The King of Tars and Dramatic Conversion Romance

Of the Medieval literature which survives today, many of the romances still make for compelling and exciting reading, featuring larger-than-life heroes, epic battles, exotic lands, and beautiful damsels. However, one particular sub-genre of romance which may have difficulty remaining relevant to modern readers is the conversion story, in which a Western European Christian hero makes his or her name by converting Pagans, Jews, and Saracens (Muslims) to Christianity. Whether the protagonist is male or female, a saint or knight, commoner or royalty, they succeed not only in persuading others to embrace a new religion, but also destroying the apparently wicked resistors to the encroaching change. A 21st century reader, hopefully raised in an environment of diversity and a reasonable sense of political correctness, might be particularly troubled by stories where non-Caucasian non-Christians, upon conversion, are suddenly made more beautiful by medieval standards, namely by becoming white and taking a Western name. Therefore, an initial reading of the strange romance King of Tars, with a mixed-race baby born as an inanimate lump of flesh being restored to health by baptism and the Saracen father transforming into a white man upon his own conversion, may seem like typical Crusade-era material equating Christianity with Western standards of beauty. Yet subsequent closer readings, along with perspective on stories which truly match the aforementioned formula, reveals a more thorough and realistic argument for Christianity’s appeal. Though a Christian princess is forced into a marriage with a Muslim sultan, the romance’s inevitable conversion is a multifaceted dramatic development as Christianity is made to prove itself in debate with Islam rather than simply being assumed to be a superior faith.
When the Sultan of Damascus learns of the Princess of Tars’ beauty, he seeks her hand in marriage yet is predictably denied, as the Princess refuses to convert to Islam. Learning of the rebuttal, the Sultan goes to war with Tars, proving himself a capable military leader. Eventually, the princess concedes to leave with the Sultan to end the War. This entire segment of the story is our first indicator that the opposing forces of Christianity and Islam will not be scrutinized with such overt bias as European romances so often portrayed, such as *The Siege of Jerusalem*’s portrayal of barbaric and cannibalistic Jews, or the Arthurian *The Turke and Sir Gawain*’s strong but unchivalrous Turkish deuteragonist. For *King of Tars*, a realist approach is taken, developing both sides near equally. Lisa Lampert suggests “The text’s focus on a clear-cut battle between Christianity and Islam is sharpened through its deployment of white and black to mark the two opposing faiths” (406) although in this engagement, each opposing side is likened by a victory and loss: the Sultan has taken his wife to be and proven his military might, yet the stigma lurks that his bride is not compatible with his religion. On the other side, the Princess has shown resolve in the face of intimidation by an invading army, and selflessness to leave her home for the good of the people, but now faces a new life in a Saracen country away from her Christian upbringing.

The next stage for the struggle between Christianity and Islam is an internal one, as the Sultan will not marry the Princess unless she will convert to and share his Muslim faith, while she refuses to give up her Christian one. This conflict is portrayed in a surprisingly fair manner, as each future spouse has good reason for their argument: “Wel lothe war a Cristen man To wedde an hethen woman That leved on fals lawe; Als loth was that soudan To wed a Cristen woman, As Y finde in mi sawe.” (Lines 409-414). The Princess’s debate culminates in the form of a surreal dream, in which it is suggested that her true religion is defined by her personal
beliefs, rather than what customs she practices. Dreaming she is pursued by dogs, she sees “That blac hounde hir was folweing Thurch might of Jesu heven-king, Spac to hir in manhede, In white clothes, als a knight, And seyd to hir, ’Mi swete wight, No tharf the nothing drede, Of Tervagaunt no of Mahoun. Thi lord that suffred passioun Schal help the at thi nede.’” (Lines 448-456) Trusting that she may fulfill the rites of conversion without actually leaving the church of her upbringing, the Princess essentially pays lip service to the story’s inaccurate portrait of Islam and marries the Sultan. While a simple description of the narrative might imply that the Princess gets away with this by deceiving her husband into thinking she has adopted a new faith, it may be better interpreted as a liberal, humanist approach to Christian practices: one does not necessarily need to look the part of an ideology to value its beliefs. In a period where religious identity is equated with external indicators such as attire and skin color, the Princess’s assurances of her Christianity despite her Muslim dress give the faith validity well beyond superficial trappings. Likewise, the Sultan is satisfied by her assuming all external signals that she has embraced Islam, not suspecting that her conversion is only skin deep. If there is any validity to this interpretation, than it means that the next part of story may have some hidden subtext in this civil struggle between Christian and Muslim societies.

In what is likely the most dramatic showdown between the two faiths carrying the romance, the Sultan and the Princess conceive, and produce a bizarre offspring: the Lumpchild, a baby which apparently lacks any traits which would indicate humanity or even life: “Withouten blod and bon. For sorwe the levedi wald dye For it hadde noither nose no eye, Bot lay ded as the ston.” (Lines 582-585) This creature, apparently the product of parents with different faiths and races, and therefore lacking a whole one for itself, may also be a symbol of the wasted potential that comes from the couple’s refusal to yield and compromise with each other, selfishly
withholding all of their identity, and subsequently having none to give to the child, born a blank, as “the lump enacts an integration of Christian and Saracen that threatens such religious self-definition with chaotic overthrow.” (Calkin 228) From here, the Christianity/Islam debate advances from the arena of personal spirituality and geopolitical issues, and sets the stage for the occurrence of a miracle. The Sultan’s prayer to the alleged multiple Muslim gods (again, wildly inaccurate) prove fruitless, while the Princess elects to have the Lumpchild baptized, which simultaneously makes the baby Christian and completely healthy. While this may seem to be an instance of superficially pandering to the belief in a Christian truth and Muslim falsehood, it also is the first instance in which the two faiths are tested by completely unnatural circumstances and a need for divine action. While both faiths were shown to be equally capable of providing social benefits in the form of two powerful nations, and personal happiness with the Sultan and Princess each comfortable with their own faith, the Lumpchild’s transformation is an indicator of a faith’s influence beyond the mortal coil. Granted, this is still a work of fiction designed to praise the teachings of Christianity, and therefore the miracle occurs late enough in the story that it is neither taken for granted, nor does it completely discredit the qualities of another faith, in this case, Islam.

The last example of the Christian message of King of Tars is one both shocking for its dissonant values to a modern reader, and yet perhaps the most poignant demonstration of Christianity’s apparent worth over Islam in the context of the story. Convinced by the restoration of his son, the Sultan chooses to be converted and baptized himself, in the process, lightening his skin: “His hide, that blac and lothely was, Al white bicom, thurch Godes gras, And clere withouten blame” (Lines 928-930). While this no doubt is derived from racist concepts of equating morality with ethnicity, to readers of the period this relates a poignant continuation of
the theme started with the Lumpchild. The inanimate creature was made human by becoming a Christian, a clear hyperbolic representation of baptism, and one which solidifies the equation of conversion with racial identity. The Sultan, however, undergoes a complete transformation of identity as a grown adult man, despite all of his previous experience as a Muslim, his political standing, and his birthright, and proclaims his faith upon seeing his new skin, showing another dynamic between appearance and religion. As the final significant miracle of the story, it is more poignant given the slow progression of the shows of Christianity’s capabilities, letting the Sultan be witness to the faith’s advantages, argue them with his Muslim beliefs, and willingly convert in a literal change of character which is so highly stressed in the symbolism of the religion.

In conclusion, *King of Tars* manages to be a more effective example of a conversion romance through a subdued and diplomatic approach culminating in a more spectacular display of the supernatural. It suffers less from implausibility by not immediately using a miracle to proclaim the appeal of Christianity and through the progression of the story develops a realistic and humanized account of a hypothetical crisis of faith. Christianity is made to work to show its good traits to the reader, giving it credibility to the audience of the time, and making for much more engaging literature than a bombastic chivalric romance of inexplicable feats of strength by heroes and unwarranted conversion by dehumanized others. Today’s sensibilities may not agree with the attitude of such distinctly medieval propaganda, but can certainly appreciate the skillfulness of its craft.

