THE ORIENT
IN CHAUCER
AND MEDIEVAL
ROMANCE

Carol F. Heffernan

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D. S. BREWER

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The idea of the Orient is a major motif in Chaucer and medieval romance, and this new study reveals much about its use and significance, setting the literature in its historical context and thereby offering fresh new readings of a number of texts. The author begins by looking at Chaucer's and Gower's treatment of the legend of Constance, as told by the Man of Law, demonstrating that Chaucer's addition of a pattern of mercantile details highlights the commercial context of the eastern Mediterranean in which the heroine is placed; she goes on to show how Chaucer's portraits of Cleopatra and Dido from the *Legend of Good Women*, read against parallel texts, especially in Boccaccio, reveal them to be loci of medieval orientalism. She then examines Chaucer's inventive handling of details taken from Eastern sources and analogues in the *Squire's Tale,* showing how Chaucer shapes them into the western form of interlace. The author concludes by looking at two romances, *Floris and Blauncheflur* and *Le Bone Florence of Rome*; she argues that elements in *Floris* of sibling incest are legitimised into a quest for the beloved, and demonstrates that *Le Bone Florence* is related to analogous oriental tales about heroic women who remain steadfast in virtue against persecution and adversity.

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For Tom, Jeff, and Mom
and in memory of Leo J. Falvo

Illustrations

Acknowledgments

From where does the idea for a book come? This one may have begun with a handshake with Lillian Herlands Hornstein who first kindled my interest in medieval romance literature. Or perhaps the origin is my maternal grandmother who was born in Altamura, a small farm village outside the city of Bari, a port on the east coast of southern Italy. In the early Middle Ages Bari had been an Islamic emirate, something which made perfect sense to me when I first learned of it: one afternoon many years ago I heard my grandmother and some of her lady *paesane* from Altamura chanting lullabies together about wolves that snatched lambs in the night. The old songs sounded, in their up-and-down-the-scale wailing, more Arabic than Barese, the dialect of Italian that my grandmother spoke.

Whatever its origins, this book about East and West could not have been completed without the encouragement of my colleagues at the Newark campus of Rutgers University: Ann C. Watts and John Demaray, who listened to me talk about various parts of the book as it was in progress; Gabriel Miller, former Chairman of the English Department, and Steven J. Diner, Provost and former Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, both of whom supported the sabbatical award that helped me bring the book to completion; and the reference librarians at the John Cotton Dana Library of Rutgers University who arranged interlibrary loans for me over a period of several years. For their interest and stimulation I also wish to thank my students in recent courses on Chaucer and on Middle English Romance Literature, especially Angela Del Casale, Jennifer Arena, Carmine Simmons, Azer Kemaloglu, Frank Nascimento, Paul Rossetti, and Roseanne Alvarez.

For an invitation to speak at the 1995 Modern Language Association convention in Chicago at a session on European Courtly Literature and the Orient, I am grateful to Zacharias Thundy. My paper, "The Medieval Tale of Florence and the East," was subsequently published in an issue of *South Asian Review* (vol. 29 [1995], 1–10) which he guest-edited. An expanded, revised version of that article became chapter six of this book. I also wish to thank the editors of *The Chaucer Review*, especially Robert Worth Frank, for inviting me to present a paper in a session sponsored by that journal at the 31st International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo. It was published as "Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*: The Poetics of Interlace or the 'well of English undefiled' " (*Chaucer Review* 32 [1997], 32–45) and later enlarged to become chapter four. Thanks are due for permission to print revised versions of these two articles. Early drafts of sections of chapters one, two, three, and five began as talks for the Graduate English Program at Rutgers-Newark, various sessions at several International Congresses on Medieval Studies in Western

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Introduction: Romance and the Orient

THIS study focuses on a genre and a place – "romance" and the "Orient" – as they are exemplified in late medieval English literature, especially in Chaucer.

Nineteenth-century scholars, pointing to Arabic and Middle Eastern sources and analogues for many medieval romances, virtually suggested that the romance form emerged from the meeting of Saracen and crusader.[1] With all of medieval reality to draw on, romance writers were fascinated enough by the Orient, which crusaders, pilgrims, and traders had opened up to them, to turn it into literature. It is a fact of literary history that the evolution of the romance genre in Europe followed these East-West contacts. Within the last decade, there has been an upswing in publication by Postcolonial theorists on the intersection of West and East and the depiction of the Orient in the western imagination.[2] Inspired by such work are several recent and challenging articles by medievalists who have looked for the presence of something like modern instances of Orientalism which they have found in portrayals of the Orient in medieval texts.[3] This study does not press anything like a continuous argument for medieval orientalism of a Postcolonial stamp, though a connecting purpose of the six chapters of this book is to show how the Orient and the people in it are represented in late medieval romance. The study does,

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[1] The views of such representative nineteenth-century scholars of romance literature as Huet, Wallensköld, and Mussafia descend from the eighteenth-century medievalist and first historian of English poetry, Thomas Warton (1728–90). He wrote in an essay at the beginning of *The History of English Poetry* entitled, "Of the Origin of Romantic Fiction in Europe": "It is an established maxim of modern criticism that the fictions of Arabian imagination were communicated to the western world by means of the Crusades" (Warton, I, i). Despite Maria Rosa Menocal's 1987 book, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage*, the relationship of the literature and culture of the medieval Arabic world to that of western medieval literature remains a large and poorly mapped problem.

[2] A few examples of this emerging postcolonial research include the following: *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen; Gyan Prakesh, "Orientalism Now"; Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*; Jacqueline de Weever, *Sheba's Daughters: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic*; Benjamin Braude, "The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Period."

[3] See especially Sheila Delany, "Geographies of Desire: Orientalism in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*" and *The Naked Text: Chaucer's 'Legend of Good Women'*; Kathryn Lynch, "East Meets West in Chaucer's *Squire's* and *Franklin's Tales*"; and Susan Schibanoff, "Worlds Apart: Orientalism, Antifeminism, and Heresy in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*."

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however, discuss distinct instances of orientalism, as, for example, in chapter 3, concerning Chaucer's depictions of Cleopatra and Dido.

My thesis is that there is remarkable oriental influence discernible in medieval romances, enough, in fact, to call for a reconsideration of the textual exchanges as well as other cultural interactions linking English (and European) romance literature of the Middle Ages and the Orient. This examination of romances centers on several of those written in Middle English: "high" romances by Geoffrey Chaucer such as the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Squire's Tale* and his two *legends* of Cleopatra and of Dido as well as "lower," anonymous examples of the romance genre, *Le Bone Florence of Rome* and *Floris and Blauncheflur*. Aside from *Floris and Blauncheflur* which is a thirteenth-century work, all the romances are late – Chaucer's dating from the fourteenth century and *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, the fifteenth century. The presence, however, of *Floris and Blauncheflur* in two late medieval manuscripts (the Auchinleck [1330–40] and Egerton 2862 [ca. 1400]) attests to the wide audience that the thirteenth-century romance continued to have in the later Middle Ages. Other Middle English romances could have been chosen, but all of these offer clear opportunities to study portraits of the Orient or uses of the oriental in fairly representative narratives displaying intrinsic literary merit. Moreover, several of these works – *The Legend of Good Women, The Squire's Tale*, and *Le Bone Florence of Rome* – are under-represented in the critical literature. Even Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and the romance of *Floris and Blauncheflur* are more appreciated than written about. The term "Orient" is understood, as it was in the Middle Ages, to refer to North Africa and the Near and Middle East. Sources and analogues are a concern of this study, but it focuses equally on other aspects of the literary and cultural interchange between Islamic East and Christian West made visible in romance texts. These include settings in the Orient, portrayals of Christian-Saracen relationships, indications (usually tonal) of the way the West perceived Islam, and even suggestions of medieval orientalism. A related and relevant concern of this study is to show wherever possible that the subject matter and other narrative elements of Arabic tales were transmitted to the Western literary tradition by the Moslems through Arabic Spain and Sicily and through cultural contacts that accompanied East-West encounters along pilgrimage routes, in arenas of trade in the Mediterranean and the Levant, and during centuries of Crusading wars. These historical realities created intersection points for cultural exchanges between East and West that reveal themselves in the details of texts as well as in exchanges of texts themselves. A clear fact of textual-historical relations, as Lee Patterson puts it, is that "the historically real cannot exist apart from the textuality by which it is made known" (Patterson, 63). The literary historian operates in a world of textuality that cannot evade enclosing the economic, political, and social realities that constitute real history. The plague, referred to by Boccaccio in the introduction to *The Decameron* as the occasion for the escape to the countryside by his aristocratic characters who tell stories, is the same plague known to have been

carried to Europe by rats on Genoese ships that sailed between Italy and the Orient. Paul Zumthor put the matter another way when he spoke of the text as a "word act" ("un acte de parole") that "situates itself among more or less institutionalized acts" ("se situe parmi d'autres actes, plus ou moins institutionnalisés" [Zumthor, 8]).[4] The study which follows is an effort to examine the impact of textual-historical encounters on some of the best Chaucerian and anonymous English medieval romances, works that reached a wide circle of readers in their day, as these narratives, written in the vernacular, were the rough equivalent of today's popular novels.

Long before the Age of Discovery directed Europe's attention westward across the Atlantic, European engagement with the Orient during the Middle Ages was complex – politically, economically, socially, and philosophically. Such multi-layered involvement could not fail to leave its imprint on medieval romance, a genre that, like the modern novel, gives its audience a comprehensive view of how society conducts life. Through the referentiality of its representations and its playing out of beliefs that have meaning for its authors and audiences, romance is the medieval genre that places itself most fully in its time.

A new literary genre emerged in France shortly after the Second Crusade. Borrowing subjects from the legends of classical antiquity and the chivalric realm of King Arthur and his knights, French writers produced verse narratives about love and the pursuit of adventure known as "romances." Romances were written in French, the vernacular, not Latin, and were intended to entertain. The new genre was imitated in all the medieval European vernaculars, including English. All Middle English narratives, written after 1100, dealing with aristocratic *personae* and involving combat and/or love are called "romances." A typical definition is that of Helaine Newstead

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4   This perception of the text shaped Zumthor's sense of his role as medievalist:

> Aucun concept n'échappe ainsi à l'absolue nécessité de spécification historique. . . . Ma tâche, comme médiéviste, sera de ré-historiser un ensemble concept élaboré "en théorie," c'est-à-dire par dés-historisation des faits . . . à valoriser fortement (au point d'en faire l'élément axia celle-ci) – un certain nombre de facteurs tenant aux conditions réelles de production de textes à analyser. (Zumthor, 8–9)

> [No concept thus escapes the absolute necessity of historical specificity. . . . My task, as a medievalist, will be to re-historicize a group concept elaborated "in theory," that is to say, by de-historicization of facts . . . to valorize strongly (to the point of making it itself the axis element) – a certain number of factors contiguous to the real conditions of production of the texts to be analyzed. (my translation)]

Zumthor here draws on the thinking of the postmodern semiotician, Julia Kristeva, whose view of intertextuality was exceedingly broad and abstract: society as a whole is to be thought of as the text, so that a text's participation within the discursive space of a culture may be as significant as its relationship to prior texts (Kristeva, "Problèmes de la structuration," 312). Kristeva's privileging of cultural space over textual artifacts reflected, in fact, a predispostion against the analysis of putative sources (Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, 60). As a Chaucer scholar and medievalist I do not share the hostility of the twentieth-century semiotician's work to the study of a text's relationship to its supposed sources and analogues. This book considers a work's relation to prior texts a legitimate concern and, where useful, that dimension of textual interrelationships is included.

in the revised Wells *Manual*: "The medieval romance is a narrative about knightly prowess and adventure, in verse or prose, intended primarily for the entertainment of a listening audience" (Newstead, 11). Correct as it is, the definition does not suggest how large and varied the genre is nor how enduring, for it lasted into the sixteenth century and beyond. The Middle English romances are commonly grouped according to theme and origin, as, for example, "English and Germanic Legends," "Arthurian Legends," "Charlemagne Legends," "Eustace-Constance-Florence-Griselda Legends," etc. Neither the definition above nor these thematic groupings indicate the extent to which political, social, religious, and aristocratic assumptions figure in the romance genre. Nor would this definition and these groupings suggest the characteristic of romance that Georges Duby and Daniel Eisenberg point out, namely, that a large part of the audience of romance was the young, socially unsettled, still in search of patterns of conduct on which to base their lives (Duby, 835–46; Eisenberg, 89–90, 93–97). Romance is the medieval genre in which love, courtship, and marriage, are often at issue.

Chaucer first uses the term "romance" in his earliest narrative poem, *The Book of the Duchess*, in attributing the story of Ceyx and Alcioun to "a book,/ A romaunce" (47–48), probably to recall his French sources, Guillaume de Machaut's *Dit de la fonteinne amoreuse* and the *Ovid moralisé* as well as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[5] "Romance" as used here refers to works written in French but also a written source that is not primarily historical. When Pandarus, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, a work written near the end of Chaucer's career, finds his niece reading with her ladies, Criseyde tells her uncle, "This romaunce is of Thebes that we rede" (100). Her description of the events correspond with the French *Roman de Thèbes*, again indicating Chaucer's association of the term with secular narratives written in French. Despite Criseyde's speaking of a vernacular text, her snobby uncle goes on to talk about the Latin *Thebiad*, an epic in twelve books. The only time the romance genre is named in *The Canterbury Tales* occurs in *Sir Thopas*, a tale that is one of two told by the pilgrim Chaucer himself. It specifically links itself with "romances" (847, 897). Thopas's calling for "romances that been roiales" (847) about popes and cardinals along with "romances of prys" (897) that the narrator specifies as the tales of Horn, Ypotis, Bevis, Guy, Lybeaus Desconus, and Pleyndamour suggest an interest in including pious romances along with adventures of chivalry and love. The pious mode, however, does not have much impact on *Sir Thopas* which tells "of bataille and of chivalry,/ And of ladyes love-drury" (894–95).

After this introductory chapter, the next chapter (Chapter 2) studies one of the romances of the *Canterbury Tales*, the *Man of Law's Tale*, which treats the legend of Constance. Some attention is given to two analogues of this tale as told by John Gower, Chaucer's close friend, and by Giovanni Boccaccio,

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5   All references in my text to Chaucer's work refer to *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson, 3rd ed.

many of whose works Chaucer had read. These romances provide not merely an opportunity to view the theme of marriage between Christian and Saracen but, more importantly, the intersection of faith and commerce in the Eastern Mediterranean. Chaucer makes the two intersect when his lawyer pilgrim credits a merchant as the source of his tale. The idea that the Syrian merchant found in the tale is very likely a Christian, probably an Italian trader living in Syria, offers a new perspective on the tale's mercantile dimension. In Chapter 3 an examination of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* shows that the poet ostensibly praises two North African (and therefore "Oriental") queens, Cleopatra and Dido, as models of true love, while in fact representing them as models of sexual excess. The tales may thus be seen as *loci* of medieval orientalism, a subject of increasing interest in recent scholarship. This chapter is pivotal to further consideration of issues of gender and sexuality in subsequent chapters, especially 5 and 6. The fourth chapter examines Chaucer's long fragment of a romance, the *Squire's Tale*. This incomplete Canterbury tale led nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars interested in origins to hunt down sources and analogues in Persian and Byzantine tales as well as in travel literature written by Marco Polo and John Mandeville. But Chaucer's structure in this tale is European even though its content is Oriental; it is a type of poetry of interlace found in medieval French romance literature and also, according to John Leyerle, in *Beowulf* (Leyerle, 147). The resemblances between western poetry of interlace and oriental frame structure are just that – resemblances – not indications of intentional intermingling of western and eastern aesthetics by the poet Chaucer. Chapter 5, "A Question of Incest, the Double, and the Theme of East and West: The Middle English Romance of *Floris and Blauncheflur*" questions the assumption, common in most literary criticism about the romance, that this tale is "ideal" in its portrait of the romantic bringing together of the Saracen, Floris, and the Christian, Blauncheflur. Chapter 6 places the popular Middle English romance, *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, told in numerous versions in medieval French verse and Spanish prose, within the context of its oriental analogues, especially those found in the *Thousand and One Nights*. This expanded consideration of the oriental analogues, merely cited in passing in the notes and bibliography to my critical edition of *Florence*, gains added importance in relationship to the other romances examined in this study. The study concludes that contact with strangers is a powerful engine for change in literature: not just sources and analogues with their plots and themes, images and motifs, but a whole other culture opened up when East met West and it intrigued writers of imaginative literature just as did the writings of Eastern scientists and philosophers. Arabs were respected for their learning in philosophy and the sciences and were regarded as the mediators of Greek and Byzantine traditions. Arabic medicine, as represented by the writing of such physicians as Rhazes (865–923), Haly Abbas (d. 994), and Avicenna (980–1037), transmitted by Byzantine compilers and translated into Latin by Constantine the African and Gerard of Cremona, became part of the education

of university-trained European doctors of medicine. It is said of Chaucer's physician pilgrim in the *Canterbury Tales*, the Doctor of Phisik, that "Wel knew he the olde Esculapius,/And Deyscorides, and eek Rufus,/Olde Ypocras, Haly, and Galyen,/Serapion, Razis, and Avycen,/Averrois, Damascien, and Constantyn" (*General Prologue*, 429–33). Suggestions of the influence of Arabic scientific thought are even evident in medieval imaginative literature, as, for example, in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Book of the Duchess*.[6]

At the outset of this exploration of the uses of the Orient in romance narratives, some fundamental matters pertaining to the interchange between Islamic East and Christian West should be addressed, namely, the Crusades, Pilgrimage, and Trade. What follows will supply relevant history establishing the East-West connection that is essential contextualization for the subsequent chapters of this book.

Crusades

Contemporaries regarded the crusades as holy wars of Christianity against the infidel who possessed the Holy Sepulcher of Christ. From 637 until the end of the First Crusade in 1100, Jerusalem remained in the hands of Mohammedan rulers. The Latin church in Jerusalem had been tolerated for centuries by Arab conquerors, but the capture of Jerusalem by the Turks in 1071 from the Arabs of Egypt changed everything. The lives of Christians became difficult; their plight proved a clarion call to the Christian West and became the immediate cause of the holy war. At the western end of the Mediterranean, more than a hundred years before the First Crusade, wars were already being fought by Christians to reclaim land taken by Mohammedans: at the instigation of Pope Benedict VIII, the Pisans conquered Arab Sardinia in 1016; with the blessings of Pope Alexander II, the Normans fought the Arabs from 1060–1090 before reclaiming Sicily for Christendom; and in Spain, as early as 970, the war against the Moors of the Omayyad caliphate was underway. Thus, not only was Jerusalem a meeting place for two civilizations during the Crusades, but East and West already had hostile as well as cultural engagements in Sicily, Sardinia, and Spain.

The First Crusade was Pope Urban II's answer to the appeals of Michael VII of Constantinople and of Alexius Comnenus, the Byzantine Emperor, for military troops to fight various hostile invaders against Eastern Christianity, especially the Seljuk Turks who were occupying Asia Minor. The Church transformed their appeal for military support into a holy war to regain Jerusalem and the rule of the Holy Land. The Pope's ambitions coincided with the economic interests of Italian cities in the eastern Mediterranean and those of the younger sons of noble households eager to carve fortunes in the East, two

6   See Heffernan, *The Melancholy Muse*, 38–94.

factors that helped secure the success of the First Crusade. Urban II's sermon at Clermont made August 1096 the date of departure for crusaders to leave for their meeting in Constantinople. Brought together there were the interests of younger sons (like Bohemond of Taranto, son of Robert Guiscard, Baldwin of Lorraine, and Raymond of Provence) and Italian merchants from the West, on the one hand, and the condition of Eastern Christians in the Mohammedan East, on the other. Nicea, in Asia Minor, was captured in 1097; Antioch, defended during a siege in 1098; and Jerusalem, captured by the crusaders in 1099. Most returned to the West, but several commanders remained: Bohemund and the Italian Normans at Antioch; Baldwin and the Lorrainers at Jerusalem, and Raymond of Toulouse and the Provençals in Tripoli. The First Crusade, preached on French soil in Clermont, had been a mostly French enterprise.

The loss of Edessa, which fell to the Moslems in 1144, provoked the Second Crusade. In 1153 Ascalon fell to the Christians and in the 1160s a series of campaigns penetrated into Egypt as far as Cairo. Victory over Saladin at Montgesard in 1177 made westerners feel they had divine support. Then came Saladin's invasion of 1187. He moved through Tiberius, seized the relic of the True Cross at the Horns of Hattin, and captured Jerusalem on October 20, 1187, after two weeks of fighting. Jerusalem was lost again after just 88 years of Christian occupation. It is said that the shock of the news caused the death of Pope Urban III. His successor, Gregory VIII, in the encyclical, *Audita tremendi*, made an appeal for a new crusade. Its center was to be Acre, the capture of which would lead the way to retaking Jerusalem. Political dissension among the crusaders, however, contributed to the failure of the Third Crusade, which ended with a truce between Saladin and the Christians (that allowed them to hold the coast from Tyre to Jaffa) and with Richard I's departure from Acre in October 1192. By August 1198, the new Pope, Innocent III, issued a new crusade encyclical that brought about the Fourth Crusade of 1202–1204. This Crusade made Egypt, now the center of Mohammedan power and trade, the object of attack. The goal of the crusade for numerous complex reasons became diverted to Constantinople. The crusaders stormed the city and in May, Baldwin of Flanders became the first Latin emperor of Constantinople. The doge of Venice was rewarded with more than a quarter of the Eastern empire. The Fourth Crusade had fallen out of papal hands into those with a commercial agenda. The Fifth Crusade (1218–24) was the last to be started by Innocent III. Again, Egypt was the goal of attack, and the crusade would start with Damietta, an Egyptian city on the eastern delta of the Nile. The capture of Damietta in 1220 was at first a success, but the crusaders lost their advantage when the river flooded in August and the Moslems broke the dykes, causing the crusaders to be trapped. They left Egypt on August 30th. The Fifth Crusade ended in failure and was to be followed in 1228–29 by the Sixth, the first and only Crusade not to have the papal blessing. It was led by Frederick II, who married the heiress of the kingdom of Jerusalem, and who made the goal of his crusade Jerusalem, not