

# The King of Tars

## Portrayals of Blackness and Islamic Ignorance

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In this paper, I will be exploring the interpretations of blackness and religious identity in medieval literature through an engagement with the early 14<sup>th</sup>-century poem *The King of Tars*.<sup>1</sup> I will give some background on the poem, as well as a summary of the plot. Then, I will discuss Cord J. Whitaker's perspective in his article "Black Metaphors in the King of Tars" who argues that in the poem, for the author and audience, blackness represents sinfulness, but somatic whiteness does not guarantee a sinless status.<sup>2</sup> Afterwards, I will critically examine his article, agreeing with much of it while maintaining that he does not take the anti-Islamic tendencies in the poem seriously enough in his overall analysis.

The author of *The King of Tars* was ignorant of the nature of Islam and his anxieties reflect the loss of the last remnants of crusader power in the Levant. *The King of Tars* was written around 1330 by an anonymous English author. It was not widely read, but despite its restrained influence at the time it still represents contemporaneous anxieties and concerns. The fall of the last Crusader stronghold at Acre in 1291 and fears about the Islamic empire and Muslims more broadly are deep concerns for the author and his audience.<sup>3</sup> The poem reflects Christian desires for successful crusades and mass Muslim conversion. It is also written by someone who either did not know much about Islam, did not care to know, did not have access to apt Islamic information, or decided to, with adequate information, deliberately misrepresent Islam and Muslims. The author also has a subtler concern with the state of people's souls.

*The King of Tars* tells the fictional story of the Islamic Sultan of Damascus

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1 *The King of Tars* tr. Alaric Hall, ed. John H. Chandler, *Teams Middle English Texts*. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2015): 1-23.

2 Cord J. Whitaker, "Black Metaphors in the King of Tars," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 112:2 (2013): 169-193.

3 Whitaker, 170.

and his violent attempts to win the beautiful daughter of the Christian King of Tars. The princess turns the Sultan's initial marriage proposal away, which causes the Sultan to fly into an uncontrollable rage, behaving "like a wild boar" and looking "like a lion."<sup>4</sup> In the ensuing battle, the Sultan and his army killed "thirty thousand knights of Christian faith."<sup>5</sup> The princess is woebegone for the part she is playing in the deaths of so many Christian men, so she accepts the Sultan's offer in order to quell the massive loss of life. The princess is transported to the Sultan's estate, and she weeps until dawn till she faints into a dream in her exhaustion.<sup>6</sup> Then, she has a dream that "one hundred black dogs" are barking at her, and the most troublesome hound "wanted to take her away," and she is too scared to fight back.<sup>7</sup> She prays to Jesus who saves her. But then, the fearsome black dog speaks to her "in human form, dressed like a knight in white clothes" and assures her that she has nothing to fear.<sup>8</sup>

They then conceive a disfigured child.<sup>9</sup> The princess spurs him to pray to his gods and she will pray to hers to remedy the child. His gods are not responsive, so he destroys all of his idols. The baby is baptized, which restores it to health.<sup>10</sup> The Sultan agrees to convert due to this miracle. The priest Cleophas names the Sultan after himself and after this renaming his "skin, that was black and hideous, became entirely white through God's grace, and pure, without sin."<sup>11</sup> His miraculous skin color change made the Sultan believe in the Christian God. He makes amends with the King of Tars and together they go on a brutal rampage against five Saracen kings. The Sultan promises to kill anyone who does not convert to Christianity on his conquest into his old kingdom and he carries through on this promise.<sup>12</sup>

The author misrepresents Islam, mainly regarding Muslim attitudes towards the Prophet Mohammad, idol worship, and war. First, the Prophet Mohammad is worshipped by the Sultan of Damascus and is at one point referred to as a "god."<sup>13</sup> Not only that, but the Sultan worships Apollo, Jove, Pluto, and Termagont.<sup>14</sup> The deification of Mohammad and the Sultan's praying to idols is forbidden in Islam.<sup>15</sup> It is an example of *shirk*, associating anything or anyone with Allah or worshipping anything other than Allah. Shirk is the most grievous sin in Islam, as it violates the *tawhid* of Allah, God's absolute unity with no associates.<sup>16</sup> It also makes a mockery of Islamic jurisprudence and Qur'anic constraints on what counts as a just war (proportionality,

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4 Hall, 2.

5 Hall, 4.

6 Hall, 8.

7 Hall, 8.

8 Hall, 9.

9 Hall, 10, 11.

10 Hall, 15.

11 Hall, 17.

12 Hall, 23.

13 Hall, 12.

14 Hall, 9.

15 John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 13.

16 Esposito, 25.

defensiveness, etc.).<sup>17</sup> The Prophet Mohammad is the best guide for virtue in all areas for Muslims, but Islamic tradition is clear that he is an extraordinary person but nothing above that.<sup>18</sup> It is also forbidden to have or make icons of Mohammad, but the Sultan has statues of him.<sup>19</sup> The representations, then, of tawhid, Mohammad, just war theory, and rules concerning iconography are some of the most egregious mis-portrayals of Islam in the poem.

In Cord Whitaker's article, he argues that scholars have been too hasty in identifying *The King of Tars* as a text that links European white skin color with Christian identity.<sup>20</sup> Rather, the author is creatively redirecting certain culturally specific prejudices (Crusader ideology, desire for mass conversions, and negative ideas of blackness) inwardly, shifting the cultural-political anxieties of the time, via the metaphor of blackness, toward a critical reflection of the reader's personal Christian spirituality. He draws on Toni Morrison's idea of the black metaphor, which claims that blackness and black characters in literature by white authors function to simultaneously represent "sameness and otherness, spiritual purity and sinfulness."<sup>21</sup> And, that these metaphors tell us about the author's, in Morrison's words, "fears and desires." Whitaker takes the skin color conversion of the black-then-white Sultan as a racial metaphor of this kind. The negative valence of blackness is not primarily encoded into one's skin but also into one's spiritual character. As Whitaker says, "skin color in the *King of Tars* is a metaphor that instructs faith."<sup>22</sup> The text, according to Whitaker, does not just represent skin color based prejudice, but more importantly, it tries to demonstrate that skin color is an imperfect guide to making character judgements. It teaches its reader about the ambiguity of the body as a marker of purity.

In analyzing the text, Whitaker takes the scenes of the Sultan's conversion, the princesses' dream of the black hounds, and the Sultan's rage after his conversion to be the most important elements. Whitaker grounds much of his reading by placing the poem in the genre of spiritually didactic texts and by arguing that biblical figural interpretations and Ciceronian conceptions of metaphor would have been present in the author's mind and might have been salient for some readers.<sup>23</sup> He also demonstrates the historical precedence of skin color conversion stories in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux and Augustine, namely their interpretations of the black bride in the Song of Songs.<sup>24</sup>

Regarding the Sultan's skin color conversion, Whitaker argues that many have read the passage carelessly and have assumed that the transformation happens because of his baptism, but it actually happens beforehand. As Whitaker says, he "becomes white at the moment the priest bestows his own name, Cleophas...*in prepara-*

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17 Esposito, 235.

18 Esposito, 13.

19 Esposito, 25.

20 Whitaker, 169.

21 Whitaker, 169.

22 Whitaker, 192.

23 Whitaker, 181, 182.

24 Whitaker, 173, 175, 176.

tion for baptism.”<sup>25</sup> He reads this as setting up two categories: external conversion (of black to white) and internal conversion (of Islam to Christianity). He brings up the tradition of metaphorical blackness as in Bernard of Clairvaux’s (1090-1153) reading of the black bride from the Song of Songs. For Bernard, she represents the untamed sinfulness of his clerical readership’s hearts that they must be on guard against.<sup>26</sup> The reality of black bodies is largely peripheral, but in Augustine’s writings, it comes to the fore. For him, Ethiopians (a term used to designate all black people at the time), are the most sinful population, and so their conversion is a symbol of Christianity’s spiritual potency.<sup>27</sup> For Augustine, the black bride’s being “washed white” in the Song of Songs also represents Christ’s salvific, cleansing power.<sup>28</sup> And by analyzing Cicero’s rhetorical texts, Whitaker argues that people would have understood the polysemous nature of these black metaphors, namely that “blackness represents damnation” and “whiteness represents purity and redemption;” blackness always calls forth the connotations of whiteness, and these evocative oppositional combinations are inherent in the imagery and these multivalent meanings don’t require authorial explanation.<sup>29</sup> Whitaker also argues that the Sultan is illustrated in the tradition of biblical *figura*, characters that represent historical realities and simultaneously divine truth.<sup>30</sup> The Sultan is meant to represent a Muslim ruler and a truth about conversion generally.

The princesses’ dream of the black hounds, for Whitaker, provides the key to the apparent clean-cut diametric oppositions of good and evil as white and black. The text has thus far advanced plenty of imagery connecting animalistic violent barbarism, Saraceness (Muslimness), and blackness in the character of the Sultan, making him out to be in diametric opposition to Christianity. The black hound in the dream, somehow working with Jesus’ might and wearing white, complicates this meaning and “suggests that the body is not a fool-proof marker of religious identity.”<sup>31</sup> This would have evoked Jesus Christ for the reader because Jesus takes the form of a human; he is divinity donning the dress of the damned: white wearing black. He also says that Dominic of Caleruega, a mere century before the poem, was positively associated with dogs, and the Dominican’s habit was “a white robe with a black cloak.”<sup>32</sup> This allows for the Sultan’s color transformation to trick the reader into thinking he is changed, but in his later great violence his inner blackness, his sinfulness, “remains intact.”<sup>33</sup> Whitaker puts it nicely by saying that “traces of the sultan’s Saraceness remain.”<sup>34</sup> All of this might teach the close reader to not judge “others based on skin color or religious

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25 Whitaker, 172.

26 Whitaker, 174.

27 Whitaker, 175.

28 Whitaker, 176.

29 Whitaker, 178, 179.

30 Whitaker, 181.

31 Whitaker, 185.

32 Whitaker, 187.

33 Whitaker, 187.

34 Whitaker, 189.

faith” and rather he will focus on “the state of his own soul.”<sup>35</sup> Given the rendering of Islam in the text, however, assuming that readers would not judge others based on skin color and their religiosity is terribly naïve.

Whitaker reads the Sultan’s continued violence as a lesson about lingering spiritual blackness, but could this not equally be a lesson—like the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish concept of Jewish *conversos*—in the Sultan’s religious-cultural, or potentially biological, taint? And, even if the author achieves his complex task of redirecting the moral metaphor, is it responsible to make a black Muslim a symbol in this way? I find much of Whitaker’s analysis to be apposite, well supported by evidence, and that it delineates an important strand in the text. Whitaker, however, might be over-emphasizing the spiritual-symbolic potential of the Sultan and under-emphasizing the Sultan’s portrayed “Saraceness” and the historical context.

My reading differs from Whitakers primarily regarding the centrality of the author’s anti-Islamic bent and the importance of the animal imagery, the Sultan’s violence—especially as contrasted to the King of Tars’ inefficacy in battle—and the historical context. The Sultan is not just black but is a black Muslim. He is not coded to be African but is simply black. And of the utmost importance is that the Sultan *qua* Muslim is cast as the moral villain. For Whitaker, the black dream hound, that might represent the Sultan, allows for flexible renderings of the relationship between morality and outer appearance. But this is just one instance of a larger pattern in the poem of connecting Muslims and dogs, making them out to be uncontrollable animals: Saracens are referred to as dogs on four different occasions, and the Sultan is often compared to unruly beasts.<sup>36</sup> To be a Saracen is to be dog-like. The dream may still contain the possible reading that a dog-like Saracen may be redeemable, but because his violence continues after his conversion, his animality (his yet-to-be-redeemed nature) never falls away. The Sultan’s animal excellence in battle is contrasted with the King of Tars being knocked off his horse multiple times where he is brought to a state of profuse bleeding.<sup>37</sup> This imbues the King of Tars with a martyr-like peacefulness and, by contrast, reveals the Sultan as even more war-like. For Whitaker, this violence stands in stark contrast to his whiteness, his new grace, and is meant to keep the reader on guard for their lingering spiritual backsliding. But it is not just a signal that the Sultan needs to do spiritual work, and that therefore so does the reader, but that insofar as the Sultan remains a Saracen, he remains violently animal. The story is always about the contradiction of Islam and Christianity, and this dichotomy never slips into the background. Whitaker may be right about many aspects of the poem, but this context can’t be backgrounded in a complete, proper reading of the poem.

Through my analysis, we see how skin color and color more generally come to take on complex meanings regarding moral and spiritual life. What happens when color symbolizes morality or degrees of spiritual growth? If the metaphorical meaning of blackness is tied to negative violence and sin, then regardless of the symbolic inten-

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35 Whitaker, 192.

36 Hall, 4, 8, 14, 20, 22.

37 Hall, 21, 22.

tion and direction (for and toward its audience's spiritual interiority) there is a distinct possibility that it will influence audiences' imagination towards blackness generally. In a world where there was perhaps only periphery contact with black people and Muslims, does the symbol system still lay the seeds for later hierarchical justification? Or do poems like *The King of Tars*, as Whitaker argues, contain positive destabilizing themes that encourage self-reflection, and hierarchizing tendencies arrive later? In studying historical change, one must dissect the overlapping sediments of people's concerns and prejudices. The author of the *The King of Tars* was genuinely concerned with his audience's spiritual development. He allowed blackness to take on the polyvalent meanings of both purity and sinfulness. But one cannot ignore how religious prejudices can undergird and motivate ambiguous symbolic registers. Above, besides, and beneath the symbols of black ambiguity lie Saracen sediment, and archaeology of any historical moment requires both the subtlety and sympathy of a brush and the rough, exacting force of a pick.