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"SO ALS CRISTE WOLDE IT WERE":
CHURCH PROPAGANDA IN *THE SEGE OF MELAYNE*

BY BETSY WILLIAMSEN '99

WINNER OF THE 1999 ROBERT T. WILSON AWARD FOR SCHOLARLY WRITING

The Sege of Melayne is a Middle English Charlemagne romance featuring the well-loved corpus of familiar characters transferred from the Old French *chansons de geste*: Charles, the Frankish king and defender of the Faith; Roland, his nephew and champion; Oliver, Roland's boon companion; the feisty Archbishop Turpin; and a battle-field-ful of vile Saracen "houndes" just waiting for someone to kill them. This romance, like most of the *chansons de geste*, concerns itself almost wholly with the conflict between the Christian and Islamic worlds that began before Charlemagne's time and was still a reality at the time of *Melayne's* composition around the end of the fourteenth century.

Although most of the Middle English romances concerning Charlemagne's never-ending fight against invading pagans are based fairly closely on pre-existing *chansons*, no source has been discovered for *The Sege of Melayne*. It is generally categorized as belonging to the Otuel group by dint of its sharing with *Otuel and Roland* a Saracen sultan by the name of Garcy, although Otuel himself never appears in *Melayne*. The only surviving copy of *Melayne*, unfortunately fragmentary, appears in the British Museum MS Additional 31042, generally known as the London Thornton Manuscript. It is accompanied in the manuscript by a variety of religious materials in Latin, French, and English, as well as romances such as *The Sege of Jerusalem* and *Roland and Otuel*. The existence of these romances amidst such works as the *Passionis Christi Cantus* and the *Moralisacio Sacerdotis tocuis apparatus in missa* is not as strange as it might originally seem, if one considers the religious bent of these particular romances. Those mentioned above treat of battles fought in the name of Christianity and teach that the most just wars are those fought for the glory of the one true Christian God. In order to do this, *The Sege of Melayne* portrays the Saracens as profoundly Other in their religious practices and Turpin as a strong warrior and spiritual leader who demands the respect and obedience of the secular world.

The romance begins when the city of Milan is sacked by the Saracen sultan Arabas, who burns the symbols of Christianity, "bothe the Rode and the Marie free," "and than his Mawmettes he sett up there / In kirkes and abbayes that there were" (26; 28-29). The lord of Milan, Sir Alantyne, manages to escape to a nearby town, but Arabas finds him and commands him to embrace the heathen religion or forfeit his city, his life, and the lives of his wife and children. Alantyne prays to Christ and is visited by an angel who advises him to travel to Paris to beg assistance from Charles. Simulta-

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neously, Charles is visited by another angel, who bids him reclaim Milan and presents him with a sword sent by Christ, making Charles God's "werryoure here in erthe" (119).

Immediately the two civilizations clash, as the Saracens demand conversion to their idolatrous religion and the Christian God demands vengeance for the invasion of Christian territory. More than simple territorial or material greed, it is religious differences and the desire to win their respective gods more followers that engenders the conflicts between the two cultures, and this is somewhat reflective of contemporary reality. At the time *The Sege of Melayne* was composed, Spain was still under Muslim control, and the Islamic civilization's history of growth through conquest would have been familiar to the romance's audiences. During the time of Charlemagne, the poem's setting, the Islamic threat would have been very real indeed, as it was during the eighth and ninth centuries that the Islamic civilization reached its largest extent (Strayer 8: 576).

Here, in the midst of historical reality, arises the first (apparent) misunderstanding of the nature of Islam. Despite the actuality of Islamic conquest, Muslim leaders did not demand the conversion of all they conquered. The *Koran* declares that all monotheists, as fellow "people of the book," should be given protection and religious freedom (Strayer 8: 578). Thus, within the areas conquered by Muslims lived Jews and Christians who were not persecuted—although they were prohibited from public displays of their beliefs—and who were frequently allowed to maintain the leadership positions they had held before the Muslim conquest (Wolf 92). The romance, however, presents the Saracen sultan and certain of his warriors as something akin to a group of deranged missionaries; ignoring the command of tolerance toward monotheists, Arabas tells his Christian captives that any who "ne will noghte to oure lawe be sworne, / He sall be hanged or other morne" (55-56).

Perhaps the reason Arabas ignores this command is that the Saracens as traditionally presented in the *chansons de geste* and romances follow a religion that bears very little resemblance to Islam. The fictional Saracens worship idols, which usually represent more than one deity (although *Melayne* mentions only "saynt Mahownn" (1253)). Although pre-Islamic Arabs were indeed polytheistic and worshipped spirits and deities represented by idols, Muhammad decried these practices and introduced a strictly monotheistic doctrine (Strayer 6: 575-6). Muslims followed the teachings of Muhammad, but did not worship him as a deity; the Saracens of the *chansons* and romances worship a deified Muhammad as Christians worship Jesus Christ.

Most critics of the literature believe the European poets were indeed ignorant of Islamic doctrine, and that their naivete is reflected in their work. If the poets had no understanding of Islam, it is probable that little to no accurate information was disseminated throughout Christian Europe. This was truer in England than on the continent: "The Crusades had never become a national movement in England as they had in France, with its Mediterranean seaboard, and the majority of writers in the fourteenth century knew precious little about them and still less about Islam" (White 178). That information about Islam was limited is supported by the reactions of First Crusaders to their Muslim surroundings on reaching the Holy Land: when the Norman

Tancred reached the Temple in Jerusalem in 1099, he naturally assumed that the silver image he discovered on a throne was an idol of "that original Antichrist, the baleful and wicked Mahomet" (Ralph of Caen, qtd. in Bennett 101). If the only information the crusaders had about the Muslims came from the *chansons* and other such material, it is no wonder they would expect idolatry. Although more accurate facts about Islam were sure to have been available to at least the nobility by the time of *Melayne's* composition, the acceptance of the stock Saracen and the formulaic nature of the Charlemagne romances inhibited any deviation from the established representation.

Norman Daniel suggests that the original poets, secular *jongleurs*, were fully aware that they were misrepresenting Islam, and that they created a polytheistic idolatry solely for its humor. He believes that the poets and their audiences were at least vaguely familiar with the nature of Islam as a monotheistic religion, but that to represent the fictional Saracens' religion as such would have been to bring it too close to Christianity. He also proposes that the absurdity of the idolatry came about because the poets did not know enough about paganism to make their Saracens' false religion plausible.

Pragmatically, to expound on the fine distinctions between the two religions within the confines of an entertainment piece would have been far too educational for an audience expecting excessive bloodshed without moral dilemmas. It is still very possible that the secular poets and their audiences were unacquainted with Islam in its actuality; the only people who had good reason to study Islam were the clerics who needed to understand the other religion in order to convince its followers to abandon it for the true Christian faith. Clerics were so familiar with the similarities between Islam and Christianity that Peter the Venerable was unable to determine

...whether the Mohammedan error must be called a heresy and its followers heretics, or whether they are to be called pagan. . . . For in the company with certain heretics (Mohammed writes so in his wicked Koran), they preach that Christ was indeed born of a virgin, and they say that he is greater than every other man, not excluding Mohammed; they affirm that he lived a sinless life, preached truths, and worked miracles. They acknowledge that he was the Spirit of God, the Word—but not the Spirit of God or the Word as we either know or expound. . . . Choose, therefore, whichever you prefer; either call [the Moslems] heretics on account of the heretical opinion by which they agree with the Church in part and disagree in part, or call them pagans on account of the surpassing wickedness by which they subdue every heresy of error in evil profession. . . . If you call them heretics, it has been proven that they are to be opposed beyond all other . . . heresies; if you call them pagans, I shall demonstrate, by the authority of the Fathers, that they are to be resisted nonetheless. (qtd. in Metlitzki 200)

That the Muslim religion was viewed by many as heresy is supported by the legend that Muhammad had been a Catholic cardinal who preached heresy to the pagan Arabs out of spite. Muhammad was the most learned of the cardinals, and thus was promised the papacy in return for converting the Saracens in the East. While he was gone, however, the ruling pontiff died, and the cardinals broke their promise and elected another. As a revenge, Muhammad began to "preach the contrary of Christian

truth" (Metlitzki 204). This legend is evidence that the similarities between Christianity and Islam were well-known, at least among the groups who circulated the legend.

As mentioned above, the ecclesiastical classes should have been fairly knowledgeable about the tenets of the Islamic faith. Does the assertion of *Melayne's* clerical authorship, then, lose credibility? Realistically, although the Church's internal dialogues about Islam strove to incorporate serious facts, its goal in regard to the secular population would most likely have been simply to convince the populace of the inherently evil nature of Islam. Aware of the possibilities of popular literature as a means of indoctrination, "the Church was not slow to exploit its claim upon the imagination of the ruling class" (Barron 92). Ignoring Christianity's own violent nature and the clergy's particular reputation for debauchery, the official polemic against Islam portrayed Muslims as inherently violent, as well as sexually rapacious.

Medieval Islam did, indeed, place few of the necessary (to Christianity) restrictions on sexual activity. When Muhammad preached God's word to his adherents, he limited polygamy to four wives, himself taking ten during his lifetime (Strayer 8: 576-77). This, of course, was innately offensive to a religious doctrine that taught chastity as a prime path to paradise. Christian theologians were additionally horrified by the Muslim conception of paradise: it is a place of "sensual earthly delights," in which "whatever one's appetite suggests is at once fulfilled," including sexual desires (Metlitzki 212). The supposed Saracen passion for sensual luxury is wonderfully exaggerated in the description of Garcy's coronation ceremony: his followers shower him with gold, jewels, "sexty fawconns faire of flyghte; / And sexti stedis noble and wyghte" (844-45), all symbols of a pleasure-loving and extremely wealthy noble class. To satisfy Garcy's more primal urges,

The Kyng of Massedoyne lande

Sent the Sowdane a presande,

The meryeste one molde:

Sexty maydens faire of face

That cheffeste of his kyngdome was

And faireste appon folde... (838-43)

After the feast, "the Sowdane hade hymselfe I wene / Thaire althere maydenhede" (866-67). The sheer number of Saracen warriors traditionally faced by the literary heroes reveals some of the anxieties inevitably bred in Christians by a civilization that practiced polygamy (White 174).

The violence supposedly inherent in the above lusty Saracens was perhaps justly attributed to the Muslims because of their belief in *jihad* but its actual manifestation in Islamic society was still misunderstood by those like Ricolto da Monte Croce, who said, "The religion of the Saracens is violent and was brought in by violence, and so among them it is held to be quite certain that it will last only as long as the victory of the sword will remain with them" (qtd. in Daniel 95). The Saracens' supposedly violent nature becomes comically fanatical in *Melayne* when the Macedonian unit sees its leader wounded and "braydede owte swerdes full bryghte / Agaynes the Sowdane folke to fighte" (1129-30; italics added). Although Muslim territory indeed grew through

conquest and many of the conquered people chose to convert to Islam, religious tolerance was offered to "people of the book," so conversion by Islamic swords was not the reality most Christians believed it to be.

With the Islamic people already bloodstained in the popular eye and with their unrestrained sensuality casting them in an animalistic light, the Church needed to employ little energy in order to arouse ruthlessly anti-Arab sentiments among the Christian warrior class, whose participation in any battles the Church might choose to engineer was integral. However, clerics certainly would not want to risk revealing the religious similarities between the two cultures, possibly tempting the masses to expect similar tolerance for sexual license from Christian spiritual leaders. Thus, if clerics writing songs both to entertain the warrior class and to teach the superiority of the Christian faith needed to employ Saracens as enemies, they were faced with making their fictional Muslims as Other as possible. Although the idol-worshipping is indeed quite humorous at times, the moral vilification of the enemy is much more productive than laughter; making the pseudo-religion amusing simply brought the Church's propaganda to more listeners.

In all regards other than their idolatrous polytheism, the Saracens of the poems are strikingly similar to the Christians who inevitably must defeat them. Their noble societies seem to be analogously structured, in that the ruler is surrounded by knights who owe him allegiance and whose services he rewards with lands and other material goods. The nobility and chivalry of the Saracens is not questioned. *The Sege of Melayne* refers to one individual Saracen warrior as "a nobill knyghte and a chevallrouse" (995) and "curtays" in battle (1063). Giving the enemy the same praise lavished on Roland and Charles' other men may seem odd, but it must be remembered that knights would not stoop to engage in battle with an opponent who was not worthy of the fight.

It is understood that the outcome of the battles in the romance will largely be determined by the righteousness of each side's respective religious beliefs. This is somewhat reminiscent of the ancient ritual of trial by combat, in which God (or the gods) determined the winner of the case by leaving him with functioning internal organs at the end of the duel. If the rules of trial by combat apply to the individual duels described within the romance's larger battles, it would appear that, contrary to the famous line from the *Chanson de Roland*, the *pagans* are in the right and the Christians in the wrong. When the Franks demand that Arabas send some people for them to fight, Sir Arabaunt of Perse [Persia] obligingly emerges from the gates of Milan with forty thousand men (to match the Frankish army) and "he bare down / worthy lordes of grete renownn" until only a handful are left alive (247-48). Each side expects its god(s) to lend some kind of divine assistance, but the Christian God seems to have been otherwise occupied during the first battle, which leaves only Roland and three others standing.

Since the Christian audience of *The Sege of Melayne* understood the inherent and immutable perfection of their faith, God's apparent abandonment of his warriors at this point in the romance may have been somewhat disturbing. Is Christianity, then, perhaps not infallible? If we compare this initial slaughter of the Christian troops to that in the *Chanson de Roland*, we must accept that this is somehow part of God's

inexplicable plan, and we must simply accept it without questioning. "True to crusade ideology, we may see here warfare depicted as a form of Christian sacrifice and worship—as, indeed, a transformation of the worldly institutions of warfare into a means of serving and reflecting the presence of Christ" (Shepherd 129). Those who die in the first battle are accepted into God's bosom for their service to Him; as the Duke of Normandy dies, he describes a heavenly vision to his commander:

'A, Rowlande, byhaulde nowe whatt I see:
More joye ne myghte never bee
In youthe ne yitt in elde.
Loo! I see oure vawarde ledde to hevene
With angells songe and merye stevene
Reghte as thay faughte in the felde.
I see moo angells, loo with myn eghe,
Then there are men within Christyanté
That any wapyn may welde.
To hevne thay lede oure nobill knyghtis
And comforthes tham with mayne and myghtis,
With mekill blysse and belde.' (313-24)

The dead warriors' example serves as both a stimulation of the Germanic revenge ethic that surely lingers within their Northern European souls, and as an illustration for the second wave of Franks, who must also be prepared to sacrifice their lives for God.

The initial defeat at Milan may also be God's reprimand of Charles, who disobeys an angelic order when he fails to lead the Frankish army against the Saracens himself; consequently, his "willingness only to delegate his divinely bestowed responsibility causes the deaths of many Christians" (Shepherd 120). Despite being named Christ's warrior on Earth and receiving explicit instructions for personally retaking Milan, Charles allows himself to be swayed by Ganelon's advice:

'What solde worthe of us in Fraunce
And thou in the felde were slayne?
Thyselve and we at home will byde
And latte Rowlande thedire ryde...' (182-85)

Although a pragmatic king probably ought to consider such things as the governmental fate of his country, listening to Ganelon is always a bad idea, as the contemporary audience would be well aware. Ganelon seeks Roland's death in order to lay claim to his lands, and the instinct for self-preservation he triggers in Charles is a subtler version of his own material greed. As God's chosen warrior, Charles should not hesitate when ordered into the fray, and he most certainly should not make any attempt to preserve his life if God sees fit to end it. "In medieval thought, true humility consisted in recognizing one's lowly condition compared with God's greatness, one's need to surrender oneself completely to the dictates of the divine Will, and one's total dependence upon grace" (Brault 1: 97). This concept of Humilitas was the ultimate mark of Christian faith.

When Roland and three of his companions are captured after the first battle, they

continue to fight with great fury: "Walde never no Crystyn knyghte thethyn flee / Thoghe that he wyste ryghte there to dye" (367-68). These four resign themselves to, and feel honored by, the prospect of dying for their God, if such is God's intention. Fortunately for them, God wants them to survive this encounter. The sultan, courteous like any worthy noble, feeds the Franks well and suggests that they should renounce their faith and turn to that of Muhammad, incidentally mistaking Roland for Charles. Roland corrects him and counter-suggests that Arabas and his men should embrace the Trinity. The sultan laughs, telling him that the Christian God must have no power, since His symbols were so easily burned when he first sacked the city.

Arabas commands one of his men to fetch a crucifix from a nearby church and throw it into the fire in order to prove the inefficacy of the God who already seems to have abandoned the Franks:

The Sowdane saide, 'Now sall ye see
 What myghte es in a rotyn tree
 That youre byleve es in.
 I darre laye my lyfe full ryghte
 That of hymselfe he hase no myghte
 Owte of this fire to wyn.
 How solde he than helpe another man
 That for hymselfe no gyn ne kan,
 Nother craft ne gyn?' (436-44)

Arabas' plan, however, backfires: as the Christians pray, the cross lies cold in the fire, actually dousing any flames that approach it. Finally the cross cracks, and "a fire than fro the crosse gan frusche / And in the Sarasene eghne it gaffe a dosche" (469-70). While the Saracens are blinded, the Franks kill the sultan and anyone else they can find, escaping on a quartet of horses supplied "thorow Goddis grace" (494). When they arrive at St. Denis and stop to thank God, the horses disappear, thereby proving their miraculous origin.

Because God has obviously not forsaken the Franks, His permitting the deaths of 39,996 Christians is unmistakably a reproach for Charles' reluctance to risk his own person in combating the Saracens. God need not worry that the message might still be unclear to Charles; He has a very persuasive ambassador in Archbishop Turpin. When Roland tells him the sad news, Turpin casts aside his miter and other symbols of his office, vowing that he will instead arm himself as a warrior and take vengeance on the Saracens. He goes to Charles, supported by an army of clergymen, and demands that the king send troops to Milan. Charles, again advised by Ganelon, wavers, rousing Turpin's anger: "Alle the false counsell that touches the crown / Here gyffe I tham Goddis malyson, / Both in lyfe and lyme" (682-84). The Archbishop excommunicates Charles, and the ecclesiastical army besieges him in Paris until he capitulates.

Although ecclesiasts were supposed to promote peace, Turpin not only commands Charles to go to war, but also does most of the slaying himself. Such actions were bizarrely incongruous with the traditional and sanctioned role of churchmen, but not with the documented deeds of historical clergymen. Carolingian capitularies from the middle of the eighth century document the Church's official disapproval of clerics'

carrying any kind of secular weapons (Martindale 151). Barber, however, cites the noted battle prowess of the early thirteenth-century bishop Philip of Beauvais — in his time, clerics were forbidden to carry swords and other edged weapons that could draw blood, but maces and clubs were approved (*Reign* 28). When Bishop Odo of Bayeux accompanied his brother William on his invasion of England, he is known to have wrapped his mace with cloth so as not to draw blood; a well-aimed (or even a not-so-well-aimed) blow could crush a man's skull or cause internal hemorrhaging that generally proved fatal. Turpin goes beyond this, hacking Saracens in half with an actual edged weapon.

Turpin's violation of this very important prohibition would seem to prevent his being viewed as a favorable representation of the medieval clergy. In addition to fighting, he demands God's assistance without any semblance of humility and petulantly rebukes the Virgin for her part in the initial failure at Milan:

'A, Mary mylde, whare was thi myght
 That thou lete thi men thus to dede be dighte
 That wighte and worthy were?

.....
 Had thou noghte, Marye, yitt bene borne,
 Ne had noghte oure gud men thus bene lorne.

The wyte is all in the...' (547-55)

The concept of Humilitas dictates humble acceptance of God's work. In this scene, however, Turpin resembles the Saracens in most of the romances (although not *Melayne*), who smash their idols in furious disillusionment when they are defeated.

When compared with Charles, however, Turpin is revealed as an ultra-positive portrayal of ecclesiastical power. The Charles of the romance's early scenes (before Turpin puts the fear of God into him) is painted as somewhat lazy and easily swayed, failing to live up to the standards of either Christian or Germanic kingship. When his vassal Alantyne begs for help, Charles puts his own life before those of his vassal's people, thus violating the reciprocity of the feudal relationship. Charles does send a force, but it is insufficient to defeat the Saracens. When that force is nearly wiped out and Charles still hesitates to engage in battle, he appears a coward who is not galvanized even by the need for vengeance. He fails in his Christianity by ignoring his heaven-sent dream and by his reluctance to reclaim Christian lands and force the conversion of any captives he might take in the process. Charles additionally offends the institution of the Church when he

... withowtten wene
 At the Byschopp was so tene,
 A fawchone hase he drawn.

.....
 The Kyng comande his knyghtis kene
 The Bischoff for to taa." (709-23)

Turpin, on the other hand, hyperbolically fulfills all the hallmarks of an admirable churchman, especially from the Church's perspective. On discovering Roland and the other survivors and learning the state of affairs, the Archbishop immediately

leaps into action, sending a summons “to monke, chanoun, preste and frere / And badd them . . . / . . . / Come help to feghte one Goddis foo” (620-23). Perhaps by doing so, he invites other clerics to violate the prohibition against violence, but it falls to the Church to protect Christendom if the secular warriors fail – or fail even to act. When Charles, even with Turpin’s example of efficient army-raising, still vacillates, the Archbishop’s passionate faith takes control: “And here I curse the, thou Kyng! / Because thou lyffes in esyre, / Thou ne dare noghte fyghte one Goddes enemy” (687-89).

Excommunication having convinced Charles to change his attitude, the Christian army arrives at Milan. Turpin, apparently having resumed his vestments—it may be that casting them aside before seizing a weapon negates his crime—performs Mass, and God shows his approval of the pending battle by miraculously supplying bread and wine for the ceremony. Donning armor, Turpin dashes into the fray, accumulating more kills for the day than those of his comrades who fight for their livelihoods. Despite his wounds, he refuses to eat, drink, or receive medical attention, citing the example of Christ’s Passion: “Criste for me sufferde mare. / He askede no salve to His sare, / Ne no more sall I this tyde” (1345-47). Significantly, Turpin is the only Christian warrior to face the Saracen champion, Arabaunt, and survive. To return to the subject of trial by combat, perhaps the previous Christian losses to Arabaunt denote the weak faith of the majority; only those truly inspired by God can triumph over the evil of the Other.

Turpin’s military prowess seems to be a partial manifestation of a clerical fantasy. Turpin embodies all the powers, spiritual, physical, and political, that the Church of the Middle Ages desired to hold over the secular nobles. The power struggle between Turpin and Charles resembles the conflicts between the Church and state over military regulations and jurisdiction over warriors. The fantasy element is apparent in that Turpin emerges hyperbolically victorious. Historically, the warrior class rather seemed to resent the Church’s interference in the secular sphere.

Largely because the baronial wars in Europe frequently left gutted churches in their wakes, the eleventh-century Church attempted to curb the warrior class’s violent tendencies by instituting the Peace and Truce of God around 1000. The first ecclesiastical peace movements, which arose in tenth-century Aquitaine, were actually aimed at controlling and punishing those *clerics* who chose to bear secular arms, rather than secular warriors themselves (Martindale 165). Their actions made it difficult for the Church to condemn warriors who attacked clerics, since the clerics were armed themselves. Having for the most part convinced those of the cloth to lay down their arms, the Church could take action against those of the secular world who raised their weapons against the religious.

The Peace of God, first instituted in France in about 980, was an attempt to give some means of protection to the unarmed sectors of society, namely the clergy and the peasants (Strickland 70). This act was also an endeavor to curb the baronial wars by threatening with excommunication those who thought to settle quarrels through force of arms rather than in the courts of justice (Barber, *Knight* 251). The Peace forbade the destruction of crops, mills, and churches and the stealing or killing of livestock.

Ravaging the countryside, however, was an essential and widespread method of furnishing supplies for hungry troops, and especially useful when the lands to be ravaged were the enemy’s (Strickland 70). Those warriors who may have been willing to refrain from attacking noncombatants were unlikely to abandon this mainstay of war-time survival.

The Peace having failed, the Truce of God (c. 1020) was a second attempt on the part of the Church to check knightly violence. This time the Church prohibited warfare between the knighthood during holy periods on certain religious feasts and between specific days of the week. In its most extreme manifestation, this act permitted fighting only from dawn on Monday till sunset on Wednesday (Strickland 71). Obviously, the practicalities of warfare necessitated that the knighthood violate these restrictions, and their indignation that the Church should take such an aggressive step toward interfering in secular law perhaps prompted them to do so with glee.

Thwarted in reality, the Church could have created propaganda like *Melayne’s* Turpin to promote sympathy and respect for ecclesiasts—and their causes; although opposed to war in general, the Church was always happy to exploit the warriors’ vices in campaigns against the heathens. “*Melayne* employs just the kind of images, incidents and attitudes that were the mainstay of medieval crusading propaganda” disseminated by the Church (Shepherd 118). The argument between Turpin and Charles, in which the Archbishop is so obviously in the right, gives evidence for the importance of clerical control over matters of government and war (surely a veiled desire of the Church throughout the Middle Ages). Charles, the secular noble, betrays both his vassals and his faith when he values his own life too highly. Since the poet could not go so far as to vilify Charlemagne (who is, after all, Charlemagne), the blame for his selfish decisions is transferred to Ganelon, the archetypal traitor.

Even though he is advised by “false counsell” (682), Charles’ attitude and lack of admirable action in this scene—indeed, his paying attention to Ganelon at all—lead the audience to a vital understanding: kings are fallible. Whether acting on their own or influenced by perfidious advisors, secular rulers, even God’s chosen, exhibit the propensity for error. Knights would be foolish to follow these men, since the rulers are not likely to be acting for the best interest of anyone but themselves. Clergy, on the other hand, are representatives of God who live holy lives without sin; they have somehow been cleansed of their capacities for misdeeds. A knight who follows the Church could be certain that his actions promoted his own spiritual welfare, as well as the serenity of all Christendom.

In defeating Charles on the matter of sending an army, Turpin assumes the role of a warrior while employing the weapons of a cleric. The Archbishop has traded his miter and crosier for helmet and sword in preparation for the battle he encourages, but he approaches Charles unarmed and in ecclesiastical garb. When the angry king draws a sword to threaten Turpin, displaying irrationality undesirable in a ruler, the Archbishop suddenly becomes secular as he steal a sword from a squire’s hand. He intimidates Charles and his men enough to stave off a skirmish, reclaiming his clerical pacifism. His final ploy, which achieves victory, utilizes the Church’s favored weapon, that of spiritual extortion: by excommunicating Charles, he effectively strips the king

of authority. No good Christian knight would be able to follow Charles' commands with a clear conscience, and the king himself would be wracked with anxiety over the questionable fate of his immortal soul. Finally receiving wholesome advice from Duke Naimes, his wisest knight, Charles asks forgiveness, bowing to the will of God as represented by the Church.

On the battlefield, Turpin becomes the preeminent warrior, claiming the life of many a Saracen. His martial skills far surpass those of the other knights, demonstrated by his rather easy defeat of Arabaunt in a merciless style:

Turpyn strake hym so sekerly
Thurgh the breste bone all plenerly
A lange yerde and more
That ded he daschede to the grounde
.....

The Bischopp than lighte full apertly
And off he hewes his hede in hy... (958-65)

Turpin is a churchman who demands the warriors' respect. His virility dispels the perception of a passive Church controlled by effeminate monks who couldn't defend themselves from a mosquito, much less from hordes of belligerent pagans. Archbishop Turpin is God's scourge, and not to be crossed. His character is rather hypermasculine, as he first rails at Mary (the feminine Church) for her quiescence in the face of the Saracens and then terrorizes the battlefield with his penetrative weapon. This problematic clergyman seems to overturn every behavior proscribed for clerics, and yet Turpin is "the floure of presthode" (1583).

Although such contradictions are widespread throughout *The Sege of Melayne*, they do paint an informative picture of the relationship between the Church and the nobility and between Christianity and Islam in the Middle Ages—or at least, a picture about which much can be speculated. Assuming the clerical authorship suggested by most critics, the romance can easily be read as manipulative propaganda intended to promote trust in the Church over secular rulers and to instill and maintain in the audience a sense of moral and spiritual superiority over the people of Islam. The exaggerated Otherness of the poem's Saracens amplified Christian distrust of Arabic peoples and the overstated inefficacy of the Frankish king, perhaps the greatest of European rulers, encourages an unquestioning obedience to the ecclesiastical powers. The Church satisfied its desire for dominion by using popular literature like *The Sege of Melayne* to perpetuate a falsehood and undermine a legend.

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