

SARACENS, GRAVES, AND THE FORMATION  
OF NATIONAL IDENTITY  
IN SIR THOMAS MALORY'S *LE MORTE DARTHUR*

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In the beginning of *Le Morte Darthur*, England is an unruly, undefined nation.<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Tiller sees its formlessness as a nation expressed through a formless landscape: “the association of violent men and a violent landscape signals the need for a code of conduct to regulate these energies” (40). This need for an ethical code will eventually be fulfilled by the chivalric code as it is formulated in the Pentecostal Oath, but not before several chivalric ideals are tested and rejected. Kenneth Hodges identifies three distinct chivalric ideals used in the first book of the *Morte Darthur*: the first is “might-makes-right chivalry,” the second, “blood-feud chivalry,” and the third, “the ethical chivalry announced in the Round Table oath” (*Forging* 35). As Arthur’s nation gradually stabilizes, its untamed landscape is marked and shaped so that it suits the nation’s social and political needs. Of course, part of the process of forming a nation is distinguishing the “us” of the nation from the “them” of everyone else. Arthur is fairly accepting of outsiders—hardly any of his best knights are English natives—but there is one quality required of the Round Table Knights: they must be Christian. Arthur does not explicitly prohibit non-Christian knights from joining his court, but he and his Christian knights instinctively recognize that non-Christians, such as Saracens, have no place at the Round Table.

Arthur and his Round Table Knights encounter Saracens regularly, but they are categorically excluded from Arthur’s inner circle. Despite the frequency of these encounters, there is no clear definition of who the Saracens are or what makes them Saracens. Malory’s perception of the Saracens seems murky and flexible; in some cases, he uses the word “Saracen” interchangeably with “pagan,” but in other cases, he clearly uses “Saracen” to mean “Muslim.”<sup>2</sup> In recent years, scholars have attempted to determine exactly what Malory meant when he used the term “Saracen,” and a consensus has been developed: most agree that, to Malory, the Saracens were “the Other” and fundamentally different from

Arthur and his knights.<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline De Weever adeptly expresses the medieval English and French understanding of Saracens: “Whatever they were for the ancient world, for writers in English and French, the Saracens were defined by what they were not: not Latin, not English, not French, not Christian” (6).<sup>4</sup> Malory understands the Saracens as a negation of who and what Arthur and his knights are, and this idea shapes how he presents Saracens both individually and collectively. Malory denies Saracens the opportunity to record their national identity on tombs, as Arthur and his knights so frequently do, and he instead links Saracens to landscape features associated with lack or absence. In crafting the *Morte Darthur*, Malory portrays Saracens as a negation of Christians.

According to Tiller, in both the world where Malory lived and the world he creates in the *Morte Darthur*, graves are much more than markers of where dead bodies have been buried. The inscriptions on tombs allow the living to frame the violent actions that led to the person’s death in such a way that they indicate an ordered world—random acts of violence are reimagined so that they suggest a divine plan at work. These inscriptions can also instruct passersby in proper chivalric behavior by praising the dead’s chivalric deeds or condemning their dishonorable ones: “Malory encodes the ideals of Arthurian chivalric conduct onto tombs and onto surrounding geographic and textual space” (39). Marked tombs let outsiders know that they have entered Arthur’s kingdom and what type of behavior is acceptable inside its boundaries. Indeed, the Round Table Knights do not merely mark their own nation’s landscape; they also mark and transform landscapes outside the borders of Arthur’s kingdom. Saracens, on the other hand, are denied the right to leave their marks on landscapes in any nation, even their own. When Saracens die, they are either buried far away from civilized, ordered space in presumably unmarked graves, or no mention is made of their burial. Not even the converted Saracens are given marked tombs—both Priamus and Palomides simply disappear from the text after they convert. Malory marks the landscape of Arthur’s kingdom in vivid detail and denies definition to the Saracens’ land. For Malory, making a lasting mark on the land for Christians but leaving no trace of Saracens is theologically symbolic. Just as the durable tombs made for Christians will last, the soul of the Christians buried beneath these tombs will live on eternally in heaven. Dead Saracens, on the other hand, will not endure in living memory or in the afterlife.

To date, most work on Malory's Saracens has focused on individuals, specifically Palomides. This trend is understandable, considering the development of Palomides' character and the amount of text in which he is included.<sup>5</sup> Dorsey Armstrong finds Palomides an ideal subject for postcolonial analysis because, for most of his presence in the text, he is in between being a Saracen and being a Christian; he was raised as a Saracen, but knows he wants to convert to Christianity. Armstrong adapts Gayatri Spivak's question "[C]an the subaltern speak?" to suit Palomides' situation in Arthur's kingdom:

Asking the question, 'Can the Saracen speak?' confronts the reader with the fact that Palomides is only intelligible in the narrative space of the *Morte Darthur* as a colonized Other who longs for full admittance to the realm of chivalric fellowship, as a figure who has chosen to reject his Saracen heritage in favor of the Christian fellowship of the Round Table. The Saracen *qua* Saracen *cannot* speak in Malory's text. ("Postcolonial Palomides" 177, emphasis original)

Although Palomides is able to function fairly well in Arthur's Christian community, he cannot express his experience as Saracen to his Christian peers. Not only are Saracens unable to speak while living, they are also denied the right to retain permanent records of their successes, failures, or even their existence after death. Aside from denying the importance, and perhaps legitimacy, of Saracens' lives, the Christian knights' practice of refusing Saracens the right to transform the land with tombs also stunts the development of the Saracens' national identity.

In order to understand this process more clearly, it will be useful to look carefully at the deaths and burials of Corsabroyne, a Saracen knight competing in an English tournament, and Estoraus, the king of Sarras. Corsabroyne and Estoraus are two of the few named Saracens in the text, and unlike Palomides and Primaus, they are not interested in converting to Christianity. Their purely Saracen identities make them ideal for a comparison of Christian and Saracen burials in the *Morte Darthur*. There are two notable features that Corsabroyne's and Estoraus's deaths share. First, both Corsabroyne and Estoraus are buried in unmarked graves and are not mourned by their fellow Saracens. Second, in each case, several Christian deaths occur in the same episode in which the Saracen dies, and there is a clear difference between the treatment of the Christian and Saracen dead. Both Corsabroyne's and

Estorause's deaths show that Saracens are muted in death, denied the opportunity to commemorate the dead or use their moral failures as lessons to those who see their graves.

Before I discuss the interactions between Saracens and Round Table Knights and the resulting burials, I will offer two examples from the first book of the *Morte Darthur* that show how Christian knights and ladies are often buried. There is not a burial description for every death in the *Morte Darthur*, nor is there a standard for burial or marking graves. However, many Christian knights and ladies are buried with noticeable, lasting markers, and their graves are used to transform the land. There are several such burials in "Balin or the Knight with Two Swords," the story of a knight who is rarely in Arthur's good graces and is notable for having committed several crimes against chivalry that result in the deaths of both knights and ladies. As Tiller notes, all five of the tombs erected and inscribed in this story write a "history of the evolution of chivalry or the code of knighthood" (41). Although a majority of these dead knights and ladies had some sort of blemish on their moral record, their lives and deaths are deemed worthy to be remembered for a long time. The inscriptions on their tombs acknowledge their moral failures, but usually commemorate them and cast their lives in a positive light. Tombs tend to be elaborate and made with lasting materials, usually stone and metal: they are crafted in such a way that the dead person's story and corresponding moral lesson will be able to instruct passersby for the foreseeable future.

One of the five tombs in Balin's tale is constructed for Launceor, the knight from Ireland, and his lover Columbe. After Balin kills the damsel with the sword, Launceor pursues him because his pride is wounded: "[H]e had grete despite at Balyne for the enchevyng of the swerde, that ony sholde be accompted more hardy or more of prouesse" (42). Balin kills Launceor in the resulting fight, and Launceor's lover, Columbe, kills herself in grief over his death. When King Mark hears their story, he is so moved by their love that he commemorates them with a rich tomb, which reads: "[H]ere lyeth Launceor, the kyngis son of Irelonde, that at hys owne rekeste was slayne by the hondis of Balyne" and "this lady Columbe and peramour to hym slew herself with hys swerde for dole and sorow" (45). The inscription presents Launceor as a model of bravery and Columbe as a model of devotion, but it also implicitly condemns Launceor's pride and Columbe's sorrow that was "oute of mesure" (43). The chivalric code now inscribed on this

landscape shows passersby that devotion is commendable in moderation and bravery is admirable when not driven by pride.

The second example comes from Arthur's war with the eleven kings, a war that grew out of the tension between region and nation. As Hodges explains, there was no single factor that defined a nation during the Middle Ages, and "regions, countries, and international groups used language, tradition, law, and stories to create and contest notions of sovereignty and community" ("Why" 562). Regional conflicts over the law of succession contribute to Arthur's war with the eleven kings. The kings of the countries within England initially reject Arthur's rule because they believe he is neither noble nor old enough to rule, declaring that they "had no joye to receyve no yeftes of a berdles boye that was come of lowe blood" (11). Merlin explains the circumstances of Arthur's birth and denies that he is of low blood or a bastard, but the kings cannot agree upon whether or not Arthur is Uther's legitimate heir. Some of the kings accept that Arthur should be king, but eleven deny Arthur's right to succession and wage war against him (12).

When Arthur finally conquers the eleven kings, he inscribes his dominance into the land with their tombs. Arthur makes gold-covered statues of the kings for their tombs, each with a "countenaunce lyke unto men that were overcom," and adds a statue of himself standing over them with his sword drawn (49). Unlike Balin, who was Arthur's subject, the eleven kings are formidable enemies for Arthur. At one point during the lengthy conflict, Arthur's allies, Kings Ban and Bors, note that the eleven kings are excellent fighters and worthy of praise, despite the fact that they are the enemy. Arthur responds, "I may nat love hem . . . for they wolde destroy me" (23). Despite the trouble these kings caused for Arthur, he still buries them in a manner appropriate to their royalty. Arthur records his Christian enemies' lives and lets their grave statues speak. Even as, in death, the kings are forced to speak the message Arthur wants them to tell, their lives are commemorated. Their overcome faces are permitted to transform the land.

The war with the eleven kings includes an interaction between Christians and Saracens and establishes the Christian-versus-Saracen opposition. At about the midpoint of the war, the eleven kings receive a message that forty thousand Saracens have invaded their lands. The kings remark, "[I]f we had nat warred agaynste Arthure as we have done, he wolde sone a revenged us" (27). The eleven kings are at war with both Arthur and the invading Saracens, but they see only Arthur as a potential ally because of the cultural and religious values they share with him.

They do not believe that Arthur has a right to the throne, but his rule is preferable to being conquered by the Saracens. Under Arthur's rule, they can maintain their language, customs, and Christian faith, all of which would be threatened under Saracen occupation. The eleven kings recognize that the most important border is the one between Christianity and paganism, not the one between various regions within England.<sup>6</sup>

Arthur's kingdom twice faces the threat of Saracen invasion on a large scale, and Saracens enter his kingdom individually as well. One such Saracen, Corsabroyne, appears in *The Book of Tristram de Lyones* during the Tournament at Surluse. Corsabroyne is in love with a damsel, and when she spurns his advances, he tells everyone she is insane so no one else will want to marry her. The damsel asks Palomides to fight Corsabroyne on her behalf. A long fight ensues, and when Palomides finally strikes off Corsabroyne's head, "therewithall cam a stynke of his body, whan the soule departed, that there myght nobody abyde the savoure. So was the corpus had away and buryed in a wood, bycause he was a paynym" (407). Malory initially suggests that Corsabroyne's quick burial in the woods is necessary because of the stench issuing from the body, but then revises that claim when he adds "bycause he was a paynym." Truly, all that distinguishes Corsabroyne from his English counterparts is his paganism. Corsabroyne is called "felownyse," but his crimes against the damsel are far less severe than those committed by Christian knights, who kill ladies and damsels with an alarming frequency. Balin, for example, kills one lady, lets two die due to his negligence, and allows another to be wounded during his tale. Corsabroyne's defamation of the damsel is unsavory, but nonviolent; she is not in danger of bodily harm at his hands. It is neither Corsabroyne's stinking body nor his treatment of the damsel that necessitates his quick burial in an anonymous grave.

Corsabroyne's grave cannot be marked for several reasons. Unlike Palomides and Priamus, Corsabroyne has no desire to convert to Christianity. Consequently, as Donald Hoffman explains, "it could hardly be expected that a Muslim would receive a Christian burial, so, while it seems a bit perfunctory, the unceremonious interment is appropriate" (55). Furthermore, if the Round Table Knights were to mark Corsabroyne's grave, they would undoubtedly describe his crimes against the damsel, but they would also likely feel compelled to include a description of how he died: in a long, equally-matched fight against a well-known knight. Though Palomides has not yet converted or been fully welcomed into Arthur's inner circle at the time of his battle with

Corsabroyne, he represents the prowess of Arthur's court. On the first day of the tournament, Galahalte, Surluse's prince, identifies Palomides as the knight to beat, and throughout the tournament Palomides bests nearly every knight but Lancelot, who will not face him. Palomides symbolically defeats Arthur as well by fighting and unhorsing his son and cousins. Palomides may still be a Saracen, but in this episode, he is almost Christian and almost a Round Table Knight. Despite his near-English, near-Christian identity, he is almost beaten by the unapologetic Saracen. If the circumstances of Corsabroyne's death were recorded on a tomb, it might bring into question the supremacy of Arthur's court and its Christian faith. Consequently, Corsabroyne is buried in the forest without a grave marker, where passersby cannot be offended by his body's odor nor made to question the superiority of Arthur's Christian nation because of Corsabroyne's tale.

Of course, it is fairly common for there to be no mention of burial after a minor knight's death. In the Tournament at Surluse, at least one knight dies per day, but Malory never says that they are buried. Instead, Malory indicates that these deaths are unimportant by depicting the matter-of-fact actions of others afterwards: "than they [the knights and ladies] wente to souper" (401). As a result, Corsabroyne's death and burial is marked as extraordinary. Malory is careful to assure the reader that the Saracen does not receive the same treatment accorded Christians killed in the tournament. It is also notable that Palomides does not mourn for his fellow Saracen, nor does he request that the burial be anything more than the removal of an offensive item from the tournament field. Round Table Knights often commemorate the opponents they defeat and praise their fighting ability, but Palomides chooses not to. Hoffman suggests that the fight with Corsabroyne is devised as a test for Palomides: "[D]oes his heart lie with his adopted culture or with his Saracen conditioning?" (54-55). Though Palomides has not yet converted, he has internalized the idea that Saracens are unworthy of lasting recognition, and therefore feels no grief for Corsabroyne.

For the most part, Arthur's knights encounter Saracens as individuals, as they do with Priamus, Palomides, and Corsabroyne. However, when the Grail Knights travel to Sarras, the Saracens' native city, they interact with both individual Saracens and Saracens as a nation. Although it would make sense if the Grail Knights experienced negation of their identity in a foreign land, the exact opposite is true. Even in their own land, the Saracens' identity is formed as a negation of the qualities of the Grail Knights. From Galahad's healing of the man at the gate to

the time Bors departs alone, both the actions of the Saracens and the landscape of Sarras construct the Saracen identity as a negation of Christianity and Englishness. The Saracens are denied the right to transform the landscape of their own land, while the Grail Knights constantly mark their values on the land and are celebrated for doing so.

Most of the interactions between the Grail Knights and the citizens of Sarras consist of the knights fulfilling a Saracen need. At the city's gates, they meet "an olde man croked" and Galahad asks him to help them carry the silver table (605). The old man tells Galahad that it has been ten years since he could walk without crutches. Galahad heals him immediately, and the man "found hymself as hole as ever he was" (605). This healing episode offers several insights into the Saracens' deficiencies. The duration of the ailment demonstrates a lack of ability or charity on the part of the old man's fellow citizens—they were either unable or unwilling to help him recover. Because the ailment required a miracle to be cured, the former is more likely, but both point to a lack of the power and good will Christian faith provides. The characterization of the healing as a restoration of wholeness indicates that part of the problem may be the man's citizenship and faith. He is not missing his legs; he is simply "croked," so it may have been more accurate to say that the man found himself as right, straight, or strong as he ever was. However, Malory chooses "whole." His affliction is perhaps as much the fact that he is a Saracen as it is that he needs crutches to walk.

In this miracle scene, Malory makes a distinct change from his French source which reinforces his understanding of Saracens as lacking and Christians as fulfilling or fulfilled. In the French *Queste del Saint Graal*, the Grail Knights have a distinct need for the crippled man's help: "[B]y the time they came to the gate, Galahad was flagging under the table's heavy weight" (281).<sup>7</sup> However, when Malory adapts this source, he removes any mention of Galahad's failing strength. Malory makes it seem that Galahad asks the old man for his help so that the man will acknowledge his ailment and Galahad can heal him. In Malory's source, Galahad's physical strength fails, but Malory removes any mention of Galahad's physical weakness and gives him control of the scene. Malory also removes the French author's comment about the charity the old man receives as he sits at the gate "in the hope of receiving alms from the passers-by, who often gave to him for love of Jesus Christ" (281). When Malory removes the explanation for the old man's presence, he also removes the possibility that other Christians are in the area or that Saracens act charitably for the love of Christ. In doing so, Malory

intensifies the old man's need for the Grail Knights—they are his only chance of obtaining healing or Christian generosity. In making such subtle changes, Malory suggests that the Saracens are identifiable only in how they are lacking in various ways.

The Grail Knights experience Saracen lack in a more sinister way when they meet King Estorause, who “was a grete tirraunte, and was com of the lyne of paynymes” (605). Estorause sees the silver table that holds the Sankgreall and, not knowing what it is, questions the knights about it and where they are from. Upon hearing their response, Estorause “put[s] hem in preson in a depe hole” (605). He leaves them there to starve, but God sends them the Sankgreall so they are sustained. Estorause's actions show that he does not have the courtesy or morals that would lead him to treat his guests properly, but his chief deficiency is a lack of knowledge of Christian faith. He believes that the knights will die of starvation in the hole, not realizing that God will provide for his faithful servants.

After imprisoning the knights for a year, Estorause falls sick. He is about to die and realizes that he needs the Grail Knights' forgiveness, which they grant him. Malory explains that Estorause dies immediately after being forgiven, but unlike his source, makes no mention of Estorause's burial. This omission would be unremarkable if it were not for the multiple other burials mentioned and described in detail in this episode. At the beginning of their time in Sarras, the knights bring Percival's sister into the city and bury her “as rychely as them oughte a kynges doughter” (605). Percival's unnamed sister receives the royal burial that the king himself is denied. It is unclear whether or not Estorause converts before he dies, but the absence of a burial or mourning by his people suggests that he failed to achieve the redemption that would make him worthy of a rich interment.

Estorause's subjects seem to share Malory's belief that Saracens do not deserve rich or marked burial. The Saracens are dismayed by Estorause's death, but only because they now have no king. However, this is not the case when their next king, Galahad, dies. After Malory describes Bors and Percival's sorrow, he writes “and so people of the contrey and cité, they were ryght hevvy” (607). The people of Sarras show more emotional attachment and respect for their Christian king than they did their Saracen king. Estorause was a “grete tirraunte,” so his death may have been cause for celebration rather than mourning, but his tyrannical behavior is not distinct from his religion and nationality. When Malory introduces Estorause as a tyrant, he adds that he “was com of the lyne of paynymes” (605). His cruel behavior is, in Malory's mind,

inherently tied to his Saracen identity. The Saracens' deeper emotional attachment to Galahad over Estoraue demonstrates that they, like Palomides, have internalized the idea that the death of a Saracen does not warrant grief.

After Estoraue's death, a council of Saracens meets to choose a new king, but it does not occur to them to make another native Saracen their new leader. Malory explains that they "wyst nat who myght be her kyng," and the indecision continues until a voice instructs them to choose the youngest Grail Knight (606). Not only are the Saracens incapable of choosing their own leader, they also have no one among them who is suitable. Galahad's fitness for the position is explained by the disembodied voice: "[H]e shall well maynteyne you and all youris" (606). Galahad's chief qualification is that he will maintain the Saracens; he can meet their needs in a way that no native Saracen can. The Saracens' need for Christian leadership is urgent and results in a potentially violent frenzy. Galahad agrees to reign, but Malory says that if he had refused, "they wolde have slayne hym" (606). The Saracens' need for Galahad's Christian rule is so profound it drives them to the point of murder.

The Saracens' tyrannical, violent behavior is a clear opposite of the Grail Knights' grace and generosity, and the description of their land reinforces the conception of the Saracen as a negation of the Christian. Aside from the gate and the palace, there are no objects or features mentioned that were in Sarras before the Grail Knights' arrival. It is clear that Malory intended to link the Grail Knights to notable images while leaving Sarras and the Saracens unimaginable. There are moments when a description of the city would naturally fit into the narration, but no description is included. For example, Malory says that the Grail Knights see Sarras from a distance when they are approaching in their boat. A description of the city or surrounding terrain would be a logical following thought, but instead Malory follows the sighting of the city with the knights' discovery of Percival's sister.

Though Malory's descriptions make Sarras blank and undefined, the land continues to be marked and ornamented by the Grail Knights. They go about transforming the city as soon as they arrive on its shore; they bring in first the Sankgreall's silver table and then Percival's sister for burial. The arrival of the silver table and Percival's sister's tomb begin Sarras's transformation from an undetermined pagan landscape into one filled with Christian landmarks. Janina Traxler suggests that Percival's sister, a Mary figure, "wins a consolation prize in the Grail

quest—admission to Sarras, albeit dead” (270). She martyrs herself for the quest, and her reward for doing so is burial in Sarras. Thus, the martyred Mary figure and the Sankgreall table constitute two significant Christian symbols now present in the otherwise blank city.

When Galahad is made king, his first action is to continue the city’s physical and spiritual transformation through holy objects and deeds:

And whan he was com to beholde hys londe he lete make abovyn the table of sylver a cheste of golde and of precious stonys that coverde the holy vessell, and every day erly thes three knyghtes wolde com before hit and make their prayers. Now at the yerys ende, and the selff Sondag aftir that sir Galahad had borne the crowne of golde. (606)

Galahad looks at the land that is now his and decides to add ornamentation to the Sankgreall and its table. Galahad covers the Sankgreall with gold and jewels, and covers himself with a gold crown that is notably absent from any description of his predecessor. As Galahad, Bors, and Percival model pious Christian behavior for their subjects, Sarras becomes marked with more precious and beautiful objects. The opulence of the Grail’s covering and Galahad’s golden crown contrast sharply with the complete lack of description and ornamentation that corresponded with Estoraue’s rule.

Galahad’s death is also significantly different from that of his predecessor. Estoraue dies of a sickness he develops after treating the Grail Knights poorly, and the only absolution he receives before death is the Grail Knights’ forgiveness. He is not buried with any ceremony, nor is he mourned. Galahad, on the other hand, is honored before death by meeting Joseph of Arimathea and having spiritual visions. Estoraue’s sickness and death are punishments for his cruelty towards the Grail Knights, while Galahad dies by his own request: he decides that he “wold nat lyve in this wrecched worlde no lenger” (606). Galahad’s soul departs peacefully to heaven after he has said his goodbyes to his fellow Grail Knights. The burial and mourning of Galahad is described in detail:

So whan sir Percivale and sir Bors saw sir Galahad dede they made as much sorow as ever ded men. And if they had nat bene good men they myght lyghtly have falle in dispayre. And so people of the contrey and cité, they were ryght hevvy. But so he was buried, and as sone as he was buried sir Percivale yelded

hym to an ermytayge oute of the cité, and toke religious  
 clothyng. (607)

While Malory makes no mention of any mourning for Estorause, three sentences are devoted to describing the depth of both the Grail Knights' and the Saracens' sorrow at Galahad's death. It is so severe that, had Bors and Percival not been good men, despair over Galahad's death would have claimed them. Galahad's Saracen people are "ryght hevvy," deeply saddened by the death of their Christian king.

Percival's grave, too, will mark the landscape of Sarras. Galahad's burial evokes a response from Percival, who leaves the city and goes to a hermitage. Percival lasts only a year and two months in the hermitage before he also dies. Though Percival left Sarras and spent the last year of his life as a holy man in a hermitage, Bors brings him back into Sarras to be buried: "sir Bors lat bury hym by hys syster and by sir Galahad in the spiritualités" (607). With Percival's grave added to his sister's and Galahad's, Sarras has become a reliquary containing multiple Christian items. Sarras's only remarkable identifying features are important Christian symbols, and it is now identified as a city conquered by the Grail Knights. The Grail Knights' Christian identity overwhelms Sarras's landscape, while no lasting record is allowed for Estorause or the native citizens.

Although the identification of Saracens with lack or negation is demonstrated in the landscape mostly by means of an absence of description, there is one way that Malory's narration actively shows the Saracens' identity of negation. Estorause's imprisonment of the Grail Knights demonstrates his deficiencies through both the imagery of the hole and Estorause's failed burial of the knights. In Malory's French source, Estorause has the Grail Knights "seized by his men and thrown into his dungeon where he held them for a year in strict incarceration" (282). In this version of the imprisonment, the Grail Knights are kept in a dungeon and carefully guarded. In Malory's adaptation, the dungeon becomes a hole in the ground, and the imprisonment is intended to kill the knights through starvation. While Malory's source presents the knights as imprisoned in some sort of structure, Malory describes it as a hole, nothing more than an area where the soil has been removed. In this only instance in which a Saracen is responsible for creating a distinguishable feature on the landscape, that feature is an absence.

Estorause's imprisonment of the knights can also be read as a failed attempt to mark the land and assert his power with a burial, as the Grail

Knights do. While the Grail Knights' burials involve ornate covering of the body, Estorause's burial of the knights leaves them exposed. Estorause may be attempting to bury the knights and leave them unremembered, as Arthur's knights have often done to Saracens, but he fails to erase them from memory. He does not station guards near the hole to ensure that the knights do not escape and fails to make the burial permanent because he has to release the knights when he needs their forgiveness. He neither triumphs over the Christian knights nor manages to make a lasting mark on his own land.

Malory's work indicates that he had only a vague idea of who the Saracens were, but it is clear that he thought of them as a negation of Arthur and his knights: not English and not Christian. This negative identity is shown through the Saracens' deep-seated needs that can be fulfilled only by the Christian Grail Knights. The Saracens' actions toward the Grail Knights indicate lack of propriety and Christian morals: Estorause imprisons the Grail Knights, and the Saracens force Galahad to be their king. The Saracens recognize their need for the Grail Knights' sustenance and will use violence to obtain it. Malory's conception of the Saracens as a negation of Arthur's knights' qualities extends to his description of the city and landscape of Sarras. Malory seems intentionally to avoid giving detail to all things Saracen, while at the same time providing plenty of rich, opulent detail for holy Christian items. The emptiness of Sarras likely reflects Malory's attempt to assert the plenty of Christian faith in the face of the lack associated other religious beliefs in his mind.

John Victor Tolan explains that, during the Middle Ages, there was no standard knowledge or opinion of the Saracens for Europeans:

To a large extent, one's own opinion of Islam is a product of how much one knows about Islam and of how much contact one has with Muslims. Perhaps even more important, though, are the needs and interests of the Christian author. If the Saracen (or Moor, or Turk) is the Other, he is an Other who may conveniently be deployed to fit the needs of each Christian author. (xx)

Malory's use of the Saracens in the *Morte Darthur* demonstrates Tolan's point. Under Malory's treatment, the Saracens' national identity becomes an identity of lack, but this is only partly because of medieval Europe's murky understanding of Muslims, pagans, and non-Christians in general.

Both Malory and Arthur prevent the Saracens from forming an identity—they negate the legitimacy of the Saracens while supporting their own. Much like Arthur's knights, who do not want the Saracens to make any lasting mark on the land, Malory does not want Saracens to leave a lasting mark in the reader's memory. Although Malory could have ensured that the Saracens were forgotten by not including them in the text at all, using them as an opposing force for his Christian knights better serves his purpose. By including the Saracens and weighing them against the Christians, Malory effectively shows the superiority of the Christian faith over other religions.

While Arthur's nation is continually being formed and shaped with more intricate detail, the Saracens' nation is amorphous. It has no defining features aside from those brought in by the Grail Knights and the hole Estorause makes—it is virtually impossible to conjure a mental image of Sarras. Likewise, there is no identifying feature of the Saracen moral code. The Saracens are either a blank people, reflecting the morals of their present leader, or the moral opposite of Christian, English knights. Whatever their identity is, the Saracens are not permitted to inscribe it into the land with grave markers, even within their own borders. The English identity grows as its chivalric code is written into its landscape and foreign landscapes, while the Saracen identity cannot develop because Saracens are not permitted to record their identity or moral code. In preventing lasting record of Saracens, Malory asserts the supremacy of the Round Table Knights' English and Christian identities.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of whether or not England is actually a nation, see Hodges, “Why Malory’s Launcelot Is Not French: Region, Nation, and Political Identity.” Hodges points out that there is no agreement upon whether or not states in the late Middle Ages were nations, especially as the term is defined by Benedict Anderson. However, Hodges points out that at the beginning of the *Morte Arthur*, there is already a clear idea of England as a nation: “[D]espite the divisions of civil war and petty kings, there is an England that *should* be whole. Arthur is restoring a nation, not simply expanding his personal holdings” (564).

<sup>2</sup> Vinaver defines Saracens as “heathen, pagan” in his glossary for Malory’s works, and many critics have accepted that Malory uses Saracen as a synonym for pagan, but Goodrich disagrees with this classification. Goodrich claims that considering the Saracens as pagans rather than Muslims “is hardly useful for informed analysis of Malory’s achievement, even though it is debatable how much Malory himself actually understood about Muslims” (10-11). Goodrich believes that both the text and Malory’s use of sources support the interpretation of “Saracen” as “Muslim.”

<sup>3</sup> Several recent efforts to understand the conception of Saracens during the Middle Ages are a part of a special issue of *Arthuriana* published in the winter of 2006, including articles by Roland, Hoffman, Keita, and Goodrich.

<sup>4</sup> De Weever’s quote comes from her introduction to the 2006 issue of *Arthuriana* mentioned above.

<sup>5</sup> For notable work on Palomides, see Armstrong, “Postcolonial Palomides” and “The (Non-) Christian Knight in Malory,” Dulin-Mallory, Grimm, Burakov Mongan, and Wheeler.

<sup>6</sup> In “Why Malory’s Launcelot Is Not French,” Hodges makes an opposing claim: “what may matter most in his [Malory’s] work is not the external boundaries between Arthur’s empire and the world at large but the internal boundaries that separate ‘England’ from other British lands” (562). Hodges’ claim is sound in regard to Malory’s work as a whole—there are many regional disputes and such disputes ultimately contribute to Camelot’s fall. However, in matters of faith, the border between

Christians and non-Christians clearly takes precedence over the regional borders inside of Arthur's kingdom, as the war with the eleven kings shows.

<sup>7</sup> Quotations from the *Queste del Saint Graall* are from Matarasso's 1969 translation.

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