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Black Metaphors in the *King of Tars*

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In the late Middle Ages, Christian conversion could wash a black person's skin white—or at least that is what happens when a black sultan converts to Christianity in the late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century English romance the *King of Tars*. The remarkable transformation, however, is not what it might at first appear to be. While some critics have taken the conversion as the conflation of racial and religious identity, the change is in fact not indicative of a cut-and-dried relationship between Christian identity and the normativity of European whiteness.¹ The connection between color and religious identity in the late Middle Ages is rather more complex, and the *King of Tars* in particular exploits the normativity of physical whiteness in western Christendom when it advocates the necessity of metaphorical, or spiritual, “blackness” in Christians. In the *King of Tars*, the physical reality of skin-color difference gives way to the metaphor of color that facilitates Christendom's necessary “blackness.” The *King of Tars* didactically navigates the line between reality and metaphor in order to turn its reader's attention from the Christian mission to convert others, a defining feature of late medieval Crusades ideology, to the project of examining and maintaining his own spiritual well-being.

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1. Geraldine Heng identifies a phenomenon she calls “cultural-biological” identity in the *King of Tars*. She writes that the Sultan's “physical body is ontologically rearranged, his color is stripped from him and he loses his race along with his religion.” She continues, “On becoming a Christian, the Sultan's bodily transformation describes his admission into another cultural-biological formation, European Christianity.” *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003), p. 234, my emphasis. Lisa R. Lampert-Weissig asserts that “Heng's analysis reveals a deep entanglement of the discourses of nature and culture that reaches back into a period sometimes presumed to be free of racial discourse.” Lampert-Weissig recognizes that color differences in the *King of Tars*, along with Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, are extremely important to the study of racial discourse “precisely because of their ambiguities, their malleability, and their emphasis on culture and especially religion.” *Medieval Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 79–80. The “entanglement of the discourses of nature and culture” is deep indeed, and I proceed from the position that the oscillation between blackness and whiteness that occurs twice in the poem is evidence enough that racial discourse is in play. I focus instead on the spiritual discourse that skin color's malleability makes possible.

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In order to consider how this process makes use of what I will call black metaphors—textual moments in which black skin signifies sameness and otherness, spiritual purity and sinfulness, salvation and damnation—I turn to what is perhaps the most powerful recent study of skin color as a metaphor: Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*. Writing on the American and African-American traditions, Morrison goes about proving the vast extent to which black figures are relevant in canonical American literature. Morrison’s insight into the didactic nature of race metaphors is as relevant to medieval literature as it is to modern. Morrison asserts that the black figure in the American literary tradition is pregnant with meaning:

[T]he subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity.²

The black metaphor, she argues, is capable of conflicting and even contradictory meanings simultaneously. Through examining the uses of the black figure, the reader is able to discern the perspectives of the “dreamer”—that is, the writer—on the black other and on herself.

The revelation of longing, terror, perplexity, shame, and magnanimity Morrison cites in the “Africanist persona” did not spring up *ex nihilo*. My study argues that the profound anxiety about black characters found in English literature has its roots in the Middle Ages. Morrison states that race

has become metaphorical [in the modern era]—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological “race” ever was.³

I argue that race was already metaphorical well before the biological “race” of the nineteenth century. Clearly, a black sultan who converts to Christianity and becomes white bears the requisite “perplexity.” In a late medieval Christendom still reeling from the fall of the last Crusader stronghold in the Levant at Acre in 1291, and in which politicians and others still fantasized about Crusade, the sultan recalls Christendom’s fears of eastern dominance while his conversion registers Christian longing for Muslim conversion. What is less clear and what I hope to show here is that through the black sultan of the *King of Tars*, the medieval reader, like Morrison’s “dreamer,” is led to reflect upon his or her own spiritual state. Morrison writes that

2. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. 17.

3. Morrison, *Playing*, p. 63.

we need studies of the technical ways in which an Africanist character is used to limn out and enforce the invention and implications of whiteness. We need studies that analyze the strategic use of black characters to define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters. Such studies will reveal the process of establishing others in order to know them, to display knowledge of the other so as to ease and to order external and internal chaos.⁴

I hope to answer Morrison's call by exploring the use of a black character to "ease and order" the "external and internal chaos" of the white medieval Christian reader.

In addition to depicting the sultan's transformation from black to white, the *King of Tars* goes about "establishing others in order to know them" by pairing the white Christian princess and the black sultan. The poet writes that "non feirer woman miȝt ben" than the princess. The princess is then described "as white as feþer of swan . . . wiþ rode red so blosme on brere & eyyen stepe & gray . . . wiþ . . . white swere" (ll. 10–15).⁵ A heathen sultan hears of her beauty and vows to wage war on the Christian kingdom of Tars unless she marries him. The princess eventually relents and agrees to marry the sultan. The reader soon learns that the sultan's skin is "blac & lopely" (l. 928). In addition to religious difference and warfare, the sultan's skin color establishes him as the princess's other. It is at this point that the sultan's apparent physical alterity, established in hope of a hard and fast division between the white Christian self and the black non-Christian other, is complicated by the sultan's conversion to Christianity.

When the sultan converts, he ceases to represent the Christian reader's "external chaos"—in this case, the religious, geographical, and racial discord occasioned by the Crusades—and comes to represent the "internal chaos" of the white Christian reader whose salvation is in question. A close reading of the sultan's baptism reveals that the text does not, as some have argued, assert the necessity of white skin as a part of Christian identity.⁶ The sultan

. . . wiþ gode wille anon,
Dede of his cloþes euerichon
To reseȝue his baptize.

þe Cristen prest hiȝt Cleophas;
He cleped þe soudan of Damas
After his owen name.
His hide, þat blac & lopely was,
Al white bicom, þurth Godes gras
& clere wiþouten blame

4. Morrison, *Playing*, pp. 52–53.

5. *The King of Tars*, edited from the Auchinleck MS, *Advocates 19.2.1*, ed. Judith Perryman (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1980), p. 73. All subsequent quotations, unless otherwise noted, will be from this, the most recent scholarly edition of the romance.

6. For Heng's and Lampert-Weissig's positions, see note 1.

& when the soudan seye þat sizt,
þan leued he wele on God almiȝt
 His care went to game.
 & when the prest hadde alle yseyd,
 & haly water on him leyde,
 To chaumber þai went ysame. (ll. 922–36, my emphasis)

While, at first glance, the sultan's conversion appears to cause his skin to turn white, his skin actually turns white *prior* to his conversion. Counter to Geraldine Heng's assertion that culture and religion "shape and instruct" biology in the *King of Tars*, religion and biology actually exert pressure on one another mutually.⁷ The sultan becomes white at the moment the priest bestows his own name, Cleophas, on the sultan *in preparation* for baptism. It is only after the "sultan saw that sight" that he believes in the Christian God; this sequence of events implies that the sultan converts not because of his skin turning white *per se* but rather because of the miraculous nature of the transformation. In that the sultan, who was black until very recently, is already white at the moment of conversion, the *King of Tars* at once offers its reader a black figure who converts externally and an already white figure who converts internally.⁸

The *King of Tars*'s concern with miraculous internal conversion is substantiated by comparing the text's two extant versions—one in the mid-fourteenth-century Auchinleck manuscript (National Library of Scotland, Advocates' Library 19.2.1) and the other in the Vernon (Bodleian Library, English Poetry a.1, Summary Catalogue 3938) and Simeon (British Library, Additional MS 22283) manuscripts.⁹ The versions of the *King of Tars* in the Vernon and Simeon manuscripts are nearly identical, and this study treats the Vernon-Simeon (VS) version as a single text.¹⁰ Though my study

7. Heng, *Empire*, p. 228.

8. I agree with Kofi Campbell, *Literature and Culture in the Black Atlantic: From Pre- to Post-colonial* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 52, that the use of blackness in medieval texts is part of a process of "England's precolonial positioning of Africa and blacks" that lays the groundwork for colonialism. The external conversion of the black sultan bears out this assertion. The internal conversion of the already white figure will be dealt with below.

9. Lines from the Vernon and Simeon version (VS) of the *King of Tars* will be quoted from "Kleine Publikationen aus der Auchinleck-hs, XI: *The King of Tars*," ed. F. Krause, *Englische Studien*, 11 (1888), 1–62. The Auchinleck manuscript can be dated to 1330–1340 due to the fact that it mentions Edward III, who acceded to the throne in 1327. Perryman, *King of Tars*, pp. 9–11, cites E. Zettl's edition of *An Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle*, EETS, o.s., 196 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1935), fols. 304r–317r, for the notion that "our zong king Edward" refers to Edward III. While the Auchinleck version breaks off before the *King of Tars*'s end, the VS version adds a rather hasty ten-line ending. The Vernon and Simeon manuscripts, likely produced in the very late fourteenth century, are very similar to one another and contain many of the same items, as shown by A. I. Doyle, "The Shaping of the Vernon and Simeon Manuscripts," in *Studies in the Vernon Manuscript*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), p. 1.

10. Doyle, "Shaping," p. 11, has suggested, based on the more efficient use of page space,

mainly considers the Auchinleck version, from which comes the passage quoted above, comparison with the VS *King of Tars* illuminates in several instances the relationship between the sultan's physical appearance and his spiritual condition.

The VS version of the *King of Tars* implies the sultan's whiteness, but it shifts the text's focus from physical whiteness per se to miraculous spiritual purification, whatever its physical manifestations. In VS, the sequence reads:

þe prest hihte sire Cleophas
 And nempnede so þe soudan of Damas
 After his owne name.
 His colour, þat lodlich and blak was,
 Hit bi-com *feir* þorw godes gras
 And cler wiþ oute blame.
 Whon þe Soudan hedde þer of a siht,
 þat god was of so mucche miht,
 His care was tornd to game.
 Whon þe prest hedde al iseid
 And holy watur on hym leyð,
 To chaumbre þei wenten in same. (ll. 835–46, my emphasis)

In VS, the sultan is not explicitly called white. Rather, he becomes “fair,” an adjective whose meaning (beauty) implies whiteness but does not necessarily denote it. The VS version emphasizes the sultan's turn from ugliness to beauty, taking the turn from blackness to whiteness as a possible part of that greater transformation. Physical whiteness is shown to be secondary to beauty as a sign of conversion. To put it another way, whiteness is a suggestive, but not ultimately necessary, marker of Christian identity.

The idea that the black convert would become white in the *King of Tars* is further contextualized by its analogues in prior medieval Christian writing. Metaphorical blackness, Christian texts assert, is a necessary part of the human—and Christian—condition. Bruce Holsinger has shown that Bernard, abbot of Clairvaux (1090–1153), uses the image of the black bride in the Song of Songs as a metaphor for his clerical readership. Holsinger uses Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of “homosocial” relations, “a desire to consolidate partnership with authoritative males in and through the bodies of females,” to explicate what he sees as Bernard's use of female bodies to facilitate male-male relations between clergy and their interior selves. Holsinger writes:

[I]n [Bernard's] sermons 25 through 29, male homosocial relations are grounded specifically in a *black* female body. The Bride's words, “I am black but beautiful . . .,” provoke Bernard both to explore the somatic and ethical

the omission of pictures, and the appearance of several hands, that the Simeon manuscript may have been produced as a “slightly cheaper stable-partner” of the Vernon manuscript.

significance of skin color and to instill thereby a militaristic will in his readers to overcome the alterity that the Bride's blackness comes to represent. . . . For Bernard . . . it is the western male subject himself whose body paradoxically represents the ultimate object of colonialist desire. Enjoining his male readers to perform the objectified role of the Bride themselves, Bernard positions himself, his auditors, and the militant host his sermons address precisely as the abject victims of ethnic and religious violence, as blackened and feminized Christian subjects who must perform their own ravishment and defeat before they can hope to triumph.¹¹

This is to say that in order to conquer the world for Christendom, the clergy must first conquer their own concupiscence and wayward souls. The black female body is a metaphor for the clerical reader's interior self. The success of the metaphor, however, depends upon the imagination of the black female body as a *real body* capable of being possessed sexually. Through the bride, Holsinger argues, the clergy are inspired to *self-mastery*. The bride's blackness represents the soiled state of the clergy's sin-stained souls at the same time as it inspires their desire to conquer their waywardness. The "militaristic will" Holsinger identifies is provocative; Holsinger's reading takes the black bride as simultaneously a metaphor for the "militaristic" desire to spiritually possess the self as well as to physically possess the religious, racial, and gendered other. Bernard sees this desire as a good thing, and the abbot extols blackness's ability to inspire desire: The black pupil is "not unbecoming," and black gems are "glamorous."¹² Ultimately, Holsinger's argument that the black bride inspires clerical readers to spiritual self-examination rests on the idea that the clergy *need* their blackness, the symbol of their sin, in order to become better Christians and better clergy.

Crossing the boundary between metaphorical blackness and real blackness was not unique to Bernard. In addition to such clearly metaphorical representations as Bernard's black bride, real black people were seen as necessary to Christendom, too. Centuries before Bernard's writing, St. Augustine of Hippo uses the blackness of Ethiopians as a means to discuss the global reach of Christianity while deploying the tension between the particularity (and devaluation) of physical blackness and the universality of the metaphorical blackness that he uses to represent the sin-stained soul of man. As has been established by art historian Paul H. D. Kaplan, "Ethiopian" is the classical and medieval catch-all descriptor for black-

11. Bruce Holsinger, "The Color of Salvation: Desire, Death, and the Second Crusade in Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*," in *The Tongue of the Fathers: Gender and Ideology in Twelfth-Century Latin*, ed. David Townsend and Andrew Taylor (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), pp. 164–65, emphasis original.

12. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons sur le Cantique*, ed. Jean Leclercq, Henri Rochais, and Charles H. Talbot, 4 vols. (1958; repr. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1998), II, 262.

skinned people; it at once described all black people and the specific inhabitants of Ethiopia.¹³ Augustine comments on Psalms 71:9, which reads, “ante eum procident Aethiopes et inimici eius pulverem lingent” (Before him the Ethiopians shall fall down: and his enemies shall lick the ground).¹⁴ Augustine writes:

*Coram illo decident Aethiopes, et inimici ejus terram lingent. Per Aethiopes, a parte totum, omnes gentes significavit; eam eligens gentem, quam potissimum nominaret, quae in finibus terrae est. . . . Hanc terram lingendo, id est, talium auctoritate vaniloqua delectati, eos amando, et in suavissimos habendo, contradicunt divinis eloquiis, quibus catholica Ecclesia praenuntiata est, non in aliqua parte terrarum futura, sicut quaelibet schismata; sed in universo mundo fructificando atque crescendo, usque ad ipsos Aethiopes, extremos videlicet et teterrimos hominum, perventura.*¹⁵

(Before him will fall down Ethiopians, and his enemies will lick the ground. By Ethiopians, from part the whole, is meant all people; choosing those people, what they are most principally called, that are in the ends of the earth. . . . In licking this earth, that is, delighting in the vain speeches of such authorities, loving them, and holding them dear, they contradict the divine word, by which the Catholic Church has been foretold *not* to be in any particular part of the world, like certain schismatics; but bearing fruit and growing in all the world the Church will come even to the very Ethiopians, namely the most remote and foulest (or blackest) of men.)

For Augustine, the prophecy that Ethiopians will fall down at the feet of the Lord indicates that the Church will spread through the entire earth. In other words, physically black Ethiopian Christians are necessary for the maintenance and growth of Christianity. Black people, Augustine recognizes, make up too much of the world for Christendom to ignore them. At the same time, the Ethiopians' identification as “the most remote and foulest of men”—that is, the most foreign and the most sinful—makes their conversion a great witness to Christianity's supreme power and ultimately makes them the perfect symbol for the salvation of the entire world. Christianity and the black metaphors that undergird its advancement, Augustine asserts, need real black people.

13. Paul H. D. Kaplan, *The Rise of the Black Magus in Western Art* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), p. 4.

14. The Latin text is taken from *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, ed. Roger Gryson et al., 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007). The English translation is from *The Holy Bible: Douay Rheims Version* (1899; repr., Baltimore: TAN Books, 1989). All Bible quotations are from this edition of the Vulgate Bible, and translations are from this edition of the Douay-Rheims version.

15. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, PL, 36, col. 909, my emphasis. Translation is mine, with reference to that of Kaplan, *Black Magus*, p. 23, and that of Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard Univ. Press, 1970), p. 204, nn. 57, 58. “Teterrimos” translates to “foulest” or “ugliest.” Snowden translates the word as “blackest.”

Nonetheless, even Augustine's interest in real black people cedes primacy to metaphorical blackness and whitewashing. Psalms 73:14, in the Gallican translation, reads: "tu confregisti capita draconis dedisti eum escam populis Aethiopum" (Thou hast broken the heads of the dragon: thou hast given him to be meat for the people of the Ethiopians). In his sermon on the passage, Augustine takes it upon himself to define the Ethiopians:

Dedisti eum in escam populis Aethiopicibus. Quid est hoc? Quomodo intelligo populos Aethiopes? Quomodo, nisi per hos, omnes Gentes? Et bene per nigros; Aethiopes enim nigri sunt. Ipsi vocantur ad fidem, qui nigri fuerunt; ipsi prorsus, ut dicatur eis: Fuistis enim aliquando tenebrae; nunc autem lux in Domino (Ephes. V, 8). Ipsi prorsus vocantur nigri; sed ne remaneant nigri: de his enim fit Ecclesia, cui dicitur, *Quae est ista quae ascendit dealbata* (Cant. VIII, 5, sec. LXX)? Quid enim de nigra factum est, nisi quod dictum est: *Nigra sum, et speciosa* (Cant. I, 4)?¹⁶

(*You have given him to be meat for the people of Ethiopia. What is this? How do I understand "Ethiopian peoples"? How else than by them, all nations? And properly by black men [for Ethiopians are black]. Those are called to the faith who were before black, just they, so that it may be said to them "Ye were sometimes darkness but now are ye light in the Lord"* [Ephesians 5:8]. They are indeed called black but let them not remain black, for out of these is made the Church to whom it is said: "*Who is she that cometh up having been made white*" [Song of Songs 8:5]? For what has been made out of the black maiden but what is said in "*I am black and beautiful*" [Song of Songs 1:4]?)

Though Augustine recognizes the importance of physical reality when he writes that "Ethiopians indeed are black," he focuses on metaphor when he uses the case of the black bride in Song of Songs 8:5, who is "made white," or in some translations "washed white," to assert that belief in Christ purifies the soul. It is clear that the black bride's whitewashing is purely metaphorical when she says "I am black" in the present tense, although she has already gained her "beautiful" whitewashed status. The bride, inasmuch as she remains black, is a metaphor for the sinner. Inasmuch as she is washed white, she is a metaphor for the sinner who has been saved.

The ability to move with fluidity between multiple significations for a single black metaphor is not only Bernard's or Augustine's. Toni Morrison has pointed out that black figures signify in multiple ways in modern American literature, too. In her description of the process by which she came to write *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison speculates whether the "championed characteristics" of canonical American literature are responses to a "dark, abiding, and signing Africanist presence."¹⁷ Among these charac-

16. PL, 36, col. 938. Translation is that of Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, p. 204, with reference to Kaplan, *Black Magus*, p. 23 and n. 27.

17. Morrison, *Playing*, p. 5.

teristic responses, she names “the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell.” These themes map onto the sinfulness represented by the bride’s blackness and the purity represented by her whitewashing. Black metaphors, in medieval and modern literature, signify damnation in order to inspire the reader’s desire for “innocence” and redemption.

Black metaphors, like all metaphors, are inherently polysemous. Each points toward something else; in the case of the *King of Tars*, black paradoxically calls forth white, and damnation calls forth redemption. In order to understand how the *King of Tars* deploys the polysemy of the black metaphor, it is necessary to consider medieval writers’ conception of metaphor in general. The medieval understanding of metaphor owed a great deal to Cicero, and Cicero’s writings help to establish the sultan’s transformation from black to white as a metaphor in its own right. For most of the late Middle Ages, the authentically Ciceronian *De inventione* and the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium* made up the greater part of scholars’ knowledge of Cicero’s rhetorical works.¹⁸ In *De inventione*, Cicero writes of the role of rhetoric in arguing cases and influencing decisions. He describes the ability of a thing to be “translated” into different “arrangements” of words while the thing’s essence remains the same. The idea is more fully fleshed out as *translatio* in the *Ad Herennium*. In Book IV, the *Ad Herennium* offers a pithy definition of metaphor: “Translatio est cum verbum in quandam rem transferetur ex alia re, quod propter similitudinem recte videbitur posse transferri” (IV. 34.45) (Metaphor occurs when a word applying to one thing is transferred to another, because the similarity [between the things] seems to justify this transference).¹⁹ In short, metaphorical representation relies on similitude between a literal thing and another literal thing that represents it. The object represented remains itself even while being signified by the representative object. The representative object remains itself even while representing the former object. Taken together, the pair of things offers a multiplicity of possible meanings. The black metaphor is even more polysemous than other sorts of metaphors because it is constituted of two metaphors: one in which

18. Other sources for rhetorical knowledge, including Cicero’s *De oratore* (later than *De inventione*) and Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria*, were known in the Middle Ages, though in incomplete copies. In *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), Frances Yates treats these rhetorical texts in the context of thought about memory and mnemonic practice in the Middle Ages. For discussion of the 1421 discovery of the complete *De oratore*, see Ruth Taylor-Briggs, “Reading Between the Lines: the Textual History and Manuscript Transmission of Cicero’s Rhetorical Works,” in *The Rhetoric of Cicero in Its Medieval and Early Renaissance Commentary Tradition*, ed. Virginia Cox and John O. Ward (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 101–7.

19. *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. H. Caplan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 342–43.

blackness represents damnation and one in which whiteness represents purity and redemption. The relationship between black and white is not based in similitude between them, nor is the relationship between damnation and salvation. Indeed, quite the opposite is the case. The black metaphor calls forth damnation and redemption at once because it has its basis in the *similitude of the oppositions* between black and white and between damnation and salvation. Blackness and whiteness, because oppositional, are concepts that are correctly transferred onto the sultan's change from non-Christian sinfulness to Christian purity, also perceived as opposites.

The oppositions between black and white, and between damnation and salvation, are so stark that they produce memory effects comparable to those of similitude. Medieval treatises on memory consider visual metaphors, such as the black-then-white Sultan, necessary to the process of committing a thing or idea to memory and then recalling it. For example, Cicero's *De oratore*, later than *De inventione* and not known to the West in a complete copy until 1421, lays out the importance of vision to metaphor quite clearly: "omnis translatio, quae quidem sumpta ratione est, ad sensus ipsos admovetur, maxime oculorum, qui est sensus acerrimus" (III.40.160) (every metaphor, provided it be a good one, has a direct appeal to the senses, especially the sense of sight, which is the keenest).²⁰ The sultan's conversion certainly appeals to the sense of sight. Dominican Albertus Magnus, a reader of Cicero and Aristotle and teacher of Thomas Aquinas, also understood metaphors as essential to memory, even if they were somewhat inexact. In his *De bono*, written between 1246 and 1248, Albertus questions whether nonmetaphorical words are more useful to the memory than metaphors because they designate things more exactly. He comes down on the side of metaphor, though, when he concludes, "licet propria magis certificent de re, tamen metaphorica plus movent animam et ideo plus conferunt memoriae" (although the *propria* give more exact information about the thing itself, yet the *metaphorica* move the soul more and therefore better help the memory).²¹ The scene of the sultan's conversion is not meant to provide precise information. No details are given as to how the sultan became black—whether he was born that way, whether

20. Cicero, *De oratore*, Book III; *De Fato*; *Paradoxa Stoichorum*; *De Partitione Oratoria*, trans. H. Rackham (1942; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 126–27.

21. Albertus Magnus, *De bono*, Alberti Magni, ordinis praedicatorum episcopi, *Opera Omnia*, 28 (Monasterii Westfalorum: Aschendorff, 1951), p. 251. Translation is from Yates, *The Art of Memory*, p. 65. This passage has been translated more recently in Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2d ed. (1990; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), p. 359. I quote Yates's translation because she chooses to translate *animam* as "soul" while Carruthers chooses "mind." Yates's translation is more fitting for the current essay because my interest is in the role of metaphors in directing the reader's soul toward salvation or damnation.

blackness is natural to his people, or whether he became black through being exposed to too much sun. Rather, the scene's purpose is to move the soul and help the memory through its appeal to the reader's sense of sight. It is the conversion's spectacular nature, the stunning movement between the visual extremes of black and white, which makes the scene memorable.

The memorable spectacle of the sultan's miraculous conversion begs the question what the reader is meant to remember and learn from the circumstances. When the sultan undergoes an external and then an internal conversion, the poem plays across the divide between the exterior and interior worlds that characterizes the notion of memory. Metaphors have everything to do with visual perception of the external world and the interior reproduction of the external things perceived. Just before his statement about the *propria* and the *metaphorica*, Albertus writes that images for things and words are "as much for the purpose of making the thing intelligible as they are for producing copies."²² After writing *De bono* and during his term as a prior provincial of the Dominican province of Teutonia between 1254 and 1257, Albertus took up the subject of memory again in his commentary on Aristotle's *De memoria et reminiscencia*. In it, he elucidates the process by which things are seen and remembered:

Memoria autem, sicut [i]am ante diximus, etiam illa quae est intelligibilium, non sit sine phantasmate: ergo memoria ex eis quae sunt apud animam, reflectitur in res per accidens quidem intelligibilium: eo quod ipsa reflexio aliquando incipit ab intelligibili prius accepto.

(Memory, however, as we stated just before—even that which is of objects capable of being grasped by the intellect—does not take place without a mental image. Therefore, memory on the basis of those matters which are within the soul reflects upon matters through the accidental properties that can in fact be grasped by understanding. The reason for this is that the reflection itself sometimes begins from something understandable that has been received previously).²³

Memory comes into being after something is perceived and its image is imprinted upon the soul. The image is then recalled. The traversal of the divide between the exterior and interior worlds is central to what a reader, or hearer, of the scene would have been expected to remember. The *King of Tars* provides a mental image that relies on the "accidental properties" of blackness and whiteness—conditions that, for readers, are likely already coded with meanings of sin and salvation. These color associations are not what readers are meant to remember; they likely already

22. Albertus, *De bono*, translated in Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, p. 359.

23. Albertus, *De Memoria et Reminiscencia*, B. Alberti Magni, Ratisbonensis episcopi, ordinis praedicatorum, *Opera Omnia*, 9 (Paris: Apud Ludovicum Vivès, 1891), p. 102. Translation is from *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. Mary Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p. 130.

knew them. The association of black figures and, by extension, real black people with sin was already current, if not as inflexible as it became in later centuries.²⁴ Indeed, the poem's deployment of the sultan relies on this already extant association. Rather, the fact that the sultan's external conversion happens before his internal conversion suggests to readers that blackness and whiteness, of the internal and external varieties, can simultaneously cohere in a single being.²⁵

Readers are also encouraged to remember something quite important about metaphors themselves: no metaphor exists in a vacuum, and therefore the image that is remembered may not be exactly the same as that which was perceived. A thing has been perceived, interpreted in order to create a mental image, and then reproduced for recall. The interpretation of any metaphor, such as blackness or whiteness, is subject to multiple factors including other metaphors, physical or spiritual implications, even the particular "accidental properties" a reader has previously perceived in his or her lived experience.²⁶ For instance, as I will argue below, the converted sultan's external whiteness means something quite different than a reader might at first expect once it is considered in the context of factors such as the sultan's behavior.

The *King of Tars's* lessons do not end with metaphor's traversal of interior and exterior worlds nor with the complexity of metaphorical interpretation. The reader conversant in Biblical interpretation is invited to consider the sultan's blackness and whiteness and their implications in the context of Christian spiritual didacticism. He would have understood the sultan's conversion as a *figura*, a particularly polysemous form of metaphor central to medieval Biblical exegesis. The figure is especially plastic in that it signifies multiple things in relation to factors more concerned with temporality and divine truth than other forms of metaphor. Erich Auerbach defines *figurae* as

not only tentative; they are also the tentative form of something eternal and timeless; they point not only to the concrete future, but also to something

24. Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), pp. 49–51. Loomba establishes the early association of blackness with lechery when she references a second-century CE Roman mosaic that associates blacks with heat and unrestrained sexual passion. For a discussion of Greco-Roman views of blackness and their early Christian adaptations, see Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, pp. 196–205.

25. A similar dualism is also observed in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. See Loomba, *Shakespeare*, pp. 47–49.

26. See Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, pp. 85–86, for a useful explanation of Aristotelian memory theory. Memory's part in moral and ethical judgment has its basis in affective responses to memory images. The affective response to a memory image presented in a text will be subject to elements within and outside that text. In addition, response is a matter of habituation; a person is predisposed to have the same affective response he has had in the face of similar images previously.

that always has been and always will be; they point to something which is in need of interpretation, which will indeed be fulfilled in the concrete future, but which is at all times present, fulfilled in God's providence.²⁷

In short, figures depict a thing that is concretely and historically real but also gestures toward a profound, divine truth. That truth will not be fully revealed in earthly experience until a second earthly event occurs that fulfills the first earthly event. Even then, both events will point toward a further fulfillment in the future.²⁸ Auerbach founds his argument on the philological base that *figura*, whose classical use he traces from Terence in the second century BCE through Quintilian in the first century CE, originally meant "plastic form." *Figura* maintained that sense of plasticity as it and related terms were used by the Church Fathers to explain that, for example, the Passover signifies the coming of Christ, as Tertullian does, or that the current heaven and earth is but a *figura* pointing toward the new heaven and earth that will come to be after Judgment Day, as Augustine does.²⁹ The plasticity of the black sultan—his depiction as physically black then physically white and spiritually black then spiritually white, with his spiritual transformation slightly delayed—suggests that the sultan is a figure pointing toward profound *veritas* about Christian conversion and salvation.³⁰

Indeed, the *King of Tars* should be situated within a milieu of texts meant to teach readers about salvation. That the text seeks to instruct its readers about the Christian life is borne out in the choices of those who compiled the manuscripts in which the *King of Tars* appears. A. I. Doyle has argued that if anything unifies the texts of the Vernon manuscript, it is their potential role as homiletic and didactic texts. The Vernon manuscript, Doyle writes, is characterized by "catechetical, moralizing, and devotional pieces."³¹

27. Erich Auerbach, "Figura," trans. Ralph Manheim, in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature, Theory and History of Literature*, 9 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 59–61.

28. Auerbach, "Figura," p. 58, puts it this way: "Figural prophecy implies the interpretation of one worldly event through another; the first signifies the second, the second fulfills the first. Both remain historical events; yet both, looked at in this way, have something provisional and incomplete about them; they point to one another and both point to something in the future, something still to come, which will be the actual, real, and definitive event."

29. Auerbach, "Figura," pp. 29, 37.

30. Space constraints do not allow me to treat the exact relationship between metaphor and *figura*, of which metaphor is a less plastic form, in this essay. For now, it suffices to say that metaphor, called *translatio* in classical rhetorical writings, as noted above, consists of the transfer of the description for one thing onto another similar thing. The connection of concrete events with some "other, future, true" event and a profound spiritual meaning that "lies concealed" is indeed more salient in *figura* than in other kinds of metaphors. Metaphors may point to other metaphors or have spiritual meaning, but metaphors may not veil other events per se; furthermore, a metaphor may not point to another metaphor and a spiritual truth at the same time, as a figure is wont to do.

31. Doyle, "Shaping," pp. 3–4.

One of these is the *Sayings of Saint Bernard*, a moralizing poem certainly not attributable to the saint, which appears alongside the *King of Tars* in the Auchinleck, Vernon, and Simeon manuscripts. The *Sayings*, also titled *Man's Three Foes*, exemplifies conventional Christian moralizing literature of its time in that it instructs Christian man that he must be vigilant against the flesh, the world, and Satan, respectively. The body, the *Sayings* claims, is “vyl wiþ-Innen and wiþ-outen / A luytel wormes mete” (ll. 86–87).³² The text teaches that those who receive their rewards on earth will not be rewarded in and with heaven. The *Sayings*, along with a host of other moralizing texts, are evidence that the use of figural interpretation is not necessary in order to achieve a spiritually didactic goal. The *King of Tars*, however well it fits with texts such as the *Sayings*, has somewhat different goals that require the especially plastic figure of the sultan. The text's concerns are those of cultural conflict and the salvation of Christendom as a whole rather than the concerns of personal and estate salvation that drive the *Sayings*.

Trading in polysemy is how romance teaches the individual reader when the subjects are fears and anxieties germane to its audience's cultural and historical moment. Metaphors in romance do so in a way that might seem manageable to the individual reader. Morrison recognizes the power of romance in American literature as well as the European literature that preceded it when she identifies the romance genre as

an exploration of anxiety imported from the shadows of European culture [that] made possible the sometimes safe and other times risky embrace of quite specific, understandably human, fears.³³

These fears involve “being outcast, failing, powerlessness . . . aggression both external and internal.” Furthermore, romances provide space in which to stage the “imaginative entertainment of violence, sublime incredulity, and terror.”³⁴ Medievalists have addressed the use of metaphors for similar purposes. Treating medieval Latin metaphors, Giles Constable concludes that “metaphors hold up a shifting mirror . . . to the outer and inner worlds of medieval men and women.” He cites certain metaphors that “expressed the sense of insecurity, both physical and spiritual, of human existence and the dependence on God.”³⁵ In the *King of Tars*, metaphorical polysemy allows readers insight into the inner worlds of medieval people, and romance serves as a platform for working out their

32. *Sayings of St. Bernard*, as taken from the Vernon manuscript text, in *The Minor Poems of the Vernon Manuscript*, Pt. II, ed. F.J. Furnivall, EETS, o.s. 117 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1901).

33. Morrison, *Playing*, p. 36.

34. Morrison, *Playing*, p. 37.

35. Giles Constable, “Medieval Latin Metaphors,” *Viator*, 38 (2007), 19.

innermost anxieties and fears. The confluence of the two makes for an especially powerful narrative that responds to fears about both social and personal salvation and damnation. The *King of Tars* handles at once social and individual anxieties by reducing Christendom's aspiration to world domination and the attendant (and terrifying) specter of Muslim conquest to the metaphor of the sultan's individual conversion.

The polysemy and plasticity of the poem's images are on display when the *King of Tars* presents an alternative to the supposition that blackness and whiteness are diametrically opposed. In a conversion that occurs well before the sultan's, and has received significantly less critical attention, the poem points toward the sultan's conversion in a most ambiguous way.³⁶ Indeed, the sultan's conversion is foreshadowed when a black hound that menacingly pursues the princess in a dream suddenly becomes a comforting mouthpiece for Christ. When the princess first arrives at the sultan's castle, she cries the night away. When she finally falls asleep just at the break of dawn, she slips into an early morning dream in which one hundred black hounds threaten her:

Her þouzt þer stode hir bifore
An hundred houndes blake
& bark on hir, lasse & more.
& on þer was þat greued hir sore,
Oway þat wald hir take;
& sche no durst him nouzt smite
For drede þat he wald hir bite,
Swiche maistri he gan to make.
& as sche wald fram hem fle,
Sche seye þer stond deuelen þre,
& ich brent as a drake. (ll. 422–32)

A devout Christian who believes she faces certain death, the princess puts all her thought on Christ. As a result,

Perfore þe fendes derd hir nouzt,
Noiþer lesse no more.
Fro þe fendes sche passed sounde (ll. 437–39)

The image of black hounds is a pun on the name *Mahounde*, a misnomer for Muhammad popular in medieval Christendom that derogatorily combined the name *Mahoun*, for Muhammad, with the oft-used epithet for Muslims, "hounde."³⁷ The fact that the white princess's safety is assured

36. The fact that this moment points toward the sultan's conversion, a dynamic moment in the poem's internal future, is further evidence that the sultan's conversion, along with this earlier conversion, calls for figural interpretation.

37. Siobhan Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity: The Auchinleck Manuscript* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 1, n. 3, p. 70.

because she “puts all her thought on Christ” seems to firm up the association between the hounds, blackness, and Saraceness in opposition to white Christian identity.

The text, however, undermines the association between the black hounds and non-Christianity when the black hound that seemed as if “it wanted to take her away” catches up with the princess. The hound speaks to her of Christ. After she escapes most of the hounds,

afterward þer com an hounde
Wiþ browes brod & hore;
Almost he hadde hir drawn adoun,
Ac þurth Ihesus Cristes passioun
Sche was ysaued þore.

zete hir þouzt, wiþouten lesing,
Als sche lay in hir sweuening,
Þat selcoupe was to rede,
Þat blac hounde hir was folweing,
Þurth mizt 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 nede.” (ll. 440–56)

At one moment the hound has almost captured the princess. At the next, he speaks to her “as a man” through “the might of Jesus, king of heaven.” The black hound has switched allegiances, and the switch is symbolized by the fact that the hound now wears white clothes similar to a knight’s cloak. The text reminds its reader that this is the same hound that threatened the princess earlier when it reiterates, at line 448, that this figure is “blac.” The result is an association between blackness and Christianity that contradicts the text’s associations between blackness and *non*-Christianity.

The white cloak contrasts sharply with the hound’s black hide, and Cicero’s assertion rings true that in metaphor the “hearer’s thoughts are led to something else . . . without going astray.”³⁸ The scene leads the reader to think of Christ without jettisoning the image of a black hound wearing a white cloak and speaking like a man. The metaphor is so powerful that it has led at least one critic to presume that the black hound actually becomes Christ. Lisa R. Lampert-Weissig, for instance, writes that “the

38. In *De oratore*, pp. 124–27, Cicero defines the case of metaphor more fully than in *Ad Herennium*: “vel quod is qui audit alio ducitur cogitatione neque tamen aberrat” [the hearer’s mind is led to something else without going astray] (III.40.160). That is, the hearer is directed to an image by another (the metaphor), and the two images are connected because of reasonable similitude between the two.

swan-white Princess later has a dream in which she is attacked by black hounds (l. 448) and is then comforted by Jesus, who appears to her 'in white clopes, als a kniȝt' (in white clothes, as a knight) (l. 451) to reassure her.³⁹ Lampert's assertion does not bear up under the weight of textual evidence. Rather, "Pat blac hounde" speaks to her "through might of Jesus . . . as a knight" (my emphasis). The black hound is not Christ, though the text directs its reader to imagine the possibility of Christ speaking through the black hound.

The black hound clothed in white suggests that the body is not a fool-proof marker of religious identity, and that one body can display the ostensibly incommensurate somatic markers of Christian and non-Christian identity—blackness and whiteness—at once.⁴⁰ What Lampert-Weissig's reading reflects is that the black hound speaking "in manhede" evokes Christ's incarnation. The black hound in his white cloak is indeed a powerful metaphor for Christ, himself considered at once the bearer of abject sin in his assumed humanity and perfect sinlessness in his divinity—at once black and white. In one of his sermons on the Song of Songs, Bernard writes:

Agnosco *denigratae* formam naturae; agnosco tunicas illas peliceas, protoplastorum peccantium habitum. Denique semetipsum denigravit formam servi accipiens in *similitudinem* hominum factus et habitu inventus ut homo.⁴¹

(I recognize the image of our sin-blackened nature; I recognize the garments of skin that clothed our sinning first parents. He [Christ] even brought this blackness on himself by assuming the condition of slave, and becoming *made like men are*, he was seen as a man).⁴²

Bernard's writing affirms Christ's whiteness and his taking on of human "form," that of blackness. As does the black hound's Christlikeness and explicit reliance on Christ's might, Bernard's writing suggests concurrent metaphorical blackness and whiteness for Christ's followers. Bernard writes from a perspective that includes all humans when he refers to "our sin-blackened nature." To acquire the "*similitudinem hominum*" then is to have a "white" nature "blackened" by the sin that inheres in man. What

39. Lampert-Weissig, *Medieval Literature*, p. 78.

40. This, in and of itself, is enough to suggest that the medieval understanding of the body's relationship to identity could significantly complicate the biological understanding of race in the modern West.

41. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super cantica canticorum, Sancti Bernardi opera*, 1, ed. Jean Leclercq, Henri Rochais, and Charles H. Talbot (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957), p. 193.

42. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, trans. Killian Walsh, 4 vols. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), II, 89. Bernard is quoted in Calkin, *Saracens*, p. 25. Calkin's emphasis on "blackened" denotes Bruce Holsinger's modification of Walsh's translation; see Holsinger, "Color of Salvation," p. 168. Emphases on "*similitudinem*" and "*made like*" are mine, and they reflect my modification to Walsh's "becoming as men are."

is more, when Bernard writes that Christ is made “like men,” he does not distinguish between non-Christian men and Christian men. Spiritual blackness, Bernard and the *King of Tars* suggest, persists in a man, even in Bernard himself, despite his Christian conversion. The hound’s white cloak does not eradicate sin, though it can compensate for it.

In addition to the black hound’s polysemous representations of blackness and whiteness, non-Christianity and Christianity, threat and comfort, the image of the hound exhibits plasticity germane to a *figura* per se. As Auerbach demonstrates, the notion of *figura* develops through the patristic practice of reading Old Testament events as figures presaging (*prefiguring*) New Testament events. Taken together, the Old and New Testament figures have profound spiritual meaning. At the same time, they maintain their status as real-world historic events. The black hound’s conversion from threat to comfort certainly presages the sultan’s conversion from black to white, but it also has its own historical referent.⁴³ Jordan of Saxony’s *Libellus de initio ordinis praedicatorum*, reasonably dated 1232–33, is the earliest historical work produced by the Dominican order. In it, St. Dominic is directly connected with dogs. Chapter 5 describes Dominic as a young boy growing up in Caleruega, Spain. His mother, according to the text, had a vision:

Cuius matri, antequam ipsum conciperet, in visione monstratum est, quod catulum gestaret in utero, qui facem ardentem in ore portabat et de ventre egrediens omnem orbem succendere videbatur. Quo *prefigurabatur* concipiendum ab ea predicatorem insignem, qui sacre eruditionis latratu soporatas peccatis animas ad vigilantiam excitaret et ignem, quem dominus Iesus venit mittere in terram, mundo spargeret universo.

(Before he was conceived, his mother had a vision in which she saw herself carrying a puppy in her womb, with a blazing torch in its mouth; when it emerged from her womb, it seemed to set the whole world on fire, signifying [*prefiguring*] that the son she was to conceive would be a famous preacher, who would wake up souls which had gone to sleep in their sins with the barking of his holy teaching and spread throughout the world the fire which the lord Jesus came to cast upon the earth).⁴⁴

Dogs are a particularly plastic form with which to convey the complicated nature of conversion and Christian identity. Engaging a historical world external to the poem, the black hound points backwards to Saint Dominic;

43. I use the term “historical” fully understanding the extent to which hagiographies are constructed of legendary material. It would be most apt, though consistently awkward, to situate St. Dominic’s mother’s vision as something that adherents of the faith in general and Dominicans in particular would have understood to be historical.

44. Emphasis mine. Translation is that of Simon Tugwell, OP, *Jordan of Saxony: On the Beginnings of the Order of Preachers* (Chicago: PARABLE, 1982), p. 31, n. 1. The Latin is quoted from *Monumenta Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum Historica*, 29 vols. (Rome: Institutum Historicum Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1935), XVI, ii, pp. 27–28.

the association is particularly salient in that the hound's black skin with white cloak calls to mind the Dominican's standard habit of a white robe with a black cloak. In the world of the poem, the black hound prefigures the Sultan's conversion. In both worlds, the figure of the black hound continues to trouble the associations of blackness with sin and whiteness with purity.

The figure of the black hound, as well as Bernard's image of a metaphorically black and white Christ, conveys the unstable relationship between the body's color and religious identity; physical whiteness does not exclusively indicate Christianity nor does blackness necessarily signify non-Christianity. The sultan's color transformation does not imbue him with a new, sinless essence. Rather, the sultan's transformation suggests his newfound purity, while his subsequent actions suggest his original sinfulness remains intact. The sultan's conversion exploits the already conventional "color-coding" of religious and cultural difference in order to assert the permeability of the boundaries between the metaphorical whiteness associated with Christian purity and the metaphorical blackness associated with non-Christian sinfulness. Taken together with Bernard's black and white Christ, the hound's and the sultan's conversions are figures asserting that the permeability of the boundary, fuzziness of the line, between sinfulness and purity is absolutely necessary for Christian self-improvement. Christian conversion, the figures assert, is for the individual Christian far from the end of the salvific line.

THE SULTAN AS A METAPHOR FOR THE CHRISTIAN SELF

Given that the sultan's conversion is prefigured by the black hound's appearance and that the black hound has a historical referent in the life of St. Dominic, the sultan's conversion demands figural interpretation. The scene is not as meaningful alone as it is in the context of its referents. Getting to the profound meaning of this string of figures, however, requires seeing the sultan as something separate from his conversion. While the sultan is every bit a figure in the moment of his conversion, for most of the poem he is more properly a metaphor.

The sultan exhibits all the polysemy inherent in black metaphors. It is peculiar to the *King of Tars* that the sultan's violence attests the ambiguity of his transformation. In the *King of Tars's* sources, the sultan does not fight his former compatriots. Six texts that predate the Auchinleck manuscript contain a version of the *King of Tars* narrative. They include the Anglo-Latin *Flores historiarum*, Villani's Italian *Istorie Fiorentine*, Rishanger's

Anglo-Latin *Chronica*, a Hispano-Latin letter to Jayme II of Aragon, the Germano-Latin *Annales Sancti Rudberti Salisburgenses*, and Ottokar's German *Österreichische Reimchronik*. In these chronicle accounts, all datable to the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, the princess is the daughter of the Christian king of Armenia and her to-be-converted husband is a pagan king of Tartars who attacks Saracens.⁴⁵ When the king of Tartars turns on Saracens, he in no way turns on himself. In the *King of Tars*, when the sultan turns on his former Saracen brethren while he simultaneously engages in the violence that has characterized him throughout the text, he at once conveys division from and unity with his former self, signifying the permeability of the boundary between purity and sinfulness.

Despite readings that have sought to prove that the sultan's conversion is complete and that his subsequent actions reinforce his migration to a different community, his actions in fact reinforce the persistence of his preconversion Saracen-associated sinfulness. Siobhan Bly Calkin, in her exhaustive study of the *King of Tars*, sets up a contrast between two competing paradigms for cultural integration: (1) the lump-child, which she argues "decisively refuses a biological division of Christian and Saracen, and instead confronts readers with a situation in which cultural inheritances cannot be disentangled";⁴⁶ and (2) the sultan's conversion, which she argues "forcibly re-inscribes the divisions between Saracen and Christian." Calkin explains that

[t]he changing of an individual's religious beliefs, and his or her subsequent inclusion into a new group, is not an integration of various elements of each group's identity in the sense of an equivalent interpenetration of various elements of each group's identity as they unite to form a new entity. Rather, conversion rewrites individual differences in a way that simultaneously asserts the borders between, and the difference defining, religious groups.⁴⁷

Calkin argues that the *King of Tars* explores interreligious mixing in the lump-child, and ultimately concludes that nondifferentiation is a "horror" that produces a lack of "social, cultural, or biological intelligibility, and thus no humanity" for the lump-child.⁴⁸ In response to the "hideousness" of the lump's unintelligibility, Calkin asserts, the text reinscribes difference between Saracens and Christians by depicting the sultan's conversion. Conversion, Calkin rightly states, is a much more traditional and less radical means of "integrating peoples." On the other hand, Calkin's

45. Perryman, *King of Tars*, p. 46, and Calkin, *Saracens*, p. 105.

46. Calkin, *Saracens*, p. 114, continues, "The image drives home to its readers the extent of the cultural intermingling that has occurred; nothing of either Saracen or Christian can be definitively identified in this mixed heritage offspring and, consequently, one is forced to confront the fact of pervasive cultural integration that it represents."

47. Calkin, *Saracens*, p. 122.

48. Calkin, *Saracens*, p. 121.

claim that “no trace of the [Sultan’s] Saracen origins remains when he is Christian” goes too far.

While Calkin argues that the sultan’s violence sets him apart from his Saracen past as a new and committed Christian crusader, I take the sultan’s violence as indicative of the fact that the sultan is a metaphor with all the attendant ambiguity. When the sultan turns on his former Saracen brethren, the violence certainly seems on the surface to reinforce his new Christian identity and the incommensurability of Christianity and Saraceness. The sultan’s character, however, is not bound by rules that require a single consistent signification, and he sometimes reinforces and sometimes undermines the divisions between purity and sinfulness and between Christian and Saracen identity.

Traces of the sultan’s Saraceness remain, even as he fights his former brethren. Fully 381 of the 1235 extant lines in the Auchinleck manuscript, over thirty percent, deal with violence either initiated by or executed by the sultan. In lines 96 through 215, the sultan responds to the King of Tars’s refusal to give him the princess by tearing his own robe and beard, smashing a table, and striking down anyone nearby. He calls together a council and advises them that he will go to battle against the King of Tars. The Christian forces are so well routed that “the valleys ran with blood” and there was not a Christian knight “who withstood them.” After nearly falling to the King of Tars’s sword, the sultan recovers and fights more boldly than before:

Alle þat he hit he maked blede.
“Help, Mahoun!” he gan crie.
Mani helme þer was ofweued,
& many bacinet tocleued,
& saddles fel emtye.
Mani swerd & mani scheld
& mani knigt lay in þe feld
Of Cristen compeynie. (ll. 197–204)

The sultan’s violence continues when his gods fail to transform the lump-child into a living being. He picks up a staff “wiþ grete hete” and beats the idols until they fall down. Then he gives them “strokes gode & gret” and “brac hem arm & croun” (ll. 649–57). Violence is central to the sultan’s preconversion character.

Nor does the sultan’s violence threaten to end when he converts. After he is baptized, the sultan writes a letter to the King of Tars requesting his help converting his subjects to Christianity (ll. 988–96). The King of Tars, with sixty thousand Christian knights, goes to assist the sultan. The sultan announces to his barons that he has converted and that they must, too. Those who convert are “beloved and dear” to the sultan. As for any

baron who does not convert, “anon [the sultan] dede strike of his hed,/ Rigt fast bi þe swere” (ll. 1055–56). Five “heathen” kings resist and wage war on the sultan. During battle, the sultan beheads King Canadok. The King of Tars unhorses and then kills King Lesias. The sultan cleaves King Carmel’s skull. The King of Tars drives his sword through King Clamadad’s heart. The sultan beheads King Memaroc. The Saracens retreat; the Christian knights follow, shedding the Saracens’ “brains and blood” as they go. The sultan’s violence against his five former compatriots, if anything, continues a behavioral pattern that he, and he alone, has demonstrated from the beginning of the text. He initiates the fight against the King of Tars when he demands the princess’s hand in marriage, and he initiates the battle against his former compatriots when he demands they convert or die. All other characters, even the warrior King of Tars himself, only respond to the sultan’s calls for violence. While the sultan’s violence may reinforce difference between Christians and non-Christians on one hand, on the other it bespeaks a lack of difference between the sultan’s Saracen and Christian selves.

Lest the persistence of the sultan’s metaphorical blackness escape the reader, the sultan shows just how sinful his behavior is when he threatens to put recusant Muslims to death in the same manner as Christ was executed. In his letter to the King of Tars, he writes that all

Who þat wold nouȝt cristned be
He schuld be honged opon a tre,
Wiþouten ani delay. (ll. 994–96)

The centrality of the themes of Christian and non-Christian identity in the narrative means that the echo of the Crucifixion and Christ’s hanging on the “tree” of the Cross is glaringly obvious. On one hand, the threat of crucifixion suggests that the sultan is a very bad Christian since he seems to have no idea that his behavior is decidedly un-Christian. On the other hand, Saint Bernard’s use of blackness, in Sermons 25 through 29, as a means to inspire readers to attain spiritual whiteness suggests that the sultan is simply a very new Christian; the sultan does not yet understand the relationship between his own sin and the state of grace whose outward marker he has been conveniently afforded. As physical blackness persists in the Song of Songs’s bride or the Ethiopian Christian, so does spiritual blackness persist in the sultan. Just because he has been afforded the physical whiteness suggestive of Christian identity does not mean that the sin once so insidiously manifest in his physical blackness has gone away.

The sultan is a figure only for a moment, and his figural interpretation relies on his use as a metaphor; after his conversion, he lacks the plasticity that would make him a figure. Once the reader considers the

violence that characterizes the sultan, when he is black *and* when he is white, the reader encounters a sultan who has meaning regardless of past or future events such as the hound's appearance or the Last Judgment. Indeed, the sultan's spiritual meaning lay in the disconnect between his new Christian self and his violent behavior—a disparity that occurs in, and draws its rhetorical strength from, the contradictory coexistence of grace and unforgiving violence in a single character at a single time. In accord with Cicero's definition of metaphor, the reader's thoughts are yet again "led to something else and yet without going astray"; the skin-color transformation leads the reader to believe, on one hand, that the sultan has been purified. On the other hand, the text takes pains to ground the reader in the fact that the sultan continues the behavior that once characterized his blackness. Both are true, and either way the reader interprets him, she has not "gone astray." The Christian sultan's behavior leads the reader to think of the non-Christian sultan, and the sultan becomes a closed-circuit system in which each of his partial identities speaks to his complete identity. Sin and purity prove not to be mutually exclusive. In the sultan, they appear as two parts of one whole, in direct relationship to one another, without the interference of other metaphors or past and future events that characterizes the sultan-*figura*.

When the converted sultan is self-contained—that is, when he is a metaphor and not a *figura*—he speaks to ethical relationships between people on earth.⁴⁹ Kofi Campbell addresses the question "What does it Mean to be Black?" in late medieval versions of the popular *Secretum Secretorum*. Using Fredric Jameson's work on romance, Campbell asserts that late medieval texts use blackness strategically in order to reify hegemonic ideologies that legitimize a culture's biases and borders. As part of a "complex strategy of rhetorical persuasion," blackness is used to integrate white laborers, brown-skinned from working outside, into the hegemonic ideologies of the higher classes by associating black skin specifically with Africans and blacks instead of brown-skinned workers.⁵⁰ This is certainly one ethi-

49. Frances Yates, *Art of Memory*, pp. 53–61, and Mary Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, pp. 81–89, have shown that medieval scholars conceived of memory as an integral part of the cardinal virtue of prudence, the virtue through which humans might live moral and ethical lives. Memory is defined by thirteenth-century scholar of rhetoric Boncompagno da Signa as that faculty by which humans "assiduously remember the invisible joys of paradise and the eternal torments of hell." Albertus and Aquinas, perhaps influenced by Boncompagno, draw on the notion of *imagines agentes* in the *Ad Herennium* to produce, according to Yates, *Art of Memory*, p. 77, "beautiful or hideous human figures as 'corporeal similitudes' of spiritual intentions [meant to remind us how to gain] Heaven or [avoid] Hell." These "spiritual intentions" often take the form of ethical or unethical behavior, including the treatment of other people.

50. Campbell, *Literature and Culture*, pp. 49–51. Campbell quotes Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), p.

cal formation that could spring from texts' rhetorical uses of blackness. The persistently violent sultan metaphor, however, does not produce a consolidated Christian English identity. Instead, it reifies the notion that externally indicated Christian conversion—that is, the *white* Christian's conversion—may be incomplete. In other words, the white Christian, like Bernard's cleric, should experience the "militaristic" desire to possess the wayward self. The converted sultan lacks this desire, and the result is that he has a decidedly *un-Christian* way of treating people. The promotion or lack of ethical treatment of others is offered as the yardstick by which to measure the state of the Christian's soul. The attentive reader of the *King of Tars* will avoid judging others based on skin color or religious faith; instead, he will react to the *King of Tars* as a wake-up call that he must keep a careful watch on the state of his own soul.

Ultimately, skin color in the *King of Tars* is a metaphor that instructs faith. The reader is shown that skin color may be a useful metaphor for the state of the soul—the menacing hounds are black and the converted Christian sultan is white. The reader is also shown that physical blackness and whiteness are not foolproof markers of identity. The *King of Tars* instructs its reader to use the metaphor of skin color not in order to make judgments about real white and black people but rather in order to examine the gap between the reader's own professed faith and his inward shortcomings. The black hound dons a white cloak, embodying at once the human state of sinfulness and the condition of being as pure as Christ himself. The Christian sultan, for his part, remains far from perfect in his understanding of Christian faith despite his whiteness. The *King of Tars* exploits blackness and whiteness's associations with non-Christian sinfulness and Christian purity only to prove them erroneous. The text turns its reader's gaze away from physical skin color and toward the much harder to grasp significance of color in the realm of spiritual metaphor. In the black-become-white sultan, the English Christian reader is invited to consider his own Christian virtue—he just might find that, despite his white skin, he is spiritually black.

The sultan's function as a black metaphor gives us insight into the prehistory of race in the West in that his whiteness is something quite different from modern whiteness. Morrison writes that

287, who writes that "if the ideological function of mass culture is understood as a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are 'managed' and defused . . . some preliminary step must also be theorized in which these same impulses . . . are initially awakened within the very text that seeks to still them." Jameson goes on to conclude that a text's manipulation of its reader "must necessarily involve a complex strategy of rhetorical persuasion in which substantial incentives are offered for ideological adherence." The integration of the white laborer is, for Campbell, this incentive.

images of blackness can be evil *and* protective, rebellious *and* forgiving, fearful *and* desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable.⁵¹

The sultan's whiteness, however, speaks. It is not "impenetrable" or "inarticulate." Rather, it speaks with the same violent voice that the sultan's blackness does. In the sultan, whiteness is a rhetorically powerful tool that thinly veils the spiritual blackness that pervades humanity's fallen state. It is only once bodily appearance and physical whiteness are considered more important than a person's spiritual condition—that Morrison's claim about whiteness rings true. Whiteness is "mute, meaningless, unfathomable" in modern American literature precisely because its original underlying meaning, visible in the *King of Tars*, is no longer speakable: in the Middle Ages, whiteness points to spiritual blackness.

51. Morrison, *Playing*, p. 59, emphasis original.