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Strengthened Knights: Masculinity In Sir Isumbras And El Libro Del Caballero Zifar

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STRENGTHENED KNIGHTS: MASCULINITY IN *SIR ISUMBRAS* AND *EL LIBRO
DEL CABALLERO ZIFAR*

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 2013
Master of Arts, University of North Dakota, 2016

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of


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This thesis, submitted by Ruth Mary Gripentrog in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.


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Ruth Gripentrog
5 May 2016

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine the masculinities of the titular characters in *Sir Isumbras* and *El Libro del Caballero Zifar* [*The Book of the Knight Zifar*] through a lens of power in which masculinity is proven through the dominance over other men. *Zifar* and *Isumbras* must construct and prove their masculinities in a variety of circumstances; however, they differ significantly in their treatment of masculinity: *Sir Isumbras* extolls a compound masculinity, which the *Zifar* aims for one of consistency. I have chosen to focus on two of medieval Europe's main Christian powers, and through a comparative analysis, their distinct masculinities become apparent. While many scholars have focused on aspects of lordship and identity construction, very few examine the core feature of those aspects: masculinity.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sir Isumbras and *El Libro del Caballero Zifar* are both tales which follow the Man Tried by Fate tradition. They lose their positions and subsequently regain them through trials and suffering. So, too, are they retellings of the “St. Eustace” hagiography, through which their important pieties shine through. However, these retellings differ in distinctly important ways through their treatment of masculinity.

The hagiography “St. Eustace” follows the pagan knight Plácido, who sees a vision of the Cross in a deer’s antlers during a hunt. Upon this vision, he is baptized as Eustace and his family is converted in turn. Though he is tested by the devil with loss of position and the separation of his family, Eustace lives as a shepherd until he is found by his former pagan king’s men. Resuming his position, he fights and wins a battle for this king, who demands that the family renounce their Christianity. Refusing this, the family instead dies as martyrs, though they feel no pain in the execution and are brought to heaven to live eternally. Through different means, *Sir Isumbras* and the *Zifar* work this material for their own cultural purposes.

The poem *Sir Isumbras* dwells on the piety of its titular character. Isumbras is a man concerned with earthly possessions which allow him to forget his Christian duties. While on a hunt, he is visited by a bird who condemns his pride and allows him to choose

between suffering in youth or in maturity. Choosing the former, Isumbras's horse immediately falls dead and his family loses their position. Carving a cross onto his shoulder, Isumbras and his family set off on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, during which he is separated from his family. His wife is abducted by a Saracen king and his three sons are taken by a lion, a unicorn, and an angel respectively. Isumbras continues to travel and lives as a blacksmith, an errant knight, and a palmer before being reunited with his family. As an errant knight, he defeats the Saracen king along with the Saracen army, and upon the reunification of his family, Isumbras assumes the throne, converting the land in the process. He then faces an uprising of his Saracen subjects; killing all of the rebel armies, Isumbras and his family continue to conquer lands and live out their days in prosperity.

The prose *Libro del Caballero Zifar* focuses much more on the social position of the knight Zifar whose piety is already established. Zifar is seeking the reinstatement of his family's lost position, and has a curse in which any horse he rides dies after ten days. Due to the great cost of maintaining such a knight, he is exiled by his king and takes his family on a journey in service to God. His family, too, becomes separated from him; one son is taken by a lion and the other becomes lost in a city, while his wife is abducted by pirates. Encountering many threatened communities, Zifar brings consistent aid and liberates each land until he is rewarded with marriage to the Princess of Mentón and assumes the throne. He is reunited with his family in this kingdom, and upon the queen's death is able to publicly identify his family. The family immediately faces a rebellion from Zifar's vassals, but this is quickly squashed. Having established his public identity as king and father, Zifar gives instructions to his sons on what it means to be a noble man

and knight. After which, the text follows the adventures of the younger son Roboán who liberates lands and ultimately becomes Emperor.

Both characters undergo penitential journeys: Isumbras must atone for his pride, while Zifar atones for the sins of his ancestors. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) writes extensively on penance, which is two fold—internal and external. They differ in that “internal penance is that whereby one grieves for a sin one has committed, and this penance should last until the end of life,” whereas “external penance is that whereby a man shows external signs of sorrow...and makes satisfaction for his sin,” but lasts “only for a fixed time according to the measure of the sin.”¹ The internal penance lasts for so long because “man should always be displeased at having sinned.” This is important in terms of these characters, who become strengthened through their sufferings, as it increases the likelihood of them never falling into the trappings of sin. Aquinas tells us that “good comes from their falling, not that they always rise again to greater grace, but that they rise to more abiding grace,” and results in “the part of man, who, the more careful and humble he is, abides the more steadfastly in grace.”² It is that that makes penance able “to bring all defects back to perfection, and even to advance man to a higher state.” Indeed, both characters are able to advance to a higher state because of their increased knowledge through travelling.

My reading of these texts is centered on identity, which becomes apparent through the construction of masculinity. Contrary to Renaissance scholars who claim that the Middle Ages was a time before individuality, the medieval period was actually a time

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. *Saint Patrick's Basilica*. Saint Patrick's

² Aquinas, *Summa*, 3414.

of significant individuality, as countless chivalric romance heroes set themselves apart from their societies. Stephen Greenblatt is pivotal in formulating a notion that it is only in the sixteenth century that there was “a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities.”³ As will be shown, there are indeed very clear social structures in medieval Spain and England that govern personal identity. However, there *is* an important correlation between the community and individual, as identity is created through comparison with others. This has important consequences for masculinity, which is only created in competition with other men. Through this lens, a man must continually reinforce his power over others in order to maintain his right to masculinity. This masculinity is additionally closely tied to the role of horses within each text, specifically in its symbolism of masculinity and social position.

There was nothing random in the construction and performance of masculinity, as the performance was a deliberate public display. Susan Crane explains that “Living in an externally oriented honor ethic, secular elites understand themselves to be constantly on display, subject to the judgment of others, and continually reinvented in performance.”⁴ This reinvention necessitates repetition, as it cannot be a performance if it could not be repeated. This is particularly significant in the formation of masculinity, as a man represents his masculinity to the social world, so this masculinity must be repeatedly enforced. Man was superior, and the gender expectations were clearly defined.

³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980; at 1.

⁴ Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002; 4.

Medieval populations, Joyce E. Salisbury notes, “did see biology as destiny” in that gender expectations were based on one’s sex. Essentialism held sway, and Michelle M. Sauer notes that “there are only two genders—male and female—and that these are present at birth, remain unchanged, and are the only choices.”⁵ She continues,

Individuals and societies did not ascribe manhood to men or femininity to women simply because they were born with particular anatomy; rather, they require men and women to perform gendered actions and assume gendered roles after which they would be described as male or female. Gender is always under construction, and this construction relies upon a combination of personal biology, individual choices, and cultural concepts of socially and religiously acceptable behavior.⁶

The above passage importantly highlights the performative aspect of sexuality—it is through actions and choices that make one masculine or feminine.

Aquinas expounds on the qualities that define “man” in his *Summa Theologica*. In this theological treatise, Aquinas explains that “man differs from irrational animals in that he is master of his actions.”⁷ All actions from humans and animals is due to the will, but is only humans who have free will. In this free will, choice is of utmost importance, and humans “have dominion over their actions through their free will” which results from the faculty of reason.⁸

The quality of reason is also significant in term’s of medieval men’s place in the social order, for “the proper operation of man as man is to understand; because he thereby surpasses all other animals.”⁹ Moreover, reason placed the man as the superior being because he had a “higher nature” through knowledge and the “divinely established

⁵ Michelle M. Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, New York: Bloosmbury, 2015; 4.

⁶ Sauer, *Gender*, 102.

⁷ Aquinas, *Summa*, 777.

⁸ Aquinas, *Summa*, 778.

⁹ Aquinas, *Summa*, 492.

authority.”¹⁰ Aquinas illustrates, “in natural things it behooved the higher to move the lower to their actions by the excellence of the natural power bestowed on them by God: and so in human affairs also the higher must move the lower by their will.” This divine order is explained through man’s free will, in which he is “left the free choice proceeding from his own counsel.” As a result, man was superior to all others—women, social inferiors: those that lack reason. This is due to the fact that “man’s good is founded on reason as its root, [and] that good will be all the more perfect, according as it extends to more things pertaining to man.”¹¹ Man is the only being that God left to rule itself, which makes man superior to all beings.

The sorrow the characters undergo is also useful in that “it can be a virtuous good. For it has been said that sorrow is a good inasmuch as it denotes perception and rejection of evil.”¹² St. Jerome (347-420), too, weighs in on penance and explains that suffering is helpful, “not that the Creator and Lord of all takes pleasure in a rumbling and empty stomach, or in fevered lungs; but that these are indispensable as means to the preservation of chastity.”¹³ Having suffered, the person would always remember the pain of it, thereby avoiding it in the future.

At the heart of the medieval conception of the definition of man was “not woman,” or behaving as the opposite of a woman. Patriarchal power was preserved “by focusing on the similarities between men and women, [and] choosing to claim male

¹⁰ Aquinas, *Summa*, 2193.

¹¹ Aquinas, *Summa*, 934.

¹² Aquinas, *Summa*, 1016.

¹³ St. Jerome “Letter XXII. To Eustochium.” *NPNFW2-06. Jerome: The Principle Works of St. Jerome.* Ed, Philip Schaff. Trans, M.A. Freemantle. *Documenta Catholica Omnia.* Cooperatorum Veritatis Societas, (2006). 74-103; at 81.

superiority through the ‘better use’ of human qualities.”¹⁴ This notion was the result of the belief that “as an inverted man, woman was less perfect and therefore subordinate.”¹⁵ She was marked as Other, while man is unmarked. Women were closely tied to their bodies, so they could not, therefore, control themselves. They were moreover “the source of sexual temptation which men needed to resist,”¹⁶ as it could lead him into sin. It is through masculinity, in proving oneself the opposite of women, that a man is able to control others, be they women or subjects. This stems from the notion of the association of masculinity with rationality, as medieval thinkers reasoned that “if semen comes from the brain and is the essence of a man, then masculinity is equated with reason.”¹⁷ This also meant that male experience was seen as human experience: men want to compete with such worthy behavior, and women admire and then emulate it. Moreover, there is a clear aspect of mastery in his pursuits.

In the essentialist model, “sexuality’s major role in everyday interactions is thus understood as vital and necessary to the function of society, but often goes unnoticed unless presented as outside the social scripts and norms.”¹⁸ This sexuality was necessarily heterosexual, as the only approved sexual relations were between a man and woman—and then only for the purposes of procreation. This connects to the performance of masculinity through control of the relationship, as “a man’s power dictated” that he be

¹⁴ Sauer, *Gener*, 4.

¹⁵ Jacqueline Murray, “Hiding Behind the Universal Man: Male Sexuality in the Middle Ages,” in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, New York: Routledge, 2010: 123-152; at 127.

¹⁶ Murray, “Hiding,” 126.

¹⁷ Murray, “Hiding,” 126.

¹⁸ Sauer, *Gender*, 5.

the active partner in the relationship as well as “be active in the world.”¹⁹ Both of these components introduce the notion of penetration, as through penetration of the woman he is active in the relationship, and through penetration of lands through conquest, crusade, and conversion he is active in the world.

Moreover, masculinity is determined through comparison with others, and evaluated by others. Aquinas tells us that “honor denotes a witnessing to a person’s excellence;” the witnessing of such excellence is made apparent through “the means of signs, either by words, as when one proclaims another’s excellence by word of mouth, or by deeds, for instance by bowing, saluting, and so forth.”²⁰ This contemporary opinion highlights the important role of community within identity construction. Sauer, too, notes that “medieval masculinity was not just dependent on suppression of women or the feminine; it also relied upon dominance over other men.”²¹ Knights perform their masculinity by fighting better or killing more enemies, to the admiration of his peers. In guilds, men proved their masculinity through creating masterpieces in their particular guild. For religious men, masculinity was upheld through exemplary spirituality. There is a clear sense of the importance of action—of doing and creating. The result of the action was the achievement of reputation. This validated power through deeds, as others see the behavior and then seek to emulate it. Reputation was also especially important to the sustainment of masculinity in guilds and religious groups as well, but this will be discussed further in a later portion of this chapter.

¹⁹ Salisbury, “Gendered Sexuality,” 85.

²⁰ Aquinas, *Summa*, 2118-9.

²¹ Sauer, *Gender*, 141.

Inherent in any discussion of masculinity, especially in medieval performances, is the fact that masculinity, like power, is not static, for “the order of the universe requires that there should be some things that can, and do sometimes, fail.”²² As is the case for the main characters of my texts, and countless other romance heroes, the knight must prove himself as masculine over and over again. From Milton (1608-1674) we receive the idea that untested virtue is not real virtue, and this is the same case for masculinity. More importantly, and as I have mentioned previously, a man could not be masculine if he could not repeat that masculinity.

Comparatively turning to the evidence, this examination of masculinity offers an increased understanding of the place of masculinity within these societies. I will demonstrate that Isumbras represents a corrective compound masculinity, whereas Zifar’s masculinity is one of consistency. This thesis contributes to the discussion in the text by focusing the attention on the characteristic that enables their lordship: masculinity. These men have important social identities as kings, so their masculinity must be one that the kingdom, and by extension the audience, can emulate. Additionally, as Spain and England were two dominant Christian powers within medieval Europe, this study is important in terms of the masculinity that is espoused in each text.

²² Aquinas, *Summa*, 340.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND

The Historical Backdrop

The popularity of *Sir Isumbras* is apparent through the number of surviving manuscripts; with nine extant copies, it is the most numerous of any medieval romance. The earliest extant manuscript that contains the poem is London, Gray's Inn MS 20 which was written in approximately 1350.²³ While the tale is of likely Midlands provenance, "others were produced in an array of locales, including Yorkshire, Chichester, and Kent."²⁴ This variation in locale had an equal effect on the variation between the manuscripts, though the text still appears with both romances and penitential texts, which helps explain its central position between chivalric romance and exemplary tale. Moreover, it heads a group of romances referred to as the "*Isumbras*-group" by scholars. This *Isumbras*-group appears across the nine manuscripts containing *Sir Isumbras* and the recurring romances include the *Earl of Toulouse*, *Libeas Desconus*, *Octavian*, *Sir Englamore*, *Sir Isumbras*, *Beves of Hampton*, and *Sir Degaré*.²⁵

²³ Norako, "Fantasy," 170.

²⁴ Norako, "Fantasy," 170.

²⁵ Evans, Murray J. *Rereading Middle English Romance: Manuscript Layout, Decoration, and the Rhetoric of Composite Structure*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1995; at 56. These romances share topoi of a separated family, establishment of a family line, and the adventures of their titular characters.

The particular version I am working with is the Rate manuscript, Codex Ashmole 61. This paper manuscript was compiled in the late fifteenth- to early sixteenth-centuries and is of Leicestershire provenance. It contains forty-two items, all of which emphasize piety and religion. Preceding *Sir Isumbras* are “two parallel courtesy items in which a father instructs young men and a wife instructs young women.”²⁶ After which appears *Sir Isumbras* and the Ten Commandments in verse. Item 8 contains moral instruction from *Dame Curtasy*; all of these items leads to a manuscript context “evidently oriented to young reader/listeners.”²⁷ Rate’s *Sir Isumbras* is also unique in comparison to the tale in other manuscripts, as Rate alters or adds lines that highlight the suffering of the family. Also unique is the fact that an angel, and not a unicorn as in other versions, abducts Isumbras’s youngest son and it is an angel that carries away his gold. Murray Evans finds that these details “render Rate’s version noticeably more oriented to the suffering of Isumbras and his wife and to the explicitly religious, changes suited to the family and religious context of *Sir Isumbras* in Ashmole 61.”²⁸ This specific manuscript also contains two *Isumbras*-group texts: *The Earl of Toulouse* and *Libeaus Desconus*. As a result, this manuscript is particularly apt for a discussion of masculinity.

The *Libro del Caballero Zifar* is a chivalric romance, written in the early fourteenth century, approximately around 1330 and is of Castilian provenance. The text survives in two extant manuscripts: Biblioteca Nacional de España MS. 11.309 and Bibliothèque Nationale de France MS. 36. The latter is a beautifully illuminated

²⁶ Evans, *Rereading Middle English Romance*, 72.

²⁷ Evans, *Rereading Middle English Romance*, 73. *Dame Curtasy* is a courtesy text that holds an insistence on humility that was intended for an audience of children.

²⁸ Evans, *Rereading Middle English Romance*, 73.

manuscript that appeared in fifteenth century, and is also missing the prefatory material that establishes the romance. It contains more than two hundred miniatures, which serve to overpower the textual intelligibility. However, 11.309 retains fewer sections, with a number of written correction in the margins that are later additions. José Manuel Lucía Megías finds these corrections to be intensifications that add precision to the text, and believes that the scribe desired to stylistically reinforce the message of emendation that is laid out in the initial pages of the prologue.²⁹ Additionally, because the text is set up as a translation, scholars have been lead to speculate that the text is of Oriental origin. After all, Islam means submission to God. Indeed, the text portrays Oriental influence through its use of *exempla*, the trope of instruction, that was a significant mode of storytelling in Arabic literature. The close interaction with Islamic populations in medieval Spain also contribute to this belief, as will be discussed below.

Both text's share motifs from their source material: the hagiography "St. Eustace." The titular characters each share a trial through social loss, abduction of children by animals, abduction of wife by marauding sea men, subsequent victory in battles, and the final reunion of the family. However, their significantly different cultural contexts change the didactic message of the hagiography in profound ways. Each text demonstrates aspects of both chivalric romance as well as exemplary literature more fitting to hagiography, stemming from their shared source of the St. Eustace legend.

Michael Harney produces a careful examination of the legend's influence on the *Zifar* in "The *Libro del Caballero Zifar* as a 'Refraction' of the Life of Saint Eustace."

²⁹ José Manuel Lucía Megías, "Manuales de Crítica Textual: Las Líneas Maestras de la Ecdótica Española," in *Revista de Poética Medieval* 2 (1998): 115-153; at 135-7.

He succinctly demonstrates the secularization of the Eustace legend. Harney explains that the hero Plácidas would be a significant hero for the knightly class, men who wished to one day prove themselves as equals in chivalry. These were young knights who had yet to establish themselves, either in marriage or in position. Significantly, the very qualities that Plácidas symbolizes are particularly masculine: he is a master hunter, knowledgeable in war, and obsessed with dogs. However, Harney then establishes a significant link between Zifar's younger son, Roboán and the hagiographical hero. In Roboán's adventures, he seeks fame and eventually becomes a master of chivalry in the same fashion of Plácidas. That Roboán's attainment of an empire is thanks to his mastery of chivalry, his earthly rewards are highlighted.

For a treatment of the relationship between the Eustace legend and *Sir Isumbras*, we turn to Ann B. Thompson's "Jaussian Expectation and the Production of Medieval Narrative: the Case for 'Saint Eustace' and *Sir Isumbras*." Thompson discusses the current trend in viewing *Sir Isumbras* as a story that lacks sophistication. In response, she explains a medieval "expectation of horizons" that existed within the literary tradition that illuminates the circumstances of medieval romance. As the literature was reproduced, recopied, and reworked by multiple authors in multiple genres, Thompson explains that a medieval audience would still recall the important hagiographic features of its source material that would make its didactic message remain powerful. In this way, the author of the poem skirted around issues of writing within a defined genre.

Isumbras combats a Saracen army and converts his nation to Christianity; through this the efforts of the Crusades are recalled. Rhetoric related to the Crusades was still very much prevalent in fourteenth-century England. The Crusades were intermittent

between Pope Urban II's (1041-1099) First Crusade in 1096 and the end of the fifteenth century. Contemporary concerns during this period were "for both the security of Christian territory and recovery of the Holy Land."³⁰ Recovery treatises in particular "called for peace between England and France so that an intercultural crusade might be waged, one that might rout the Turks and enable the recovery of the Holy Land."³¹ However, such a peace could not be reached, so this failed vision is particularly significant for *Sir Isumbras*.

As Lee Manion suggests, the defeat at Acre (1291) would be prevalent in the minds of the poem's audience of a noble or knightly class. Due to the inability of Christian armies to put aside national differences, the city, as well as the populace's faith in their leaders, was lost. In light of this, there appear two significant crusade movements that stand out for their unsanctioned nature. These movements of 1309 and 1320 occurred without royal permission, and the participants acted outside of established rituals. Adopting the cross outside of ecclesiastic rituals, "shows that even after formal liturgical rituals existed, crusading practices remained open and susceptible to contestation," which "arguably contributed to its persistence in medieval culture."³² These movements served as an opportunity for the larger populations to take part where leaders and knights had failed. Jerusalem served as both a geographical and ideological city, as both the heavenly

³⁰ Leila K. Norako, "Sir Isumbras and the Fantasy of Crusade," in the *Chaucer Review* 48.2 (2013): 166-89; at 171.

³¹ Norako, "Fantasy," 173.

³² Lee Manion, "The Loss of the Holy Land and *Sir Isumbras*: Literary Contributions to Fourteenth-Century Crusade Discourses," ; at 76.

Jerusalem as well as the “ultimate destination for crusaders.”³³ Historical chroniclers of the Crusades identified the loss of Acre “as a sign of the spiritual deficiency of the upper class.”³⁴ This battle is considered to be one of the most important battles of the Crusades, and it marked the end of the crusading movement in the Levant because the loss of the city resulted in the Christian armies’ loss of the last stronghold in Jerusalem.

The Iberian Peninsula, on the other hand, had an intimate relationship with Muslims. In the period between 711 and 1492, “Muslims trolled varying portions of Iberia, and their long presence had a profound influence on Spanish culture.”³⁵ However, there was still an undercurrent of tension, as Alex Novikoff explains that medieval Spain was “a society organized for war.”³⁶ This country was constantly encroached upon, both from outside and from within. Besides fighting to reconquer Spain, Christian kings also had to deal with Jewish influences as well as civil war due to fights over inheritances. Spanish kings were also itinerant, as they often had to travel among different kingdoms through marriage and conquests, which caused a high level of instability.

However, even in conquered areas social relations were, in reality, pragmatically tolerant. Phillips and Phillips demonstrate this, as “people who came under Muslim authority had the option of converting to Islam, but they did not have to do so to live

³³ Dorothy Kim, “Rewriting Liminal Geographies: Crusade Sermons, the Katherine Group, and the Scribe of the MS Bodley 34,” in *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 42.1 (2016).

³⁴ Manion, “Loss,” 80.

³⁵ William D. Phillips, Jr. and Carla Rahn Phillips, *A Concise History of Spain*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010; at 47.

³⁶ Alex Novikoff, “Between Tolerance and Intolerance in Medieval Spain: An Historiographic Enigma,” in *Medieval Encounters* 11.1/2 (2005): 7-36; at 9.

peaceably under their new overlords,” while many pragmatically learned Arabic.³⁷

Kenneth Baxter Wolf explains that the “supposed ‘Islamification’ of Spain was really more of a ‘Hispanification’ of Western Islam” as the result of the original invaders being “demographically and culturally absorbed by their subjects.”³⁸ This pragmatism lay in the conquering ruler desiring peace, and as the Reconquest began, that toleration was continued, at least in the early stages. Fernando III (c.1201-1252), “continued the policy of toleration toward Islam and Judaism, considering himself to be the king of all three religious communities,” though he did “convert former mosques into churches in the areas he conquered.”³⁹ So his kingdom has the visible markers of Christendom, though his policy was tolerant. Importantly, Muslims and Jews could pay special taxes to live peacefully in their religious identity, though they could hold no political power.

Additionally, Christian armies held a more tolerant view of the Muslim armies as well. Phillips and Phillips illuminate that foreign knights taking part in the Christian struggle “often expressed dismay at the willingness of Spanish leaders to honor surrender treaties with the Muslims.”⁴⁰ However, this tolerance was highly vulnerable to political considerations, because “given the progress of the *Reconquista* and the steady increase of power in the Christian kingdoms, it was only a matter of time before this type of tolerance would give way to its opposite: pragmatic *intolerance*.”⁴¹ This pragmatism

³⁷ Phillips and Phillips, *Concise History*, 47.

³⁸ Kenneth Baxter Wolf, “*Convivencia* in Medieval Spain: A Brief History of an Idea,” in *Religious Compass* 3.1 (2009): 72-85; at 74.

³⁹ Phillips and Phillips, *Concise History*, 72.

⁴⁰ Phillips and Phillips, *Concise History*, 67.

⁴¹ Wolf, “*Convivencia*,” 80. Original emphasis.

explains the sharp contrast between *convivencia* in the Middle Ages and the violent Spanish Inquisition of the fifteenth century.

With the military battles in Jerusalem, Spain faced the problem of knights leaving to fight in the Crusades rather than defend against Muslims at home. One solution was to create an alternative Spanish route to Jerusalem. Additionally, clerical leaders successfully put the eternal rewards of the Reconquest in terms that equaled those in the Crusades of the Middle East. The rhetoric surrounding the two ventures was the same, as “the Iberian campaign was viewed as a war seeking to liberate the captive church and restore the patrimony of Christ.”⁴² The call for the Spanish *Reconquista* was involved in equal rituals as well, in that “participants received indulgences, made vows, took the sign of the cross, and were granted papal legate.”⁴³ Aiding Spain as the site of pilgrimage was the path to Santiago de Compostela, which became “one of the most popular and important centers of Christian pilgrimage in all of medieval Europe, outranked only by Rome.”⁴⁴ Moreover, King Alfonso III (849-910) interestingly paid homage to the Crusades of the Holy Land in that “the castle given to the Monreal confraternity was named after a crusader castle in Palestine,” and also carried a relic of the true cross with him in battle.⁴⁵ Rather than go out to fight Muslims, it was of utmost importance that Spaniards *remained within* to fight.

⁴² Patrick J. O’Banion, “What has Iberia to do with Jerusalem? Crusade and the Spanish route to the Holy Land in the Twelfth Century,” in *Journal of Medieval History* 34 (2008): 383-395; at 386.

⁴³ O’Banion, “Spanish Route,” 386.

⁴⁴ Phillips and Phillips, *Concise History*, 62.

⁴⁵ O’Banion, “Spanish Route,” 388.

Importantly, this reconquest was marked by important losses. The Almohades captures Seville in 1172, overtaking the forces of Alfonso VIII (1155-1214) who barely escaped with his life. This defeat boiled down to “the failure of coordination among the Christian forces when the promised Leonese troops never arrived.”⁴⁶ This is another instance of Spanish inconsistency, of which Zifar rectifies through his consistent actions.

Knights played an integral part in the *Reconquista*, and enjoyed a prominent position. Due to their important military role in the ongoing battle, Alfonso X of Castile (1221-1284) “in 1256 and 1264 assured municipal mounted warriors of significant tax advantages provided that they were suitably equipped for war.”⁴⁷ This characterizes the constant threat under which Christian kings lived. Significantly, “nobles retained their fiefs and castles so long as they remained loyal and fulfilled their feudal obligations,” highlighting the reciprocal nature of feudalism.⁴⁸

The king’s public role was also important, as well as the ritualized chain of command. For the king, while the leader, depended upon the counsel of his vassals. These positions of power were publicly validated, for “if someone were to be promoted to the post of *almocadén* or infantry commander, twelve others had to swear that he was brave and loyal, knowledgeable in war, capable of command and of protecting his men.”⁴⁹ These qualities are inherently masculine, so it is significant that twelve other men had to be in agreement with this, and in a public manner. This attests to the importance the Spanish culture placed on the role of action, as the man could only be knowledgeable

⁴⁶ Phillips and Phillips, *Concise History*, 70.

⁴⁷ O’Callaghan, *Reconquest*, 129.

⁴⁸ O’Callaghan, *Reconquest*, 127.

⁴⁹ O’Callaghan, *Reconquest*, 133.

through experience. This ethic is echoed in the great legal code of medieval Spain, the *Siete Partidas* of Alfonso X, which gained the monarch eternal fame, even while he “failed miserably as a political leader for Spain.”⁵⁰ This code lays out a legal primer for rulership, as well as extolling on what it means to be a nobleman.

With this framework, *Sir Isumbras* and the *Zifar* serve to uphold important notions of masculinity for their respective cultures. Isumbras’s pilgrimage serves to sustain the Crusading movement and keep Christian men active in the fight against Islam. Zifar, on the other hand, brings important consistency time and time again through his own travels. This is especially important due to the terribly inconstant nature of medieval Spain.

⁵⁰ Phillips and Phillips, *Concise History*, 73.

CHAPTER III

LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to their significant place in their respective cultures, *Sir Isumbras* and *El Libro del Caballero Zifar* have received considerable scholarly attention. The themes within the scholarship surrounding the texts include the texts' place within genre, how the texts portray lordship, and concern for what the travels of Zifar and Isumbras represent for their respective audiences. Concentration has also been placed on the contemporary societal context, and scholars discuss the role of religion, manners, and definitions of chivalry.

The main focus in my comparative study is the respective construction and performance of masculinity within the *Libro del Caballero Zifar* and *Sir Isumbras*; how their masculinity is threatened or taken away and must be regained through deeds, and how those constructions were ingested and performed in turn by the audiences, for specific, but significantly different purposes. The masculinities of Zifar and Isumbras are dangerously threatened in encounters with the enemy, and I examine how Zifar and Isumbras perform in these scenes and how they either exert their dominance or are feminized. Additionally, as the two texts are retellings of the St. Eustace legend, they are hard to categorize due to their blurring of spiritual and secular goals. The parameters of

my topic are the ways in which the masculinity and ergo power is regained through spirituality, chivalry, and, in the case of Isumbras, craftsmanship in a guild. I have selected for review scholarship that deals with concerns of identity, lordship, and the relationship with Saracens in each text individually.

A prominent issue plaguing the scholarly work on both texts is in which genre to place them, and an important piece on the blurred line between romance and hagiography is Manuel Abeledo's "*El Libro del Caballero Zifar* Entre la Literatura Ejemplar y el Romance Caballeresco" ["*El Libro del Caballero Zifar*" Between Exemplary Literature and Chivalric Romance"]. Abeledo analyzes the *Zifar* comparatively with a French Arthurian romance, *Lanzarote del Lago* to argue that it is *Zifar*'s religiously virtuous characteristics that truly place the text outside of normal chivalric conventions.⁵¹ His discussion fits within a general scholarly disagreement on the genre of the *Zifar*; while the *Zifar* has close links to Arthurian literature, the text itself is separated from it because of the very different motivations. *Zifar* seeks spiritual reward whereas Lancelot seeks earthly, almost mercenary, rewards. His own contribution, I believe, is specificity—he examines *what* exactly makes the *Zifar* depart from chivalric literature. Abeledo's argument is three-tiered, as he explores how the incongruities between religious and secular motivations influence the tale in its adoption of generic norms of chivalric literature and in its contemporary reception.

In his comparative analysis, Abeledo chooses *Lanzarote del Lago* because it epitomizes the mercenary values of chivalric romances through the search for earthly rewards: position, wealth, social legitimization, marriage (which immediately allows for

⁵¹ The *Lanzarote del Lago* is a twelfth-century Arthurian romance of French provenance.

the acquisition of all the previous rewards). Abeledo does not, however, classify the religious incongruencies as being present due to the tale's relation to the hagiography of St. Eustace. However, if we remember the last portion of the romance, that of Roboán's adventures, we will see that Zifar's son—an extension of his masculinity and identity—searches for earthly rewards. I therefore see a strong weakness in Abeledo's argument that results from his not considering the importance of Roboán's narrative, covered in David Arbusú's work, which will be discussed further below. Roboán's narrative shares many of the same traits the Abeledo discusses in relation to Lancelot through his mercenary search for earthly rewards.

However, the strength of the article lies in its display of a strong comparative analysis and it emphasizes on the importance of Zifar's main description as the Knight of God. This descriptor enhances the particularly exemplary aspects of the text that make it deviate from chivalric literature. Through Abeledo's analysis, Zifar is presented as a realistic hero who constructs a concept of a good reader that understands and accepts the implications of putting oneself completely under divine protection. God is Zifar's only companion, which results in Zifar's unquestionable success. Abeledo also includes in his discussion the ways in which the text performs as a mirror for the audience to emulate—though he does not explain what audience this is—in Abeledo's case here as a representation of a perfect Christian. I would extend this in my own argument to examine the ways in which these religious traits contribute to, and moreover enhance, Zifar's *masculinity*, as Zifar is still a knight; he has a distinct social persona that he has to negotiate through his travels.

Along these same lines is “The Cultural Authority of ‘Buen Seso (Natural)’ in the *Libro del Caballero Zifar*” by John C. Parrack. Parrack argues that discursively trying to compartmentalize the *Zifar* is redundant due to the fact that debates on genre placement are a modern construct; rather, we should historicize the romance to place it within its context as a book of kingly advice with examples of how a ruler should act. This pertains to my own argument through the importance of correct leadership—and in my case, masculinity—and I can extend Parrack’s argument to come to a fuller conclusion, particularly the ways in which correct masculinity leads to correct leadership.

As a previously stated, *Isumbras* scholars are also concerned with considerations of genre for the poem. An important article pertaining to this is Rhiannon Purdie’s “Generic Identity and the Origins of *Sir Isumbras*.” Purdie’s study is historical, and she examines the various possible origins for *Sir Isumbras*, including the French *Guillame D’Angleterre* and the Spanish texts of *La Historia del Caballero Plácidas* and *El Rrey Guillame de Inglaterra*.⁵² She explores the possibility that *Sir Isumbras* is a reworking of a lost French lay, but notes that this is unlikely due the lack of historical cultural references to *Isumbras*—no historical personages share the name of the literary hero, while there are historical Rolands. Additionally, she explores aspects of *Sir Isumbras* that allow it to hold a middle ground between romance and hagiography.

It is highly interesting that Purdie’s study did not include at least a reference to the *Zifar*, since it is such an important reworking of the Eustace legend. Of particular

⁵² The French *Guillame D’Angleterre* is a twelfth-century text attributed to Creti n de Troyes (1160-1172). *La Historia del Caballero Pl cidas* and *El Rrey Guillame de Inglaterra* are each twelfth-century Spanish texts. These three stories share similarities with *Sir Isumbras*.

interest is that two Spanish texts are examined, but not the work with high cultural significance. Purdie claims that her study is based on structure and content, but because of this oversight, her article is portrayed as a search for texts that share titles rather than content.

Lee Manion, in “The Loss of the Holy Land and *Sir Isumbras*: Literary Contributions to Fourteenth-Century Crusade Discourse,” argues for seeing texts that blur the line between hagiography and romance as “crusading romances,” as crusading itself addressed the idea of the holy warrior as well as the popular treatment of crusading in the public imagination. His article additionally responds to incorrect notions that crusading efforts were largely halted after the disastrous fall of Acre. In particular, Manion argues that the poem demonstrates the impact from the crusade movements of 1309 and 1320. Interestingly, Manion critiques Elizabeth Fowler’s article for not considering the possible influence crusade discourse had on the poem’s penitential process. This relates to my own study in terms of how crusading discourse inherently called on masculinity to fight Saracens and expand Christendom, achieving spiritual and secular success and rewards. Moreover, Manion’s discussion is significant to my own in the way that he discusses the cause of the crusade movements being *the inaction of English monarchs*, which directly mirrors how I see Isumbras’s fall from masculinity—he is inactive, impotent.

Leila K. Norako in her article “Sir Isumbras and the Fantasy of Crusade,” builds almost directly off of Manion’s, as she argues for a subcategory of the crusading romance that she calls “recovery romance” in which the plots, including that of *Sir Isumbras*, revolve around medieval desires to reclaim and recover the Holy Land and project an idealized version of a united Christianity that can permanently defeat Islam. Norako’s

article ties to my argument in that, while I am not so much concerned with the literary reclaiming of the Holy Land, I *am* concerned with the ways in which Isumbras recovers his identity through proving his masculinity, which directly correlates to representations of military recovery that Norako discusses.

Just as medieval writers and theologians were constantly concerned with the treatment of Saracens, modern scholars, too, focus much of their attention on religious relationships within the texts. In the case of Isumbras, Stephen D. Powell argues that there are indications for the possible peaceful coexistence in his article “Models of Religious Peace in the Medieval Romance *Sir Isumbras*.” His argument is predicated on the discrepancy between manuscripts: in some, all of the enemy is killed, but in some only about two-thirds are slaughtered leaving the question of what happened to the rest of the Saracen army open. Powell interestingly brings up Isumbras’s similarity to the Sultan who abducts his wife. In Powell’s view, Isumbras’s main sin is lack of charity which the Sultan also displays. Moreover, Powell states that the Saracens are “quasi-Saracens,” stereotypes rather than true adherents to the faith. I see this as a gap in the article, as the Saracens are, after all, *willing to die* rather than convert. I would argue, additionally, that if we are to assume that a medieval audience would pick up on the similarities between the Sultan and Isumbras—through their lack of charity and incorrect faith—then we would need to assume that Isumbras shared other important characteristics as well. Indeed, Powell makes no reference to the direct aftermath of the wife’s abduction—the Sultan’s men beat Isumbras in front of his son. As Saracens are holistically feminized in medieval literature, here Isumbras is also feminized through the inability to protect himself and his wife.

I would also argue that Isumbras's main problem is a lack of masculinity—a Christian masculinity. Isumbras sits at home, and, as Powell discusses, gives his money to minstrels. However, the fact that Isumbras *is not* going out into the world and increasing Christendom displays a lack of correct faith, but more importantly a lack of masculinity, which he must recover through his travels.

Relationships with Saracens is not a main concern in the scholarly work on *Zifar*; rather, what *is* concerning are the possible Oriental influences on the tale, which explicitly presents itself as a translation. This is Neryamn R. Nieves's focus in her article "The Centrality of the Oriental in the *Libro del Caballero Zifar*." Nieves examines two motifs within the tale that are of Eastern origin: the use of *exempla* as one character instructs another, and the use of testing another character through dialogue and a series of questions. She maintains that these motifs structure the romance, in the way that each key decision is preceded by one of the motifs and is followed with action compelled by the motif. In terms of relations with Saracens, Nieves importantly expostulates that the tale shares universal truths, and that this is representative of the multicultural nature of medieval Spain; these truths are not specifically Christian, but rather truths every person must learn, regardless of culture. Nieves's considerations of the *exempla* include instances in which Zifar instructs through indirect conversation, which curiously connects to Fowler's examination of the speech acts of Isumbras as indications of the social persons he performs. While my own study is not focused on Oriental influences, I *am* concerned with how Zifar constructs his masculinity and social role when dealing with an Othered enemy. Medieval Spain had a much more tolerant view, and the importance of the

relationships with Saracens within *Zifar* is only made apparent in comparison to the treatment by “Sir Isumbras,” which is a particularly important in my analysis.

Along with much scholarly work on medieval texts, the criticism surrounding *Sir Isumbras* and the *Zifar* are particularly concerned with identity—how it is created, along with how it can be lost. In both texts, the loss of identity is symbolized in external punishment based on an internal crime, which is then regained through virtuous deeds. Medieval notions of identity were not necessarily communal, but they did hinge on comparison: masculinity had to be compared to other masculine men to be truly proven. A great example of this in relation to the *Zifar* is David Arbesú’s “La Muerte de los Caballos en el Zifar and el Debate sobre la Nobleza” [“The Death of the Horses in the Zifar and the Debate about Nobility”]. Arbesú examines the ways in which the symbolism of the horses’ death in the *Zifar* demonstrates contemporary concerns on lineage, virtue, and nobility. He situates his discussion within the four main scholarly interpretations of the cause for these inexplicable deaths. The most accepted of which is that the death of the horses is the result of a curse upon the family. However, this is quickly dismissed as Arbesú points out that it is *only* Zifar that is afflicted. Arbesú’s solution is to examine the ways in which the horses themselves represent concepts of lineage, nobility, and virtue. His argument is heavily charged with contemporary rhetoric, as he include modes of understanding and literature through examples from the pivotal *Siete Partidas* of Alfonso el Sabio that demonstrate the ways in which man and horse are fused together to represent an image of the noble knight.

I believe Arbesú’s main strength is his use of contemporary sources. His discussion on the ideas of lineage through Bartolo de Sassoferrato and Juan Rodríguez

del Padrón are particularly enlightening and emphasizes the ways in which nobility was not necessarily inheritable, but rather had to be earned. This is important for my own argument because I address constructions of qualities. Bartolo in particular explained that a lineage without dignity could not survive into the fourth generation of a family—Zifar is the fourth generation, and none of the misfortunes he faces affect his ancestors—and Arbesú brings this back to his own focus on the horses' deaths as a unique affliction to Zifar and justifies the main cause for these deaths. This can tie directly to my own discussion of masculinity through Arbesú's emphasis on lineage and nobility through virtuous deeds. This also contributes to Norako's work, discussed above, in her discussion of recovery. Additionally, if we are to accept Arbesú's argument for an emphasis on lineage within the text, I would look at how Zifar's sons extend their father's masculinity, which was regained through virtuous deeds. My own discussion would broaden the scope to represent social representations more explicitly.

For the conversations on issues of identity within *Sir Isumbras*, there is a consensus between scholars on the importance of external evaluations of identity. Many scholars, in discussing Isumbras's fall, hit on the pivotal sequence in which Isumbras carves a cross into his shoulder and vows to travel in service to God—which I maintain is what he should have been doing all along. Samara P. Landers clarifies that identity is not externally imposed, but rather determined through external factors, i.e. appearance and behavior. Landers maintains that these are the only criteria we have to evaluate the characters, and that there is little window into Isumbras's inner thoughts. She further discusses Isumbras's exclusion from community, through penitential exile. However, while Landers expresses that her analysis does not discuss Isumbras's feelings, she still

lays out her argument in terms of what “Isumbras feels,” introducing confusion into her argument, given that it is based on external behavior. This article does, nonetheless, raise an important point of difference within the two texts in my study: while Isumbras spends much of the tale on a solitary journey, Zifar travels from community to community, and performs important deeds that uphold his masculinity.

Another major contribution to issues of identity within the Middle English poem comes from Elizabeth Fowler and her article “The Romance Hypothetical: Lordship and the Saracens in *Sir Isumbras*.” In this, Fowler discusses the topoi of politics, sexuality, and religion within the poem and argues that these aspects contribute to contemporary discussions of lordship and dominion. Her article rejects scholarly notions that romance are escapist and fantastic due to the genre’s abstract and abrupt nature. The current consensus, as Fowler sees it, is that abstraction and generality lead to a simplicity; however, Fowler argues that the hypothetical events in romance actually allow an audience of both learned and unlearned individuals to contemplate complex issues such as lordship and dominion. Her argument is logically structured around the three topoi: Fowler closely examines how the political, sexual, and religious aspects of the poem individually contribute to ideas of lordship and dominion before discussing how they work in tandem to construct a clear representation. In terms of the issue of identity, Fowler expostulates on the various “social persons” Isumbras inhabits within the topoi.

Fowler interestingly and very briefly discusses current concerns on genre: she mentions that romances and hagiographies are similar through a theme of divestment and reinvestment, but differ through their respective secular and religious concerns—

romances are concerned with what makes a person rich or a king whereas hagiographies are focused on what makes a person holy.

My own discussion of *Sir Isumbras* echoes Fowler's in many ways, as I too examine the social roles Isumbras acquires in his penitential travels, but which I would extend her argument to right of dominion and power in and of itself through masculinity. Each of the "social persons" Isumbras performs display distinct masculinities: proven through military prowess and conquest when he is a knight, faith in its utmost form as a palmer, and masterful workmanship in his armor when he is a smith. In my analysis these forms allow him to gain his most basic right of dominion: his masculinity. In order for Isumbras to become king, he must prove his masculinity in its various forms.

This same idea of allowing the text's audience to consider complex ideas in a safe space flows through Ivy A. Corfis's article, "The Fantastic in *Cavallero Zifar*." Corfis goes against critical views of the genre of fantasy as escapist, and maintains that this literary mode can be used to instruct as it can explore human fears and vent emotions that could not be explored in everyday life. She uses the *Zifar* as an example, and argues that the fantastic in the romance opens the opportunity for self-analysis and didacticism in order to promote and teach ideas from a safe distance. Corfis spends a great portion of her article reviewing previous studies of the fantastic episodes of the *Zifar*, and reaches a general consensus that supernatural events are present in both realistic and fantastic scenes in the tale, though that the previous conversation had been focused on how the supernatural events occurred in both types of episodes. She advances that the *Zifar* demonstrates that the marvelous realm of romances does not need to exclude opportunities for *exempla* through an examination of the fantastic episodes of the

enchanted lake and the *Islas Dotas*. Corfis's discussion contributes through her emphasis on contemporary reactions to the text. In addition, it complicates Manuel Abeledo's article, discussed above, as the fantastic scene of the enchanted lake, and the *exempla* within, that Corfis illuminates align it with Arthurian romances. For the purposes of my own argument, I would argue that the important ideas promoted by the text are specific to masculinity.

A specific discussion of contemporary lessons on correct lordship and dominion as it pertains to the *Zifar* specifically occurs in Michael Harney's "Law and Order in the *Libro del caballero Zifar*." Here, Harney argues that the romance is concerned with inheritance rights, the equality of all in the law of the land, the integrity of territory, and the maintenance of public safety and order. He examines the legal issues presented in the text to conclude that justice is conceived as being implemented locally. Harney further argues that the *Zifar* demonstrates a preference for cities over countryside and connects his discussion to how this preference demonstrates the romance's separation from chivalric literature, and compares it to *Amadis de Gaula* to demonstrate that *Zifar* is concerned with becoming king, whereas characters of chivalric literature are concerned with becoming a knight—a vassal.⁵³ The notions of law and correct leadership are also of my concern, and I would extend Harney's discussion of leadership to focus on *Zifar*'s masculinity, and its contributions to his ability to correctly carry out the law of the land. Additionally this correlates to my own comparative study through the concerns of the

⁵³ The *Amadis de Gaula* is a fifteenth-century chivalric romance, written by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo (1450-1504), of Zaragozaan provenance that was in vogue throughout the sixteenth century. The hero is abandoned at birth and must reclaim his inheritance through action.

poem. While Zifar is concerned with becoming king, Isumbras is concerned with regaining the grace of God, with his eventual kingdom being a spectacular reward that highlights God as a feudal overlord.

Raluca L. Radulescu illuminates the important political context for *Sir Isumbras*. Due to its concern with the suffering of a man in a position of social power, the poem was greeted enthusiastically by an audience that desired to examine their rulers' lack in interest in their subjects' welfare as well as examine governmental abuses. She examines the tale through its various extant forms, the time span of which spans a century, and points to the multiple depositions of Henry VI (1421-1471) who was accused of usurpation. The tensions that were raised by this king's contested rule are reflected within Isumbras's former preoccupation with earthly rewards, and Isumbras's redemptive journey symbolizes an ideal political leader. In this context, my examination of masculinity and the way in which it allows Isumbras to hold political power extends Radulescu's work.

A major agreement within the literature is that both texts promote didactic morals, and that these morals are promoted in each romance through what has previously been seen as escapist attempts: the fantasy in Zifar and the abstract nature of Isumbras. Additionally, there is consensus on proven identity based on external behavior, and I would extend these considerations of identity to focus specifically on masculinity.

It is astounding to notice the many similarities in scholarly concerns for both *Sir Isumbras* and the *Libro del Caballero Zifar*, yet to see such little comparative consideration. These romances are rife with possibilities into getting a clearer idea of the ways in which the tales represented contemporary concerns of masculinity, in specific

ways for each society. The *Zifar* espouses a particularly Spanish masculinity—I would argue that *Zifar*'s masculinity is more stable, as he is always the Knight of God, and that this stems from the always-present danger of Islamic invasion. Moreover, *Zifar* is very active throughout the tale, but more significantly is active before his fall; it is external jealousy of *Zifar*'s accomplishments that result in his initial exile. *Sir Isumbras*, on the other hand, is initially inactive, and represents a deeply threatened masculinity that reflects contemporary crusading rhetoric; throughout *Isumbras*'s penitential quest, his masculinity is regained only through deeds that uphold Christianity and expand its dominion.

CHAPTER IV

REFORGING MASCULINITY: LOSS AND RESTORATION IN *SIR ISUMBRAS*

Masculinity is the root of a man's power; be it secular, religious, or chivalric. Chivalric masculinity in itself could be the most complicated, as it entailed not only nobility in the virtuous sense, but also prowess through physical dominance and wisdom. While there has been extensive work done on Isumbras and the social positions he inhabits, few consider how his masculinity allows him to hold power and perform the various social positions he acquires on his penitential journey. Ultimately, Isumbras, through this masculinity, upholds an imagined English community. His performance of masculinity allows the audience to come to a particular form of knowledge through his acknowledgement of his wrongdoing and his penitent actions. The performance of these actions becomes especially important due to action's central place in the establishment of masculinity. I will argue that Isumbras goes through a process of a complete loss of masculinity, and through his penitential travels acquires new masculinities that are tested and proven. Additionally, it is these masculinities which authorize Isumbras to accede the height of masculine power as king.

My aim in this discussion is to highlight the development of a compound masculinity within *Sir Isumbras*. His loss is due to an idleness and this incorrect

masculinity must be shed, for while masculinity and lordship are separate, they are inseparable in the way that masculinity enhances power, and therefore lordship. After the initial loss, the new masculinities create a compound masculinity, which allows Isumbras to learn the masculinities of his subjects. In this way, his masculinity is corrective, and represents an ideal masculinity for its audience.

Former Masculinity

Because my definition of masculinity is based on its continual need to be bolstered, as well as the fact that argument centers around a loss of masculinity, it is necessary to first evaluate what Isumbras lost. As many scholars have noted, based on Isumbras's initial description the audience can assume that Isumbras had previously earned his social position through honorable means. However, these scholars focus on Isumbras only in his social position, but do not focus on the core of that social position. I would argue, rather, that he initially has a masculine identity, which must be stripped away in order for Isumbras to gain true masculinities that ultimately bring him power as king. So in terms of his masculinity, the audience is immediately told

I wyll you tell of a knyght
That was both herdy and wyght
A dughty mone he was;
Syr Isombras was his name,
A nobull knyght of ryall fame
And stronge in every case.

[I will tell you of a knight that was both brave and stalwart, a doughty man he was; Sir Isumbras was his name, a noble night of excellent reputation and strong in every circumstance.]⁵⁴

⁵⁴ "Item 5, *Sir Isumbras*," in *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse*, Ed. George Sufferlton, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008, 1-823; at 7-12. Hereafter, *SI*.

With an excellent reputation, we can see that Isumbras had previously been active in upholding his right to dominion. Moreover, this first description alerts us to a particular form of masculinity—chivalric. As a knight, his prowess is the easiest factor to socially evaluate. Implicit in this prowess is mastery over other others: men and more specifically other knights and enemies, as well as women. Additionally, the demonstration of prowess entailed danger, which set the knight apart from his community. In this passage, Isumbras’s strength and bravery are emphasized; before we are even told his name, the characteristics we immediately associate with Isumbras are his knighthood, his bravery, and his strength. In being “stalwart,” he is physically imposing as well as “stronge in every case.” The description continues into a blazon, as

He was a feyre man and strong
With schulders brod and armes longe
That sembly was to se.
He was large man and hyghe,
All hym loved that hym seyghe,
So hend a man was he.

[He was a strong and fair man with broad shoulders and long arms that was pleasant to see. He was a large and tall man, all loved him that saw him, so noble a man was he.]⁵⁵

This blazon, a device that is more traditionally reserved for female characters, serves the purpose of making Isumbras attractive to the audience, and thus able to form a connection. This physical beauty connotes wholeness, as well and highlighting the physiognomic notion of the outer appearance reflecting the inner state of the soul. This notion can be seen in the *Summa Theologica*, as Aquinas writes that “beauty adds to

⁵⁵ *SI*, 13-18.

goodness a relation to the cognitive faculty.”⁵⁶ Physical attractiveness was related to goodness, so Isumbras’s external attractiveness would symbolize his internal goodness. Again, his physical characteristics emphasize his strength and the way in which he dominates others physically, with his “schulderes brode and armes longe.” This upholds the notion that “aristocratic power derive[d] from armed might.”⁵⁷ In the setting of a battle, his victory would be ensured, and the audience is in turn assured that Isumbras used to be an honorable man. These characteristics allude to a former chivalric masculinity, which could have been, in part, inherited in Isumbras’s lineage. Crane notes that within chivalric selfhood, “ancestors define descendants because blood is not simply one’s own but is continuous through time; and, complementarily, that deeds consolidate identity because chivalric standing must be continually asserted.”⁵⁸ In other words, a knight’s masculinity is part of an extension of his father’s, which he consolidates, and, in an ideal world, moves past the masculinity of his father through better deeds. This also emphasizes that Isumbras must constantly assert a masculinity that is worthy of being passed on, and through this places importance on his role as a father.

Chaste Marriage: Isumbras as Husband and Father

Leila K. Norako asserts that *Sir Isumbras* “creates an atemporal world wherein the lines between self and Other are starkly drawn, and the factiousness of Christian Europe is replaced by a unified family capable of expanding the

⁵⁶ Aquinas, *Summa*, 945.

⁵⁷ Crane, *Performance*, 2.

⁵⁸ Crane, *Performance*, 107.

borders of Christianity.”⁵⁹ From this, Isumbras’s role as a father and husband, especially in the beginning of the poem, emphasize his masculine identity. As an expectation of his role as a social leader, he was to settle down, have children, and then pass on that leadership to his heirs. He is the dominant power in his community based on his ability to be the dominant power in his family.

This pertains to sexual domination as well, as “He had the feyresete ladye / That any man myght se with ee” [He had the fairest lady that any man with eyes might see].⁶⁰ This position asserts a communal recognition of the lady’s beauty as well as a communal recognition of Isumbras’s mastery of that woman. This mastery is proven as “thei hade fayre sones thre; / They were all feyre as thei myght be” [they had three fair sons; they were all as fair as they might be].⁶¹ Through their children, consummation—and more importantly penetration—has been proven, and sets up the lineage of Isumbras as well as continues Isumbras’s previous lineage. The legitimacy of the line is without question, as Isumbras, his wife, and his children are all communally described as “feyre.”

Along with this proof of penetration is the move to a chaste marriage, evidenced by the fact that Isumbras’s wife is not pregnant, and nor does she become pregnant in the tale. Additionally, based on his social position and their three children, enough time has passed in Isumbras’s life for him and his wife to reach an age in which it was appropriate for them to move to a state of chastity.

⁵⁹ Leila K. Norako, “*Sir Isumbras* the fantasy of Crusade,” in *The Chaucer Review* 48.2 (2013): 166-89.

⁶⁰ *SI*, 25-27.

⁶¹ *SI*, 28-29.

Here, I follow Dyan Elliot's formulation of the conventional form of chastity, in which the couple consummates during childbearing years, and then the wife having reached menopause, the couple would vow to remain celibate.⁶²

Inherent in chastity is the control necessary for a couple to remain celibate, which increases the man's masculinity in being able to withstand the constant temptation that was the female body, which, as previously, mentioned "feminized" men through stirrings of lust," and which made the man more reliant on the woman than on God. Aquinas asserts that "chastity takes its name from the fact that reason 'chastises' concupiscence, which, like a child, needs curbing."⁶³ Concupiscence holds pleasure in venereal acts to be its end goal, and humans are continually inclined to seek it; these venereal pleasures "are more impetuous, and more oppressive on the reason than the pleasures of the palate" which makes chastity all the more necessary for control over oneself.⁶⁴ Moreover, "A man was to expend his sexual pneuma [spirit] sparingly to allow himself to remain strong to contribute to the public good."⁶⁵ While this allows the audience to acknowledge that Isumbras had a strong masculinity before this time, the notion of the chaste marriage raises important questions pertaining to Isumbras upholding masculinity: if he is not penetrating his wife, then what is he penetrating?

⁶² For further discussion see Dyan Elliot, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

⁶³ Aquinas, *Summa*, 2407.

⁶⁴ Aquinas, *Summa*, 2409.

⁶⁵ Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," 83.

In terms of medieval constructions of masculinity and the various ways in which a man proves his, this would entail, secularly, penetrating lands, perhaps through crusading; or in the spiritual realm it would mean founding or patronizing monasteries, all of which would continue the man's legacy. In this way, his masculinity would be upheld, even without sexual penetration. Moreover, the benefits of chaste marriage were highlighted in religious terms; free from the restraint of desire, the couple could serve their time more wisely in spiritual contemplation. As the medieval man became more spiritual, his masculinity was sustained. However, in secular views, chaste marriage was dangerous to the enforcement of the genders. For one thing, in actual practice chaste marriage was more often upon the request of the female partner. This had the potential to profoundly transform traditional gender-dictated roles and challenged "normative concepts like female submission."⁶⁶ In this manner, chaste marriage gave the woman autonomy within the relationship as it freed her from the conjugal debt.

By this discussion, Isumbras does have masculinity. However, as will be discussed below, Isumbras is not proving his masculinity, which in turn causes his masculinity to be threatened, beaten, and finally stripped away. The masculinity that he has established at the beginning of the poem is incorrect, in that it is based in pride. Moreover, the chaste nature of his marriage serves to highlight his idle lifestyle, meaning he does not wield power within his personal life or in his social life. Through his travels, he must shed his former sense of manhood and learn correct behaviors.

⁶⁶ Elliot, *Spiritual Marriage*, 5.

Emasculation

In this section, I turn to the instances in which Isumbras's masculinity is threatened and is unable to remain under these threats. In this "unmanning," *Isumbras* follows a tradition of *Sir Orfeo*, who is initially unmanned and must regain his position through virtuous deeds. I would first argue that, contrary to some scholars, Isumbras does not lose his identity immediately when the bird tells him that he has "forgette what thou was" (44), but rather his masculine identity is beaten away until the point that he finally sheds this previous notion of himself. Samara P. Landers in particular asserts that "his behavior and conduct preserve his identity and ensure that he will recover his position as a knight."⁶⁷ However, as my following discussion shows, his initial identity is *not* preserved. Interestingly, all of these instances of emasculation are external—he is feminized by others in his interactions—and it is only when Isumbras undergoes deliberate and internal emasculation through submission to God that he begins to gain new masculinities. My purpose entails a process of loss, as well as a process of reclamation in multiple masculinities, which culminate in a compound masculinity that validates Isumbras's new identity as king.

As previously stated, based on Isumbras's initial physical descriptions, the audience would be assured his victory in a battle. However, Isumbras is within his own court, and Susan Crane notes that "medieval courts are architectural spaces, institutions, and social groups that assert their separateness and superiority to the wider world, and claim in consequence an array of privileges and powers that further set them apart," and

⁶⁷ Samara P. Landers, "'And loved he was with all': Identity in *Sir Isumbras*," in *Orbis Litterarum* 64.5 (2009): 351-372; at 352.

to do this, “courtiers constitute[d] themselves especially by staging their distinctiveness: their feasts, tournaments, entries, and weddings define their peculiarly elite splendor, generosity, power, and lineage.”⁶⁸ Isumbras, we are told

Mynstrels lovyd he well in halle,
And gafe theme rych robys of paule
And gyftys of glytering gold.
Of curtasse that knyght was knge
And of his mete not sparynge;
Ther goth none syche aon molde.

[He loved minstrels well in hall, and have them rich robes of fine cloth and gifts of glittering gold. Of curtesy that knight was king and of his food he was not sparing; there goes now none like him on the earth.]⁶⁹

These lines are particularly deceptive for the audience, for upon first glance they appear to demonstrate nothing more than Isumbras’s generosity and perceived correct feudal reciprocity. The generosity also set Isumbras apart from his peers, and could act as an extension of his social influence, as Crane notes that “the gift’s personal component is ‘inalienable’ from the givers, still conveying the givers’ independent authority” and, moreover, enhance the authority of Isumbras.⁷⁰ Although this emphasizes material wealth Isumbras proves his ability to hold influence through the ritual of gift giving. Landers demonstrates that “the items that Isumbras has and can give to others are an important part of how we are supposed to consider him” and believes that this overshadows his initial description of bravery and strength.⁷¹ Based on my initial discussion of the importance of Isumbras’s bravery and strength in establishing a masculinity that is lost, I

⁶⁸ Crane, *Performance*, 2.

⁶⁹ *SI*, 19-24.

⁷⁰ Crane, *Performance*, 28.

⁷¹ Landers, “Identity,” 356.

obviously disagree with Landers here. More important than the emphases on these characteristics is the fact that the poet's discussion of Isumbras's material wealth comes after we associate Isumbras with strength, meaning that this is secondary to his actual masculinity which he has allowed to fall into the background in favor of a comfortable life.

St. Jerome writes that "it is Christians who thus neglect the care of their own households, and, disregarding the beams in their eyes, look for motes in those of their neighbors."⁷² Aquinas agrees, and states that a man's happiness cannot come from wealth or earthly rewards, because the desire for "temporal goods" is never satisfied, "for when we already possess them, we despise them, and seek others."⁷³ It is in this that the deceptive nature of the description lies, as this is the earliest indication of Isumbras's sin of pride. The audience's association of Isumbras with correct behavior is shattered when we are told that

Bot inne hys herte a pride was browght:
Of Godys werkys he goffe ryght noght.
Hyse mersye he sette nott byghe.

[But in his heart a pride was brought: of God's work he cared nothing for. His [God's] mercy he did not consider.]⁷⁴

As a particularly masculine sin, this pride alludes to highly incorrect behavior, within all secular, religious, and chivalric performances. Aquinas elucidates that "pride is so called

⁷² Jerome, "Letter XLC. To Asella" in *NPNFW2-06. Jerome: The Principle Works of St. Jerome.* Ed, Philip Schaff. Trans, M.A. Freemantle. *Documenta Catholica Omnia.* Cooperatorum Veritatis Societas, 2006. 131-134; at 132.

⁷³ Aquinas, *Summa*, 785.

⁷⁴ *SI*, 31-36.

because a man thereby aims higher than he is.”⁷⁵ Pride is therefore outside of right reason, which “requires that every man’s will should tend to that which is proportionate to him.”⁷⁶ Pride may have a special object of an “inordinate desire for one’s own excellence,” which seems to be the problem for Isumbras as well, who “cared nothing for” God’s work or mercy.⁷⁷ This quotation also undercuts all of the previous descriptions of Isumbras. The gifts he gives are excessive, and the expense could have better served for the public good through military pursuits or donating to the church, rather than the expression of splendor. That he gives gifts of “rych robys of paule” (20) mirrors his own “ryche cyrcute of paule” [rich overcoat of fine cloth], as will be discussed further on in this discussion.⁷⁸ Moreover, these passages detract from Isumbras’s masculinity through the clear lack of instances to prove himself a man. There are no tests through tournaments, so nothing is proven. Additionally, his inconsideration of God’s mercy, as well as God’s role in Isumbras attaining his position, displays a lack of spirituality, which in itself detracts from his masculinity. This correlates to Aquinas’s notion that “pride denotes aversion from God simply through being unwilling to be subject to God and His rule.”⁷⁹ However, this particular sin is difficult to avoid because it is hidden “since it takes occasion even from good deeds.” The initial description of Isumbras therefore illuminates that he slipped into sin, most likely due to his own previous excellence.

⁷⁵ Aquinas, *Summa*, 2477.

⁷⁶ Aquinas, *Summa*, 2477-2478.

⁷⁷ Aquinas, *Summa*, 2479.

⁷⁸ *SI*, 115.

⁷⁹ Aquinas, *Summa*, 2485.

A possible indicator of Isumbras's masculinity lies in his recreation of hunting, as "The kyght wen forth for to pleye/ Hys feyre forest to see."⁸⁰ Hunting was an important male activity, and served to reinforce masculinity through the notion of mastery: "the hunter takes a deer as the man takes a woman."⁸¹ It was also another arena for competition through the act of getting the biggest or more numerous kills. This scene, moreover, is of particular importance as it is here that Isumbras is confronted, "As he lokyd hym besyde on hye, / He herd a byrd synge hym nye / Hyghe upon a tre" [As he looked near him on high, he heard a bird near him high upon a tree. And said, "Abide, Sir Isumbras, you have forgotten what you were for pride of gold and goods].⁸² The repetition that the bird is above Isumbras signifies the proper behavior Isumbras should have been portraying in his relationship with God. Isumbras, in proper submission, should have always seen himself as constantly below God, but through refusing to acknowledge God's mercy demonstrated that he believed he did not need God. This emphasis on proper behavior is emphasized when

On his kneys he fell doune thor
 And both his handys uphelde.
 "Werlds welhe I wyll forsake
 And to Godys mersye I wylle me take;
 To hym my selve I yelde."

[On his knees he fell down there and held up both his hands. "World's wealth I will forsake and to God's mercy I will take; to him myself I surrender.]⁸³

⁸⁰ *SI*, 38-39.

⁸¹ Murray, "Hiding," 134-5.

⁸² *SI*, 40-45.

⁸³ *SI*, 49-54.

This quotation represents not only Isumbras's acknowledgement of submission in making himself even lower than the bird, but also through his speech act of vowing to surrender himself to God. However, he does not immediately lose his identity, though it is immediately damaged.

After his interaction with the bird, the clearest sign of his chivalric masculine identity, his horse, is taken from him. Andrew G. Miller highlights the importance of a knight's horse as a symbol of his masculinity, as "a fine horse—like hawks and hunting dogs—afforded its medieval master the greatest status because it accompanied in him the manly tasks of war and hunting, instead of labor."⁸⁴ Added to this is the inherent aspect of action, of proving one's deeds to prove one's masculinity, and the horse allowed the knight to do this. Moreover, "astride his horse, a man looked down upon his inferiors while gazing eye to eye with his peers."⁸⁵ So it is highly significant to his masculine identity that "when he of that bryd hade no syght, / Hys sted that was so strong and wyght / Dede under hym was bentte" [When that bird was out of his sight, his steed that was so strong and swift dead under him was destroyed].⁸⁶ Miller identifies that "In medieval art and literature the horse played two contrasting roles: as 'the bearer of pilgrims' and as 'a symbol of magnificence.'"⁸⁷ Through Isumbras's horse being described as "so strong and wyght," the magnificence of the animal, and the magnificence it symbolizes, are portrayed, and the sudden fact that it was instantly not only dead, but also destroyed, emphasizes the blow Isumbras's masculinity has taken in this scene. Without the horse,

⁸⁴ Andrew G. Miller, "Tails of Masculinity: Knights, Clerics, and the Mutilation of Horses in Medieval England," in *Speculum* 88.4 (2013): 958-995; at 961.

⁸⁵ Miller, "Tails," 962.

⁸⁶ *SI*, 64-66.

⁸⁷ Miller, "Tails," 966.

he can no longer literally be at the same level as his peers, as is indicated in the next scene.

Landers asserts that “once he loses his possessions, the mark of Isumbras’s identity is that he does not change how he interacts with the people around him.”⁸⁸ However, I do not believe that she has considered the significance of the loss of the horse, as “On fote hymselfe he muste go; / To peyn turned hys pley. / As he came by a lytell shawe, / A lytelle chyld anon he saw / Came rydinge hym agene” [On foot he must take himself; to pain turned his pleasure. As he came upon a little grove, a small child he soon saw came ride up to him].⁸⁹ He is now without a horse, and more clearly without the mark of his chivalric masculinity. Even more damaging, I would argue, is the fact that a small child comes riding on a horse to him. This small child is not only physically above him, but also demonstrates what Isumbras can no longer do: be the master of that animal. This scene illuminates that Isumbras is not only no longer able to be on the same level as his peers, but also he is not even able to be on a higher level than his inferiors. However, I must concede to Landers’ point that Isumbras’s behavior during the interaction does not necessarily change, as the boy still refers to Isumbras as “Lord,” thereby validating Isumbras’s social position. Though this could be seen as an indication of how Isumbras’s pride has spread and a misuse of his lordship, as his followers cannot recognize the spiritual wrong he has committed. By this I mean that because he has not been performing the correct behavior, his subjects cannot know what that correct behavior should be—his incorrect lordship taints his followers. This has the effect of proving that

⁸⁸ Landers, “Identity,” 357.

⁸⁹ *SI*, 71-75.

his former identity cannot be reassumed, but more importantly highlights the incorrect masculinity that cannot be reassumed. It must be shed completely if Isumbras is ever to fulfill his penance.

The manifestation of Isumbras's loss of masculinity, as a process, become apparent when the knight references his remaining markers of identity. For while all of his material possessions have been destroyed, Isumbras states that "Whyle that I may on lyffe se / my wyffe and my chylder thre, / Full glad I ame this dye" [While I may see alive my wife and three children, full glad I am this day].⁹⁰ He asserts his identity as a husband and father, as each is an extension of his own identity. This is reinforced when he sees them fleeing naked from the burning buildings, as this demonstrate's Crane's idea that clothing is equated with identity, as the naked family represents a naked identity in that there is no representation of social position.

Their role as extensions of his identity is represented further when Isumbras instructs the family as to how they will react to their loss of status. Isumbras states

"For all the care that we be inne,
It is for oure wyken synne
For we are worthy myche more.
And we canne nothings wyrke,
Therfor myselve I thinke, yrke,
Of begyng for to go"

[“For all the trouble that we are in, it is from our wicked sin for we are worth much more. Since we cannot succeed at all, therefore I, exhausted, think to go begging”].⁹¹

⁹⁰ *SI*, 82-84.

⁹¹ *SI*, 106-111, translated by George Shuffleton.

Of special importance is the fact that Isumbras's family is included in the sin, through Isumbras's use of the plural communal voice. However, this also demonstrates the blow that has occurred to his masculinity, as it highlights an acknowledgement that Isumbras has no masculinity to pass on to his sons, thereby ensuring a strong lineage. His wife has had no behavior to admire, and then emulate, which makes her complicit in his sin.

Further highlighting the family as a remaining marker and extension of his identity is the fact that Isumbras

toke hys ryche cyrcute of paule,
Over his wyfe he lete it falle
With a full drery mode.
Hy ryche mantell than toke he
And cutte it and clothyd his chylder thre
That nakd before hym stode.

[took his rich overcoat of fine cloth and over his wife let it fall with a downcast spirit. His rich robe then he took and cut it and clothed his three children that stood naked before him.]⁹²

These clothes are the former marker of his identity, and this scene in particular demonstrates Isumbras's former excess. Susan Crane explains that "a court 'robe' of this period was made up of two to six pieces, such as tunic, supertunic, cloak, mantlet, and hood."⁹³ This robe also led to a waste of cloth, in the various ways it could be manipulated to suit the contemporary fashion.

That Isumbras is able to clothe four people attests to the sheer amount of fabric he had at his disposal, and reminds the audience of the rich robes that he gifted to minstrels. Moralists of thirteenth and fourteenth century England condemned excessive clothing and

⁹² *SI*, 115-120.

⁹³ Crane, *Performance*, 12.

“stressed the need for the rich to reserve at least part of their resources for social measures in the form of charity.”⁹⁴ Significantly, Isumbras is excessive in his own dress as well as in the excessive gifts, and gives nothing to charity, highlighting his incorrect actions.

Moreover, the act of clothing them with his own robes demonstrates a marked extension of his identity and remaining power. Here, they are objectified, as they “present their bodies, relationships, and capacities as valuable resources to be exploited.”⁹⁵ Isumbras’s loss of status and masculinity is extended onto his family, but he does still assert some control through the speech act of his intention for the family, and he reinforces his role as the leader of the family when he asserts that “Now shall ye do all at my rede” [Now shall you all do as I command].⁹⁶ However, this makes it all the more devastating when they are each taken away from him.

It must be noted that while the audience knows that Isumbras’s identity as a knight has been taken away from him, the narrator insists on referring to Isumbras as a knight, and it is particularly significant for my purposes of masculinity that this characteristic is still used when Isumbras is being emasculated; in fact, the narrator uses this particular marker fourteen times over the course of Isumbras’s process of loss. Often, the reference comes before an explanation that undercuts our association with him as a knight. For example, as they leave the ruins of their former lives, the audience is told

It was grete dole to se that syght,

⁹⁴ Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, “Reconciling the Privilege of a Few with the Common Good: Sumptuary Laws in Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 39:3 (2009), 597-617; at 598.

⁹⁵ Crane, *Performance*, 14-15.

⁹⁶ *SI*, 121.

That lady and that gentyll knyght,
How thei dyd sofer wo.
They that were wounte to duell with wyne

[It was with great sorrow to see that sight, that lady and the gentle knight, how they suffer woe. They that were accustomed to dwell with joy].⁹⁷

This quotation follows the pattern, as we associate Isumbras as a knight, only to be reminded of his great loss. More than that, the reference to how the couple “were wounte to duell with wyne” reminds the reader of their wrongdoing, as it references their excessive lives of luxury.

The first crushing blow to Isumbras’s masculinity, that has been upheld insofar as he is a husband and father, comes when the eldest son—his heir—is abducted. This episode follows the pattern of recognition that leads to loss, as we are told that Isumbras is “the knyght that as hend and gode” [the knight that as noble and good] as he manages to safely get his first-born across the river.⁹⁸ However, undercutting this is that while Isumbras attempts to cross with the second-born, is when “a lyon toke that other chyld” [a lion took that other child].⁹⁹ This act breaks Isumbras’s patrilineal lineage, more so than the loss of his status and property. The most significant passage in relation to Isumbras’s loss, however, is in the family’s first interaction with Saracens.

Saracens

Saracens are highly prevalent throughout medieval literature, and moreover abound throughout chivalric romances. My use of “Saracen” follows that of Sharon Kinoshita, who asserts that “The Saracens, then, should be understood not as a race but as

⁹⁷ *SI*, 145-148.

⁹⁸ *SI*, 169.

⁹⁹ *SI*, 173.

a culture, in [Arjun] Appaduria's sense of situated difference: group identities are consisted by the conscious mobilization of certain attributes to 'articulate the boundary of difference'—attributes then naturalized as 'essential' to group identity."¹⁰⁰ Religion is the most significant marker of group identity, and through this, we are reminded that masculinity was tied to spirituality. Therefore, that the Saracens follow the incorrect faith in the eyes of medieval Christian populations, they were showing a lack of spirituality, which emasculates the Saracens and emphasizes the masculinity of the Christian hero. I would go even further and argue that this demonstrates a lack of reason, which further highlights the masculinity that is inherent in following Christianity.

Stephen D. Powell demonstrates some of the similarities between Isumbras and the Sultan, stating that "the knight, who is a Christian, but (at first) a bad Christian, seems no different from the bad sultan."¹⁰¹ However, Powell only goes so far as to equate their lack of charity, but I would take this a step further to examine the ways in which the excessive lifestyle of the Saracens reminds the reader of Isumbras's initial excess. Significantly, when Isumbras approaches the ship, he doesn't recognize the Saracens as what they truly are: enemies. The audience's first knowledge of the Saracens is that their ships "with topp-castels sett onne lofte, / They semed all one gold wrought, / Thei glytered and schyned so" [with high upper decks, they seemed to be made of gold, they glittered and shined so].¹⁰² This description represents an excessive presentation, all the while it

¹⁰⁰ Sharon Kinoshita, "'Pagans are Wrong and Christians are Right': Alterity, Gender, and Nation in the *Chanson de Roland*," in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 79-111; at 83.

¹⁰¹ Stephen D. Powell, "Models of Religious Peace in the Medieval Romance *Sir Isumbras*," in *Neophilologus* 85.1 (2001): 121-136; at 123.

¹⁰² *SI*, 208-210.

reminds the reader of Isumbras's previous preoccupation with "gold and fee." After this the audience is informed that "The Soudan of Pers was therinne. / Chystindom he come to wyne, / Ther wakyd wo full wyde" [The Sultan of Persia was within, Christendom he has come to conquer, where they went they stirred up woe].¹⁰³ Here we have Saracens invading—penetrating the physical landscape—and Isumbras is powerless to fight against the incursion. Not only is he unprepared to act, but he is unprepared to recognize the threat, as his reaction is: "The knyght spake to the ladye fre, / 'What frely folk may thes be / That drawys so faste to lond? / They seme men of grete asstate'" [The knight spoke to the noble lady, "What noble folk may these be that come to fast to land? They seem like men of great estate].¹⁰⁴ More importantly, this reaction is to the opulence which the Saracen ships display. Isumbras trusts that the ship might aid his family, but erroneously because of the wealth that is displayed, so it is with "wynne" [joy] that the family approaches the ships and becomes the recipients of the Saracens' collective gaze.¹⁰⁶ Isumbras's presence is immediately noted, as

A knyght syd unto the kynge,
 "Sertys, it is a wonder thyng
 Yone pore man to ee,
 For he is both large and hyghe,
 They fyrest man that ever Y se;
 A gentyll man is he
 With armes long and shuldres grete,
 Wythe browys brante and eyen stepe,
 A knyghte semys to be.
 Hys wyffe whyte as whalys bone,
 Hyr lyre as the see fome,
 And bryght as lylé of blee."

¹⁰³ *SI*, 211-213.

¹⁰⁴ *SI*, 223-226.

¹⁰⁶ *SI*, 235.

[A knight spoke to the king, “Sire, it is a wondrous thing that poor man to see, for he is both large and tall, the most attractive man that I have seen; a gentleman he is, with long arms and broad shoulders, with arched brown and bright eyes, a knight he seems to be. His wife is as white as whale’s bone, her face like the sea foam, and bright of countenance as the lily].¹⁰⁷

Isumbras is socially recognized as a knight by the Saracens, but this passage displays much more than this acknowledgement. Importantly, the Saracen knight describes Isumbras as “feyre,” a descriptor that hasn’t appeared for 238 lines. Perhaps this represents the desirability of Isumbras to the Saracens—both in terms of physical desirability and the desire for what his strength might aid them. The wife of Isumbras, too, is significantly described in terms of light and beauty: she has a face as white as the sea foam. This description recalls descriptions of the Virgin Mary, who is bright, white, and beautiful, which draws an association of innocence and perfection for Isumbras’s wife. This passage also closely resembles Isumbras’s initial description, which recalls Isumbras’s sinful state. I would assert that this, his former sinfulness, is what makes him particularly attractive to the Saracens. Moreover, this repetition alerts the audience to the fact that Isumbras has yet to fully shed his former identity.

The Sultan, seeing Isumbras with his own eyes, attempts to seduce Isumbras away from Christianity. This temptation comes in the form of earthly rewards, but more important is that the rewards are particularly masculine; after all, one can only be tempted with that which one desires. St. Jerome writes extensively on temptation, and states that when given temptation, “our opponent may choose whichever of the two he likes; we

¹⁰⁷ *SI*, 247-258.

give him his choice.”¹⁰⁸ This choice is between whether or not to abide in Christ. He further quotes from Galatians 16-17 which says that “there hath no temptation taken you, but such a man can bear,” because “God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure.”¹⁰⁹ This is due to free will, in which “we are not forced by necessity either to virtue or to vice.”¹¹⁰ The Sultan bargains that

“Syr, both gold and fee
Thow schall have, and duelle with me
And helpe me for to fyghte.
If thou be doughty man of ded,
Thou schall be horsyd on a stede,
Mysleve schall dubbe thee knyght.”

[Sir, both gold and property you shall have, if you dwell with me and help me fight. If you are a doughty man of deed, you will be horsed on a steed, I myself will dub you a knight.]¹¹¹

The “gold and fee” would allow Isumbras to regain his former position as lord as well as his position as a knight. Moreover, through becoming a knight and fighting for the Sultan, Isumbras would be proving his chivalric masculinity. The most important aspect of this temptation to Isumbras’s masculinity, however, is the promise of being “horsyd on a stede.” Earlier in this chapter, I alluded to the importance of the horse as a symbol of the knight’s masculinity. In being “re-horsed,” Isumbras’s masculinity would regain the clearest of its markers. Isumbras is given a choice between the reinstatement of his

¹⁰⁸ Jerome, “Book II,” in *Against Jovinianus*, in *NPNFW2-06. Jerome: The Principle Works of St. Jerome.* Ed, Philip Schaff. Trans, M.A. Freemantle. *Documenta Catholica Omnia.* Cooperatorum Veritatis Societas (2006): 622-663; at 624.

¹⁰⁹ Jerome, “Book II,” 625.

¹¹⁰ Jerome, “Book II,” 626.

¹¹¹ *SI*, 265-270.

wealth and the renunciation of his faith and the consequence of fighting against this faith. However, the suffering he has already done in the name of penance for his pride of “gold and fee” would immediately signify a return to suffering if he were to fall to this temptation. Isumbras restrains the temptation “by an intenser love for Christ,” making the choice, then easy.¹¹²

This entire passage is highly important to my discussion of the process of Isumbras’s loss, as it is only after the Sultan tempts Isumbras to renounce Christianity that he come to the realization that he is appealing to Saracens as “Styll stode Syr Isombras, / And saw that he a Saraysene was” [Sir Isumbras stood still, and saw that the Sultan was a Saracen].¹¹³ Until this point, Isumbras placed his faith in the wealth of the inhabitants of the ship without realizing the incorrect behavior that it represented, and shows that he is still outside of reason. Stephen D. Powell has asserted that Isumbras and the Sultan share characteristics based on their improper charity. However, I would assert that this episode portrays a further connection through incorrect faith. It is highly significant that both Isumbras’s name and title are used as descriptors. Based on the audience’s knowledge that “Sir Isumbras” equates to sin, as well as characteristic connections between Isumbras and the Sultan, the use therefore emphasizes that Isumbras has not shed his former identity. This also places an importance on emasculation; the Saracens are emasculated through their incorrect faith, and Isumbras is emasculated through his loss of social position. In incorrect faith, the Saracens are also displaying a

¹¹² Jerome, “Letter LXXIX. To Salvina,” in *NPNFW2-06. Jerome: The Principle Works of St. Jerome.* Ed, Philip Schaff. Trans, M.A. Freemantle. *Documenta Catholica Omnia.* Cooperatorum Veritatis Societas, 2006. 291-300; at 299.

¹¹³ *SI*, 271-272.

lack of rationality, as medieval theologians placed a clear connection between spirituality and rationality. Both the Saracens and Isumbras are therefore emasculated through their lack of correct faith.

Isumbras, to give him his credit, rejects the offer and shows proper submission to Christianity. He again rejects the Sultan when Isumbras is offered the same rewards in exchange for his wife. However, the Sultan completely overpowers him as

The Soudeyn swore by hys thryft
The lady shuld with hym be lyffte
For ought that he couthe doo.
The gold on his mantyll thei told;
Thoff he were never so stronge and bold,
His wyff thei toke hym froo.
And sethyn to the lond thei gan hym caste,
And bette hym to hys rybbys braste
And made his flesche full bloo.

[The Sultan swore by his fortune that the lady should be left with him for ought that Isumbras could do. They counted the gold on his mantle; though Isumbras was never so strong or bold, his wife was taken from him. And afterwards they brought him to land, and beat him until his ribs broke and made his flesh full blue.]¹¹⁴

Isumbras is impotent to stop the abduction of his wife—his property and marker of his sexual prowess. While he is able to assert his power vocally, he cannot maintain his control over his wife. Then, he is beaten senseless; he is physically overpowered. More importantly, Isumbras is immediately described as “this knyght” and further that “The lytell chyld on lond thei sette / And saw how the Sarysyns hys fader bette” [The small child that they had set on land saw how the Saracens beat his father].¹¹⁵ That this particular descriptor—one that should connote masculine prowess, power, and strength to

¹¹⁴ *SI*, 298-306.

¹¹⁵ *SI*, 307-311.

name a few—is used in relation to his son witnessing his powerlessness highlights the emasculation Isumbras is undergoing. As discussed previously, masculinity could be passed on to heirs through their repetition, so there is no possible way Isumbras could be in any way masculine. His only remaining link to his former masculinity has no masculinity to emulate.

Isumbras’s masculinity takes a further demotion in the narrator’s description of the Sultan’s actions, which reinforce his own masculinity while detracting from Isumbras’s, as

The Soudan with his awne hond
Crounde hir quene of all hys lond
And sente hyr home to hys contré.
A ryche charter, I understond,
He seyld it with hys owne hond
That sche schuld quene be.

[The Sultan with his own hand crowned her queen of all his land and sent her home to his country. It was a potent document, I understand, he sealed it with his own hand that she should be queen.]¹¹⁶

The repetition of the Sultan using “his awne hond” emphasizes the Sultan physically accomplishing his desires, and emasculates Isumbras in that the Sultan does what Isumbras cannot. Even an act of indifference displays the true asymmetry of power between the two characters. To appease his new wife, the Sultan grants that “the knyght was brought to hyr ageyne” [the knight was brought to her again].¹¹⁷ The Sultan clearly sees no threat in Isumbras, and this is confirmed when the author describes Isumbras as

¹¹⁶ *SI*, 331-336.

¹¹⁷ *SI*, 344.

“the wondyd knyght” [the wounded knight] when he is brought into her.¹¹⁸ He departs only “when the knyght myght uppe stond” [when the knight might stand up].¹¹⁹ These descriptions highlight Isumbras’s powerlessness, as he is utterly incapacitated. It is also highly important that the narrator continually connects Isumbras as a knight to his impotency against the threat of the Saracens. Additionally, they draw attention to the fact that Isumbras is still carrying his former flawed identity.

The final episode in which Isumbras is externally emasculated occurs in the abduction of his only remaining son. When an angel seizes the gold Isumbras was given in exchange for his wife, “The sory knyght uppe sterte hee / And folowyd hym unto the see: / Ther over gane he flye. / That same tyme an unycorne / His yonge sone away had borne” [The knight started up and followed the angel to the sea: there over the angel began to fly. That same time a unicorn bore his young son away.]¹²⁰ The connection between running after the gold and his son—his only remaining family—being abducted is highly important to Isumbras’s identity. In this act, he is not submitting completely to God and the penance that he is to endure, so he is still trying to maintain a version of his former life. It is therefore significant that Isumbras truly prays only after this has occurred.

That the author connects Isumbras as a knight to his powerlessness displays that Isumbras has yet to fully lose his former identity. Throughout these episodes, Isumbras is still preoccupied with social status and earthly wealth. He cannot perform his penance with the fetters of his former identity, so it is chipped away until nothing—absolutely

¹¹⁸ *SI*, 355.

¹¹⁹ *SI*, 361.

¹²⁰ *SI*, 379-383

nothing—is left of his former life and he can begin the process of gaining not only penance, but also, more significantly, acquire new masculinities which allow him to surpass his former status and rule as a true king.

New Masculinities

Isumbras's first act after his last remaining son is abducted is to pray, and in this prayer he finally submits fully to God, as

He sette hym onne a stone;
With carfulle herte and drery stevyn,
He callyd on the kyng of heven;
To hym he made hys mone.
“Lord,” he seyde, “full wo is me!
So feyre as I hade childer thre,
And now have I none.
God that berys of heven the croune
Wyse me this dey to some toune,
For now I ame alone.”

[He sat on a stone; with sorrowful heart and sad voice, he called on the king of heaven; to him he made his lament. “Lord,” he said, “fully sorrowful am I! So fair were my three children, and now I have none. God that bears heaven’s crown guide me this day to some town, for now I am alone.”]¹²¹

The language of this passage closely resembles lovesickness, and this lovesickness is particular in that Isumbras is lovesick for God. He has a sorrowful heart, he uses a sad voice in his lamentations. He is utterly alone and can only rely on God, and fully submits, making him humble. Importantly, humility requires “knowledge of one’s own deficiency.”¹²² Additionally, humility “properly regards the reverence whereby man is subject to God.”¹²³ This is a deliberate act of feminization as he gives God total control

¹²¹ *SI*, 387- 396.

¹²² Aquinas, *Summa*, 2470.

¹²³ Aquinas, *Summa*, 2471.

over his life. Lovesickness in medieval literature, though most common in chivalric romances, served the purpose of actually enhancing the knight's masculinity, as the act of feminization made him a better knight. Here, it serves the purpose of making Isumbras a better Christian.

Following God's guidance, he acquires his first masculinity: guild. In his encounter with the blacksmiths, Isumbras is offered employment. Significantly, Isumbras is referred to as "the knyght" when he agrees that "for mete I wolde traveyll feyn, / Blow and do inow" ["for food I would work gladly, blow the bellows and do a great deal"].¹²⁴ Michelle M. Sauer illustrates the nature of guilds. She explains that "the artisan class demonstrated control of other men through the subjection of apprentices and journeymen."¹²⁵ The hierarchy consisted of masters, journeymen, and apprentices. Masters had the highest skill, and controlled their own shops. Apprentices were completely dependent upon the masters as they worked and learned from the master. Isumbras, in working the bellows, is doing the lowest of jobs, making him an apprentice. He does hard labor as an apprentice, and "Be than couth he make a fyre; / They gaffe hym than mans hyre; / He wroght more than other two" [when he could make a fire, they gave him a man's wages; he worked harder than two].¹²⁶ Isumbras gains a reputation, and Sauer points to the importance of reputations within the guild system, as "guilds 'advertised' via reputation."¹²⁷ Here, Isumbras is distinguished from other blacksmiths, as he is able to do the work of two men. Importantly, Isumbras gains a new descriptor in this

¹²⁴ *SI*, 403-405.

¹²⁵ Sauer, *Gender*, 141.

¹²⁶ *SI*, 412-414.

¹²⁷ Sauer, *Gender*, 142.

episode, as the narrator calls him “a smythes man” [a blacksmith].¹²⁸ For seven years, Isumbras labors until he is able to create “all maner of armour for a knyght / To warre when he schuld goo” [all manner of armor for a knight to go to war when he should].¹²⁹ As mastery is inherent in masculinity, Isumbras asserts his artisan masculinity through the masterful creation.

However, Isumbras does not establish himself as a master blacksmith, and I would advance that this is partly due to the subservience he undergoes. As previously stated, the artisan class asserted his dominance through the subjection of journeymen and apprentices. That Isumbras is able to create his armor speaks to the skill that he has gained, which would place Isumbras as a journeyman. Sauer explains that “journeymen fell in-between these well-defined roles [of master and apprentice], although they were subservient to masters” even while “many were skilled in their own right.”¹³⁰ With the blacksmiths, although Isumbras is skilled, he is still dependent on the guild.

Sauer illuminates the importance of guilds in medieval society. She explains that “guilds were the most significant economic movement in medieval culture” and additionally “were central in urban life in England, although distinctly important to society as a whole.”¹³¹ Through acquiring a guild masculinity, Isumbras gains important knowledge in dealing with a highly important aspect of society. I would contend that Isumbras is gaining the necessary knowledge to lead his society when he becomes king.

¹²⁸ *SI*, 415.

¹²⁹ *SI*, 419-420.

¹³⁰ Sauer, *Gender*, 139.

¹³¹ Sauer, *Gender*, 135.

It is necessary for Isumbras to leave the guild once he has gained all that he can from that aspect of society. Importantly, the narrator explains that

All that tyme, I understonde,
The Sowdan werred on Chrysten lond
And struyd it full wyde.
The Crsten kinge fled so longe,
And gedered folk full strong
The Sarysens to abyde.

[All that time, I understand, the Sultan warred on Christian land and ravaged it full wide. The Christian king travelled long, and gathered strong folk to meet the Saracens in battle.]¹³²

While Isumbras has been gaining his artisan masculinity and literally building the tools for a chivalric masculinity, the masculinity of all Christians is threatened. The Saracens emasculate Christians through their victories which allow them to further penetrate the feminine landscape. The Christian king and his entire army have so far failed to stem the invasion, and have indeed “fled” in the face of the enemy. On the day of the battle, Isumbras actively seeks to aid the Christian side, and “Upon a sted he was brought, / To batell gon he ryde” [Upon a steed [that] to him was brought, to battle he began to ride].¹³³ Substantially, Isumbras is reunited with a horse, the clearest symbol of a knight’s masculinity. Symbolically, at this point at least, Isumbras has acquired a chivalric masculinity. However, this is a different masculinity than his initial knighthood, as he is now particularly active.

This chivalric masculinity differs from Isumbras’s former identity, moreover, in the fact that he pays homage to God before joining the battle. Correctly, “he sette hym

¹³² *SI*, 421-426.

¹³³ *SI*, 431-432.

doune upon hys kne; / To Jhesu Cryste prayd he” [He set himself down upon his knee; to Jesus Christ he prayed].¹³⁴ In this act of proper submission, Isumbras is placing his complete faith in God. As a result,

The knyghtys herte was full gode,
And forth he rode with herdy mode:
To fyght he was fulle fyne.
For no wepyn wold he stynte;
There lyved non that bure his dynte,
Tyll his hors was sleyne.

[The knight’s heart was courageous, and forth he rode with a steadfast spirit: to fight he was eager. For no weapon would he [be stopped]; none lived who felt his blows, until his horse was slain.]¹³⁵

For the first time, the audience is given a connection between the descriptor of Isumbras as a knight and good behavior. Importantly, Isumbras fights until his horse is slain, but quickly seeks out the Christian leadership and is given another steed. I would assert that Isumbras displays proper feudal submission to the Christian king, as the reciprocal nature in the exchange of armed might for horses shows that Isumbras is beginning to gain a new correct chivalric masculinity. Furthermore, the symbolic connection between horses and Isumbras’s prowess continues as “He prykyd forth as sperke on glede / When he was horsyd one a stede” [He attacked forward as spark in fire when he was riding a horse].¹³⁶ His active prowess and utter dominance over the Saracen enemy clearly establish his masculinity, as well as the fact that he “prykyd” forth. He is a pointed object that punctures, a clear phallic symbol of Isumbras’s masculine power.

¹³⁴ *SI*, 439-440.

¹³⁵ *SI*, 445-450.

¹³⁶ *SI*, 457-459.

Not only does Isumbras perform the newly constructed chivalric masculinity is riding the horse, but also he dominates the Saracens through killing *their* horses, as “Hors and man doune he bare” [horse and man down he brought].¹³⁷ This act of killing horses demonstrates Miller’s notion that “Attacking another man’s horse constituted violence directed at the animal’s rider or owner as much as at the living, feeling, property itself.”¹³⁸ Isumbras symbolically attacks the masculinity of the Saracens, and triumphs in each kill. It is also important that “He rode upp to a mounteyn; / Ther the Souden was islayn / And all that with hym ware” [He rode up to a mountain; there the Sultan was slain and all that were with him].¹³⁹ This scene recalls Bercilak, who similarly attacked his enemy in rage.¹⁴⁰ Isumbras’s masculinity is fully established, as he kills the Sultan atop a horse. The concise nature of these lines emphasize the validation of this masculinity, as the Sultan cannot compare in the slightest to Isumbras.

His performance of chivalric masculinity continues even further, for “Syr Isombras” continues to fight for three days and nights.¹⁴¹ Significantly, the use of Isumbras’s name coincides with the fact that “Ther wane he the gree” [There he won the battle].¹⁴² Not only is his accomplishment acknowledged by the narrator and the audience, but also by the other Christian knights, as

Than the Crystynd were full feyn
When the Saryzens were sleyne;
They made game and glee.

¹³⁷ *SI*, 465.

¹³⁸ Miller, “Tails,” 970.

¹³⁹ *SI*, 466-468.

¹⁴⁰ From the fourteenth-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; Bercilak was transformed into the Green Knight by Morgan le Fay.

¹⁴¹ *SI*, 470.

¹⁴² *SI*, 471.

They askyd, “Were is that knyght
That was so doughty and wyght?
Well feyn we wold hym se.
He is a man of mych mycht,
And doughty bare hym in the fyght;
We knew non sych as he.”

[Then the Christians were joyful when the Saracens were slain; they made game and glee. They asked, “Where is that knight that was so doughty and brave? Gladly we would see him. He is a man of much might, and doughtily he bore himself in the fight; we know none such as he.”]¹⁴³

Recalling Aquinas’s assertion that only others can give honor, it is significant that Isumbras is socially recognized as a knight, which is further validated through the exemplary nature of his masculinity. That he is repeatedly referred to as “doughty” emphasizes his important role in the battle; it was not coincidence that brought the Christians victory. Isumbras is further set apart by the Christian knights in their acknowledgement that they “knew non sych as he.” Isumbras has proven himself in competition not only against the Saracens, but also against other Christian knights. That Isumbras is given credit for the victory validates this exemplary masculinity further, as Isumbras has singlehandedly done what the Christian king and his army could not do. Isumbras has truly become “Syr Isombras,” a true knight through acts of submission to God and to the Christian king during battle as well as proving himself in battle and being socially validated by other Christian knights.

However, just like his artisan identity, this chivalric masculinity is not permanent. Aquinas notes that humility “excludes the seeking of glory,” and when brought before the king, Isumbras chooses to identify himself as “a smythes man,” and the king decrees that

¹⁴³ *SI*, 472-480.

he will dub Isumbras a knight if he recovers from his battle wounds.¹⁴⁴ Here, the king portrays secular power, but Isumbras rejects becoming enfolded into the king's army. Again, perhaps he remains outside of this group because of the subjugation that is inherent in feudal relationships. He would be dependent upon the king, as well as being subservient to him, when he should instead be focusing on being subservient to God. Whatever the motivation, it is the correct choice, as we are told that "Godys wyll it was" [it was God's will].¹⁴⁵ Significantly, the narrator reminds the reader of the masculinities that Isumbras has already gained, as "The knyght ordeyned hym scrype and pyke, / And made all palmer like" [The knight gathered bag and stick, and dressed like a palmer (pilgrim)].¹⁴⁶ The role of the clothing signifies that Isumbras has again assumed a new identity, one of pious masculinity. Susan Crane explains that because the body is costumed, it is "clothing, not skin, [that] is the frontier of the self."¹⁴⁷ Assuming the garb of a palmer, Isumbras is displaying this new masculinity, and reminds the reader of his pious action in carving the cross onto his body. Joyce Salisbury notes that "male nakedness represented extraordinary spiritual strength as well as physical strength."¹⁴⁸ This cross is then an irreversible symbol of his spiritual strength. Now his outer appearance will reflect his inner devotion to God.

Upon entering the kingdom in which his wife has been ruling in the many years of Isumbras's isolation, the audience learns that she has prospered as queen. Isumbras first learns of her indirectly, as he was told that she "was a lady feyre and schene. / The word

¹⁴⁴ *SI*, 485.

¹⁴⁵ *SI*, 519.

¹⁴⁶ *SI*, 508-509.

¹⁴⁷ Crane, *Performance*, 6.

¹⁴⁸ Salisbury, "Gendered Sexuality," 86.

of hyr wyd yode, / Tath iche dey gaff at hyr gate, / For Godys love, who wold it take”
[was a lady who was bright and beautiful. The word of her widely went that each day she
gave alms at her gate, for the love of God, to those who would take it].¹⁴⁹ In her actions,
she upholds and extends the masculinity of Isumbras as his wife. The queen has earned a
good reputation, and it is significant that she has earned it through charity. In this, she is
acting as a physician of Isumbras’s piety, and establishes Isumbras’s authority when he
assumes the throne.

Upon becoming king, he assumes his final identity. In this, all of the new
masculinities he has earned in his penance are subsumed into his masculinity as king. It is
this compound masculinity that gives Isumbras the authority to rule. His correct chivalric
masculinity helps him assert and establish his new power, as he immediately “made crye
in borowys bold, / Riche and pore, yong and olde, / That they schuld crystend be”
[decreed in the bold town, to the riche and poor, young and old, that they were to convert
to Christianity].¹⁵⁰ In this act, he is asserting pious masculinity in Christianizing the
country, extending the power of the pre-Reformation church. Importantly, this is an
ultimatum, as “thei that wold not do so, / There schall nothing for them go, / Nother gold
ne fee” [[for] those that would not convert, nothing would help them, neither gold nor
fee].¹⁵¹ Isumbras resists the earlier temptation of “gold and fee” in rejecting it as a way
for the Saracens to still remain in the realm. These nonbelievers cannot buy their way into
remaining in his land.

¹⁴⁹ *SI*, 569-572.

¹⁵⁰ *SI*, 718-720.

¹⁵¹ *SI*, 721-723.

This authority is tested in battle, in which Isumbras is vastly outnumbered, as he “had no man with hym to fare” [had no one to fight with him].¹⁵² However, this serves to strengthen his masculinity, as it offers the opportunity of correct submission to God. He prepares himself for martyrdom, and is rewarded in miraculous intervention. As he and his wife stand “ageyn thirti thousand and mo” [against thirty thousand and more], their lost sons return.¹⁵³ The story takes this a step further, as “in angellys wed thei were clade, / And an angett them to batell lede / That semly was to see” [in angel’s clothes they were clad, and an angel led them to battle that was beautiful to see].¹⁵⁴ This description of the angel’s appearance as beautiful, as well as the fact that the sons were dressed like angels, reinforces the role of physiognomy throughout the poem.

This divine intervention highlights the just nature that Isumbras has now attained. Through proper adherence to the compound masculinity that he has acquired, he is directly aided by God. This aid does not go unnoticed, as Isumbras immediately “thankyd God many a sythe / And on hys kneys he hym sette” [thanks God many times and fell on his knees].¹⁵⁵ The family continues to uphold Christianity in their lands, and even extends its authority even further, as “Sone thre londys gon they wyn / And stablyd Crysten men therinne” [soon they won three lands, and established Christian men therein].¹⁵⁶ Isumbras continues his public reproduction, and in this act of conquering and Christianizing lands

¹⁵² *SI*, 746.

¹⁵³ *SI*, 766.

¹⁵⁴ *SI*, 775-777.

¹⁵⁵ *SI*, 789-790.

¹⁵⁶ *SI*, 811-812.

that he becomes “more better than ever he was” [better than he ever was].¹⁵⁷ He has surpassed his former identity, but so too has he surpassed his former masculinity.

His position as king is even more significant in light of the fact that that a king plays all of the roles in society, but stands apart in that he is always only a lord. Everyone else his community has the potential to be a lord and a vassal, but everyone else will always be a vassal to the king. The only superior power to Isumbras now is God, and Isumbras is God’s representative in secular power. The ideal king would have this compound masculinity; he would be chivalric, understand and respect artisans, and also marry and reproduce. It is for the benefit of the entire kingdom that the king has a correct, and in this case compound, masculinity, as the king leads the nation by example.

Conclusion

Contrary to the work of some scholars, I assert that Isumbras completely loses his identity. None of his former characteristics remain throughout the poem, as each of these characteristics is tied to his sin of pride. Rather, he must lose everything—his status, his wealth, his family, and ultimately his masculinity—in order to gain the proper behavior necessary to regain position. His former masculinity serves to demonstrate that a man can have an incorrect masculinity, but the suffering Isumbras undergoes demonstrates that this is a masculinity that is not desired. By the end of the poem, not only has he regained social position, but also this position as king far surpasses his previous identity as landowning knight. So it is necessary for Isumbras to construct and learn new masculinities that make him fit to rule, as each teaches him the necessary aspects of each part of society. In his artisan masculinity, he learns the characteristics of hard labor, and

¹⁵⁷ *SI*, 815.

reforges his chivalric masculinity through the creation of his armor. His chivalric masculinity, too, is one of significant action, as he takes part in wars that uphold and extend Christianity. This makes Isumbras's masculinity a compound one, as he is a much better ruler because of the knowledge that he has gained. The compound nature of his masculinity emphasizes action, which in comparison highlights the incorrect masculinity of his former identity, which was one of idleness.

Importantly, Isumbras regains these masculinities in isolation. His former social identity and the sin of pride that fostered it is too much a temptation for Isumbras. He must first regain personal salvation before he is able to wield social power. Through this, the poem highlights the contemporary English concern with the spirituality of its leaders. He must correctly serve God in order to gain His assistance, and it is only this assistance that enables Isumbras to maintain his newly constructed masculinity.

CHAPTER V

CONSTANT MASCULINITY: LORDSHIP IN *EL LIBRO DEL CABALLERO ZIFAR*

The titular character of *El Libro del Caballero Zifar* [*The Book of the Knight Zifar*] deals far more with unruly vassals than he does with enemy Saracens. While religious concerns are intertwined, the *Zifar* is much more a tale of a noble knight and his family. *Sir Isumbras*, on the other hand, focuses on its character's salvation, while Zifar does not need spiritual purification, but rather secular purification.

I would argue that the masculinity espoused in the *Libro* is inherently more stable due to the constant threats of enemies. After all, while Zifar is dispossessed knight, he still is the Knight of God. In contemporary Spain, this would be the long sporadic fight of the Reconquista, which served religious aims of a united Christian Spain. As the Knight of God, Zifar is the perfect representative of both secular and clerical issues. However, Zifar's masculine identity hinges on his wisdom. It is this wisdom that allows him to be a worthy knight and pious ruler. Zifar, through his correct action, restores the family to a permanent position of rulership. The interplay throughout the *Zifar* is one of correct responses to the social ritual of chivalry. Continually, one party does not fulfill his part in the social ritual, and Zifar must continually respond correctly regardless of how he is treated. In this way, he upholds his masculinity through great trials, establishes that

masculinity through finally attaining his rightful position, and then sets the stage for his sons to extend that masculinity. As discussed in my background chapter, medieval Spain was highly inconstant. Through multiple encroachments, Spain is always fighting for its own imperial identity. It is therefore crucial that Zifar display a constant masculinity in order to bring stability in his travels. In this way, Zifar shares important similarities with Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (1043 – 1099), better known as “the Cid,” and acts as a representative of the Reconquest.

James F. Burke explains the medieval understanding of human consciousness was heavily dependent upon the senses, as “God granted to each individual a soul and imprinted there certain attributes,” though these attributes could only be of use by means of the “inward wits.”¹⁵⁸ The sense that supplied the most important information was sight, by which “existence in the Middle Ages is a process understood largely (but not completely) in terms of the visual.”¹⁵⁹ However, this was not a passive process, but rather was an interplay between subject and object. Though Burke gives a wonderful examination of the development of subjectivity, he does not discuss its importance in terms of one’s gender. This gaze is inherently masculine, as the viewer penetrates the object with the gaze; and to be active is to be masculine. Though there is a danger in being feminized through the gaze, for in the process of viewing, the viewer’s mind is also penetrated with the object.

¹⁵⁸ James F. Burke, “The *Libro del Cavallero Zifar* and the Fashioning of the Self,” in *Corónica: A Journal Of Medieval Spanish Language And Literature* 27.3 (1999): 35-44; at 37.

¹⁵⁹ Burke, “Self Fashioning,” 38.

This discussion of sense of sight's role in the formation of subjectivity in medieval Spain is especially important in terms of chivalry. Chivalry as a social class, as many historians have noted, served to uphold the supremacy of the noble class as well as harness the potential violence of armed youth toward more laudable aims. It also served as a means to set the knight apart in society, for in medieval Spain, "the nobility developed a gradual awareness of their distinctive character formed by the common bond of knighthood."¹⁶⁰ However, to uphold chivalry, the young man had to be more than of noble blood; he must also be loyal, brave, pious, generous, and wise. O'Callaghan points to the importance of deeds in medieval culture, as it allowed an opportunity for socially recognized and ritualized forms of social mobility, as "a young man who distinguished himself on the battlefield might be knighted at once."¹⁶¹ Simon Barton explains the way in which medieval Spain adopted the ethos of chivalry because it epitomizes the "cult of the noble self-image." He elucidates that "aristocratic families in the Christian areas of the peninsula gradually began to embrace elements of the new ethic of aristocracy, or knighthood" from the second half of the twelfth century.¹⁶² Barton examines the *Poem of Almería*, which he notes is known for what it can tell modern audiences about medieval Spain.¹⁶³ The model aristocrat "is portrayed as being of illustrious lineage, handsome and strong, wealthy and generous, brave in the face of the enemy, and skilled on the

¹⁶⁰ Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain*, Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 2003, at 127.

¹⁶¹ O'Callaghan, *Reconquest*, 127.

¹⁶² Simon Barton, "The 'Discovery of Aristocracy' in Twelfth Century Spain: Portraits of the Secular Élite in the *Poem of Almería*," in *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 83.6 (2006): 453-468; at 456.

¹⁶³ The *Poem of Almería*, a twelfth century poem composed in Latin. The poem praises the magnates of Alfonso VII (1105-1157) as well as espouses noble qualities.

battlefield.”¹⁶⁴ These noble characteristics, however, all hinge on the masculinity of the noblemen. By the fourteenth century, “aristocracy became a matter of self-conscious expression,” as proper noblemen “looked, acted, and sounded the part.”¹⁶⁵ True chivalric noblemen were supposed to be recognized on sight.

Jesús D. Rodríguez-Velasco highlights chivalry’s significance in its role as a well-defined sociopolitical role. Chivalry as an *ordo*, a self-contained social group, “is a political and social apparatus where every locus of action or cultural practice is theoretically defined.”¹⁶⁶ This strictly defined group was predicated on ritual, which “established relations of power and constructed their own concept of authority through ceremonial events.”¹⁶⁷ This has important consequences in terms of masculinity, through the ritual’s role in establishing relations of power, and recalls Aquinas’s belief that external rituals were necessary in the giving of honor. Indeed, rituals “defined the systems of domination and subjection of an institution, a society, or an other collective entity.” By extension, rituals define the system of masculinity. This social ethic and the way in which it was played out in rituals was represented in the literature as well. Rodríguez-Velasco classifies a tale in which knighthood is presented as “a vehicle for the transformation of authority” as a “chivalric fable.”¹⁶⁸ He explains that “the chivalric fable conveys the hope that through a series of diversely codified political and moral acts, the subject can achieve social recognition and assume jurisdictional authority.” So correct

¹⁶⁴ Barton, “Discovery,” 464-5.

¹⁶⁵ Barton, “Discovery,” 465 and 463.

¹⁶⁶ Jesús D. Rodríguez-Velasco, *Order and Chivalry: Knighthood and Citizenship in Late Medieval Castile*, Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 2010, at 8.

¹⁶⁷ Rodríguez-Velasco, *Order and Chivalry*, 15.

¹⁶⁸ Rodríguez-Velasco, *Order and Chivalry*, 5.

adherence to social ritual can allow the subject to gain masculinity. The *Zifar* is a perfect example of this.

I will demonstrate that Zifar maintains his masculinity through his trials, though it is threatened. However, the constant threats serve to highlight the consistency of Zifar's masculinity. Because competition is inherent in defining chivalry and masculinity, the community plays a central role as it allows for the comparison of Zifar and other worthy knights. For chivalry, the community is the arena in which to test and define the proper relationship between a vassal and lord. Especially important for the communities in which Zifar travels is the fact that these communities are feminized: he encounters communities that are being invaded, with leaders that are powerless to stop the penetration of the enemy. He brings stability to unstable nations. As a proper leader, Zifar reestablishes the masculinity of the communities for which he fights the entire time he is reestablishing the masculinity of his family line. At the center of this masculinity is his good native sense, which allows him to know the proper rituals in all areas of social life and also serves to reject femininity.

Zifar's Masculinity

As stated, *El Libro del Caballero Zifar*, while sharing a Man Tried by Fate hermeneutic, reflects a higher concern with secular matters. The narrator emphasizes the secular nature of the story when he tells the audience that “el rey de los christianos dízenle el rey de los barraganes, muy esforçadas e más aprersonados e más apuestos en su cavalgar que otros omes” [the king of the Christians is called the king of courtiers because they are more courtly than all the others, of great prowess, more genteel, and

more elegant on horseback than other men].¹⁶⁹ This emphasis on pre-Reformation Christianity's role in chivalry introduces the reader to the link with Zifar's piety: he is a good Christian because he is a good knight. The qualities described of a Christian king are also inherently masculine due to their ability to be elegant on horseback. This introduces the audience to the important role horses will play in the story.

Knights in Spanish society "were expected to be courageous, experienced in military matters, endowed with good judgement and a sense of loyalty, and capable of evaluating horses and arms."¹⁷⁰ This definition of knighthood is not exclusive to Spain, and it is notable that England shared this view of knighthood. However, the Spanish notion of chivalry is distinct in its focus on vassalage, as feudalism was far more established in Spain than in England. This importance on vassalage serves to highlight the importance of correct action in the social ritual of chivalry. While Joseph F. O'Callaghan is speaking of the general view Spanish society held towards knights, he is interestingly perfectly describing Zifar. The author's first description to Zifar is of nothing but praise:

Dize el cuento que este cavallero Zifar fue buen cavallero de armas e de muy sano consejo a quien gelo de mandava, e de grant justiçia quando le acomendavan alguna cosa do la oviese de fazer, e de grant esfuerço, non se mudando nin orgullesçiendo por las buenas andanças, nin desesperando por las desaventuras fuertes quando le sobrevenían; e sienpre dezía verdat e non mentirea quando alguna demanda le fazían. E esto fazía con buen seso natural que Dios posiera en él.

[The story relates that this Knight Zifar was a great warrior who gave very wise counsel to whoever asked him for it, and he was always willing to do whatever had to be done when it was asked of him. He was of great valor, never changing

¹⁶⁹ Muela, Joaquín González, ed, *Libro Del Caballero Zifar*, Madrid: Castalia, 1982, 51-435, at 81. Hereafter referenced as *Zifar*.

¹⁷⁰ O'Callaghan, *Reconquest*, 127.

his character and taking pride in his successful feats of arms and never despairing over misfortunes when they occurred. He always told the truth and never lied when some request was made of him, and this he did with the good common sense that God had given him.]¹⁷¹

There can be no question of Zifar's masculinity. Importantly, this description lacks physical qualities, unlike the initial description of Isumbras. It is rather a description of his *deeds*, of his martial prowess that has sustained his position in society. Through this, emphasis is placed on Zifar's *active masculinity*, and foils the static nature of Isumbras's initial masculinity. Not only is Zifar a great warrior, but also he is rational and able to give wise counsel. Through this wise counsel, he rejects femininity, and significantly never changes his character. This characteristic is especially important for the repeated threats that will attempt to damage his masculinity, as will be discussed throughout this chapter. However, in this description, Zifar is already the ideal knight.

The mention of his constancy in wisdom and action, as well as his unwavering martial value compared to his low social station signifies that Zifar seeks justice, which Aquinas defines as "the perpetual and constant will to render to each one his right."¹⁷² The role of the will in justice is particularly important "in order to show that the act of justice must be voluntary; and mention is made afterwards of its 'constancy' and 'perpetuity' in order to indicate the firmness of the act." As a result, Zifar's continual desire to reinstate the family to position is merely one act of justice that Zifar will seek throughout the tale.

¹⁷¹ Zifar, 60.

¹⁷² Aquinas, *Summa*, 1911.

Zifar *should* be a powerful lord, but he is only a knight to a king so long as the expense of keeping him as a knight is equaled by the value that Zifar brings to the king; this value rests in the honor and victory that Zifar brings, along with his wise counsel. He is even a descendent of a king, so he has royal blood to match his noble qualities. His tenuous position is due to a family flaw, through his ancestor Tared whose wickedness lead to his deposition. This secret also introduces the important aspect of social mobility, as “que fuera despuesto e que feziera rey a un cavallero simple pero que era muy buen ome e de buen seso natural e amador de la justiciã e conplido de todas buenas constunbres” [the king was deposed and they made a knight the king, who though simple was a very good man of good natural sense and was a lover a justice and a gentlemen in all ways].¹⁷³ Zifar’s grandfather explains, in the telling of the family secret, that “Çiertas, con grant fuerça de maldat se desfaze e con grant fuerça de bondat e de buenas constunbres se faze; e esta maldat o esta bondat viene tan bien de parte de aquel que es o á de ser rey, como de aquellos que la desfazen o lo fazen” [by the strength of goodness and fine qualities a man can become a king. This evil or virtue lives within the one who is king or who is to be a king as well as within those who depose or make him].¹⁷⁴ It does not take special qualifications to be a king; of the utmost importance, rather, is that the king is personally responsible for his actions. Additionally, we learn from Aquinas that “virtue is a habit of choosing according to right reason.”¹⁷⁵ Thus virtue relates closely to masculinity through the emphasis on reason; that Zifar’s ancestor was so far outside of reason as to be deposed expresses a deep threat to the masculinity of the entire lineage.

¹⁷³ Zifar, 77.

¹⁷⁴ Zifar, 77.

¹⁷⁵ Aquinas, *Summa*, 3387.

The above description is especially important in light of Zifar's personal fatal flaw: every single horse he rides drops dead after ten days. Horses were vastly important to Spanish society, and O'Callaghan points to thirteenth-century laws "prohibiting the export of horses" that displays the priority placed upon them, as well as their scarcity.¹⁷⁶ More than that, they played a key role in social mobility: in the distribution of booty taken in raids against Muslims in contemporary Spain, a "footsoldier who captured a horse and became a mounted warrior altered his situation permanently."¹⁷⁷ So the fact that Zifar, though much more than a competent knight, cannot remain a mounted warrior severely threatens his masculinity.

David Arbesú demonstrates the significant role the horses play in terms of Zifar's social identity, as "estaría directamente relacionada con la pérdida del linaje, la nobleza adquirida mediante la virtud y, especialmente, al árbol genealógico del caballero" [it was directly related to the loss of heritage, nobility acquired through virtue, and, especially, the family line of the knight].¹⁷⁸ Legal codes of the Middle Ages, specifically the *Siete Partidas* of Alfonso X corroborate the link between loss of a horse and loss of position, as the former lead to the loss of "honrra de la caulleria" [honor of the knight].¹⁷⁹ However, the initial description of Zifar leads the audience to know that Zifar is more than worth the cost. That all of these qualities uphold his masculinity, even with this flaw,

¹⁷⁶ O'Callaghan, *Reconquest*, 132.

¹⁷⁷ O'Callaghan, *Reconquest*, 146.

¹⁷⁸ David Arbesú, "La Muerte de los Caballos en el Zifar y el Debate sobre la Nobleza," in *Corónica: A Journal of Medieval Spanish Language and Literature* 35.1 (2006): 3-22; at 3.

¹⁷⁹ *Siete Partidas*, Partida II, Título XXI, Ley XXV.

demonstrates his worth. The main conflict is that other men cannot reach the same position of virtue.

His fall from position, then, is significantly due to the ill will of the king's other vassals, who are "not as good of knights as him" as well as the unwise rulership of his king. The second *partida* of the *Siete Partidas* is mainly concerned with rulership, and advises kings that "así como los miembros hacen al hombre hermoso y apuesto, y se ayuda de ellos, otrosí los hombres honrados hacen el reino noble y apuesto, y ayudan al rey a defenderlo y acrecentarlo" [just as his members make the man handsome and dapper, and are helped by him, then the honored men make the king noble and handsome, and help the king defend and increase [his land]].¹⁸⁰ This guideline showcases the inherent reciprocity between vassal and lord in the feudal system that is necessary for the maintenance of secular power. Additionally, it is significant that the lord is made handsome through correct action, in terms of physiognomy.

Zifar's first king is set up as an unacceptable ruler, as the necessary reciprocity is revoked. Initially, "amávale el rey de aquella tierra cuyo vasallo era e de quien tenía grant soldad e bienfecho de cada día" [the king of that country, whose vassal he was and from whom he received great pay and benefits each day, was fond of him].¹⁸¹ To counter the cost of retaining a knight whose horse would always die, the king "envíalo en aquellos lugares do entendía que mester erea más fecho de cavallería" [sent him to places where

¹⁸⁰ 44.

¹⁸¹ *Libro*, 60.

need counted for more than horses].¹⁸² This positive display of leadership leads the narrator to suggest that

todo grant señor deve onrar e mantener e guardar al cavallero que tales dones puso como en éste, e si alguna batalla oviere a entrar, deve enbiar por él e atenderlo, ca por un cavallero bueno se fazen grandes batalleas, mayormente en quien Dios quiso mostrar muy grandes dones de cavallería

[every great lord should honor and retain and guard a knight who has such qualities as this one, and if some battle occurs, he should send for him and attend his needs, for by a good knight great battles are won, especially one in whom God has chosen to show such great traits of chivalry].¹⁸³

The narrator, in advising a lord to honor, maintain, and guard a knight such as Zifar, displays the important of the reciprocal nature of the relationship between a lord and his vassal. Zifar has most likely seriously risked his life many times in service to this king, as is indicated by his assignments being in places where need outweighed the cost of horses, so it is only right that he should be continually retained.

However, it must be noted that Zifar's exile is the result of envious and deficient counselors. These counselors display a noted lack of masculinity in their envy. This envy lays in the fact that "a quien Dios non quisiera dar fecho de armas acabadamente así como al cavallero Zifar" [God had not aided them as fully in feats of arms as He did the Knight Zifar].¹⁸⁴ In effect, these men are displeased that they have not received the same aid as Zifar. The narrator further condemns these men as

non parando mientes los mesquinos cómo Dios quisiera dotar al cavallero Zifar de sus grandes dones e nobles señaladamente de buen seso natural e de verdat e de lealtad e de armas e de justiçia e de buen consejo, en manera que do él se ençerrava con çient cavalleros conplía más e fazía más onra del rey e buen pres de

¹⁸² *Zifar*, 61.

¹⁸³ *Zifar*,

¹⁸⁴ *Zifar*, 60.

ellos que mill cavalleros otros quando los enbiava el rey a su servicio a otras partes, non aviendo ninguno estos bienes que Dios en el cavallero Zifar puseria.

[these wretches paid no heed to how God had endowed the Knight Zifar with great and noble qualities, especially prudence, truth, loyalty, prowess, fairness, and wise counsel, so that where he was surrounded by one hundred knights, he accomplished more and gained more honor for the king and more honor to them than any other thousand knights when the king sent them in his service to other places, for these knights lacked the qualities with which God had so endowed the Knight Zifar.]

The condemnation serves to uphold Zifar's masculinity upon comparison to the envious counselors. These men are not prudent, truthful, loyal, fair. They do not give good counsel nor do they display prowess. It is significant that the unwise counselors' actions are described in the negative, in what they *aren't* doing. These men are static, and resemble the initial incorrect Isumbras. In fact, they are further feminized through their unwise counsel, which serves to highlight Zifar's rejection of the feminine quality of being opposed to reason. Zifar's masculinity is therefore best through this rejection. Prudence has close ties to rationality, for Aquinas defines the term as "right reason applied to action."¹⁸⁵ Additionally, Zifar can accomplish the same feats as a thousand men, highlighting his activity. However, the most important part of this description is that it highlights the irrationality of the counselors. They *paid no heed*, even to how Zifar brought *honor to them*, which demonstrates their choice in their actions.

With this in mind, the audience is lead back to the *irrational choice* of the king in taking their advice. Unwise kings "dexando la verdat por la mentira e la lisonja. Así como contesçió a este rey, que veyendo la su onra e el su pro ante los sus ojos, por proeva de la bondat de este cavallero Zifar, menospreciándolo todo por meido de la consta"

¹⁸⁵ Aquinas, *Summa*, 2586.

[leave the truth behind and adhere to lies and flattery. Just as this king did who, *seeing* the honor and benefit that had come to him through the good works of the Knight Zifar *before his eyes, scorned* it all through fear of the expense]. The king is personally responsible, as he knew how useful Zifar was, but *chose* to scorn his proper obligation. Considering that human consciousness and existence were understood through the sight, the fact that the king has observed with his own eyes the honor that Zifar brings to the kingdom makes the betrayal all the more significant. As a result of these actions, the king falls to defeat and loses cities.

So while this exile is a powerful threat to his masculinity, Zifar does not completely lose it. To be irrational is to be feminine, and Zifar is far from irrational. It is necessary to reject femininity because that is what is appropriate for Zifar, whereas Isumbras could accept femininity because he must learn to submit to God. Zifar's response to being scorned is highly rational, as he states that "e pues la mi conçeçia non me acusa, la verdat me deve salvar; e con grant fuzia que en ella he non abré miedo e iré con lo que començé cabo adelante e non dexaré mi propósito començado" [since my conscience is clear, the truth must save me; and with the great trust that I have in it, I will not be afraid and will carry out what I have commenced and will not cease to do what I have started].¹⁸⁶ Aquinas notes that "since God cannot be deceived, His glory is always true; hence it is written 'He...is approved...whom God commendeth.'"¹⁸⁷ Zifar is the Knight of God, so his moniker signifies that he has God for his companion. Moreover, this quotation cogently highlights the comparison between Zifar and the men who sought

¹⁸⁶ *Zifar*, 62.

¹⁸⁷ Aquinas, *Summa*, 787.

his downfall. Those men are shameful cowards, whereas Zifar, with his rationality, is far more masculine in comparison. Moreover, in this description, Zifar holds true to his initial description: he never despairs when misfortune occurs. His assertion to finish the quest of social reinstatement for the family line highlights his pragmatic nature in that he knows he can no longer strive for honor in this land. Rather than wallow in poverty, Zifar acts.

This initial encounter with a bad king with unworthy counselors sets the stage for the family's departure for more promising lands. It is significant that Zifar continues to represent chivalric characteristics, and in the outset of his journey he displays generosity, as "e unas casas que avían fezieron de ellas un ospital e dexaron toda su ropa en que yoguiesen los pobres" [they made a hospital of their home and left all of their clothing on which the poor could lie]. They choose to leave their home, but they do not leave it abandoned. Rather, they are still in a position to sell what property they can while the rest is still useful for others. Moreover, he is correctly choosing to follow God's guiding since he unable to act further in that land.

Zifar's consistency of action continues even in the face of losing his family. This is a potential blow to his masculinity, and when both of his sons are lost, his response is to acknowledge that "nuestro señor Dios derramarnos quiere, e sea bendito su nonbre por ende" [our Lord wants us scattered, and so may his name be blessed].¹⁸⁸ Again, when his wife is taken, his trust in God remains unshaken. For though "Quando el buen cavallero Zifar se vio así desanparado de las cosas de este mundo que él más quería" [When the good knight Zifar saw the he was thus forsaken of the things he loved most in this world],

¹⁸⁸ *Zifar*, 115.

his response is only resolve.¹⁸⁹ He patiently states that “si aún te plazze que mayores trabajos pase en este mundo, fas de mí a tu voluntad, ca aparajado estó de sufrir quequier que me venga” [if it pleases You that I should suffer great trials in this world, do unto me at Your will, and thus prepared, I can endure anything that happens to me].¹⁹⁰ This constancy is immediately rewarded through a heavenly voice that promises that “por quantas desaventuras te avenieron, que te vernán muchos plazerres e muchas alegrías e muchas onras. E non temas que has perdido la muger e los fijos, ca todo lo abrás a toda tu voluntad” [for as many trials that have occurred, there will come to you many as pleasures and as many honors. And do not fear that you have lost your wife and sons, for all will happen as you wish].¹⁹¹ Even though his masculinity has taken a blow through the loss of his family, it has not been completely eroded. Rather, it is sustained through the wise correct action.

In this, Zifar importantly differs from Isumbras. Zifar’s masculinity is not tied to his family the same way that Isumbras’s is. Isumbras’s family serves as a retainer of his former masculinity, and their identities are tainted by his sinful pride in earthly position. Zifar, on the other hand, has an established masculinity, and this loss serves to highlight his consistent nature even in the most trying of times.

Through his continual correct action across the communities he encounters, Zifar earns the descriptor “El Caballero de Dios” [The Knight of God]. I would argue that his final acts as the Knight of God in the kingdom of Mentón are the turning point in Zifar’s journey to secular recovery, in that there is no longer any mention of the death of horses

¹⁸⁹ *Zifar*, 119.

¹⁹⁰ *Zifar*, 118.

¹⁹¹ *Zifar*, 118.

after this point. Significantly, this is also when Zifar is publicly validated as the Knight of God by the King of Mentón. In his initial interactions in the realm of the King of Mentón, he presses for action against the king of Ester. The king's steward, who was sent to inquire on the king's behalf, appears doubtful, as previous attempts were unsuccessful. Zifar counters by stating "Non digo yo de los atrevidos, mas de los esforçados, ca grant departimiento ha entre atrevido e esforçado: ca el corronpimiento se faze con locura e el esfuerço con buen seso natural" [I am not talking about the reckless, but of the valiant, for there is a great difference between recklessness and prudence, for recklessness is committed through madness and calculated risks are taken through good native sense].¹⁹² This suggestion highlights Zifar's rationality and his rejection of femininity, for he is calling for calculated attempts to lift the siege. The steward is highly impressed by this rationale, and tells the king that Zifar "está a guisa de buen cavallero e ome de buen entendimiento, e semeja que sienpre andido en guerra e usó de cavallería, atan bien sabe departir todos los fechos que pertenesçen a guerra" [is acting in the manner of a competent knight and a man of wisdom. It seems that he has always participated in war and the practice of chivalry, for *he knows so well* how to explain all the maneuvers pertaining to war].¹⁹³ Zifar participates in the ritual of chivalry, and his masculine rationality shines through.

The reputation Zifar that has received is put to the test by the King of Mentón, as he tests the advice from Zifar against the advice he receives from his counselors. In stark contrast to the prudence of Zifar, when the counselors are asked to give advice, "E mal

¹⁹² *Zifar*, 162.

¹⁹³ *Zifar*, 162.

pecado, tales fueron ellos que non avían fabaldo en ello nin les veniera emiente” [Alas! They hadn’t spoken about it nor had it crossed their minds].¹⁹⁴ Zifar’s masculinity is here upheld against the unwise counselors who are not doing their duty in attempting to lift the siege.

The importance of the role of sight in knowing a man’s worth is highlighted in the king’s enactment of Zifar’s wise counsel. As Zifar advised, the king commands Zifar to choose the best five hundred knights from among his troops, and “E ellos feziéronlo así, e quales señalava el cavallero de Dios, tales escrivía el mayordomo, de guisa que escrivieron los merjores quinientos cavalleros de aquella cavallería” [As the Knight of God pointed them out, the steward wrote down their names, so that *the five hundred best* knights of the cavalry were listed].¹⁹⁵ Just by looking at the troops, Zifar is able to know the value of the knights, and thereby select the best among them. The knights that he chose visually represented their masculinity, and Zifar, being of good native sense, knew to choose the best.

The following battle scene is particularly violent, as “E castigó a los peones que non se metiesen ninguons a robar, mas a matar, tan bien cavallos como omes” [He instructed the infantry not to engage in looting, but to kill all the horses as well as the men, until God brought success to their enterprise] and fighting fiercely, “El cavallero de Dios metióse por la hueste con aquella gente, feriendo e matando muy de rezio” [The Knight of God engaged the enemy with his own forces, slashing and killing savagely]. This emphasis on killing men *and horses* reinforces the masculinity of Zifar and his

¹⁹⁴ *Zifar*, 163.

¹⁹⁵ *Zifar*, 163, my emphasis.

troops as the act feminizes the enemy. As a result, the enemy “non sabían qué fazer sinon guaresçer e irse derramados cada uno por su parte” [not knowing what to do, they took off, each man for himself].¹⁹⁶ The enemy is inconstant in their loyalty, which acts as a foil to Zifar’s consistent action that brings him victory.

In victory, a knight who fought with Zifar publicly tells that king that

“Señor, non has por qué gradesçer a ninguno este fecho sinon a Dios primeramente, e a un cavallero que nos dio tu mayordomo por que non guiásemos, que dezía que era su sobrino; que bien me semeja que del día en que nascí non vi un cavallero tan fermosos armado nin tan bien cavalgante en un cavallo nin tan buenos fechos feziere su gente como él esforçava a nos; ca quando una palabra nos dezía, semejávanos que esfuerço de Dios era verdaderamente; e dígotte, señor, verdaderamente, que en lugares nos fizo entrar con el su esfuerço que si do dos mill cavalleros toviere, non más atreverme ía a entrar”

[Sire, you do not have to be grateful to anyone for this accomplishment except primarily to God and to a knight whom your steward appointed to lead us. He said the knight was his nephew; and it truly seems that in all my life *I have never seen* a knight so handsomely armed nor so well suited to the saddle. *I have never seen* deeds of arms such as he won in this victory. He inspired his own people as he inspired us; for when he uttered his first word to us, it truly seemed the inspiration of God. I tell you, sire, in truth, he led us into places with his daring that if I had two thousand knights, I would not have dared to enter.]¹⁹⁷

Zifar’s reputation is publicly upheld, and this reputation is significantly centered on what others have observed. Emphasis is placed on the role of sight through the knight’s repetition of actually seeing Zifar’s deeds, and Zifar’s masculinity is described in comparison to other knights. His masculinity is best because he is the best of any knight. Significantly, it is because of Zifar that they were able to gain victory. Zifar’s masculinity is further reinforced in being well suited to the saddle. More importantly, however, is that

¹⁹⁶ *Zifar*, 163

¹⁹⁷ *Zifar*, 166.

these qualities make him an excellent leader, in that he leads by example: his deeds of arms inspired the others.

As the promised reward, the princess of Mentón is portrayed as a helpmate for Zifar. This is initially brought up in the king's discussion with his counts of marrying his daughter to Zifar. When questioned of the princess' desires, the king answers that "Çierto só lo que yo quisiere, mayormente en guarda de la mi verdat" [I am sure she wants what I want].¹⁹⁸ This quotation perfectly describes the subjectivity of the princess as being an extension of the most important male figure in her life, in this case her father. As a good, correctly obedient daughter, she would want only what her father would want, which would then extend to her husband.

When Zifar is called in to take part in the marriage discussion, the story relates of the social ritual enacted therein. For Zifar "entró de su paso, delante el mayordomo; ca el mayordomo por le fazer onra non quiso que veniese en pos él" [entered a pace before the steward, for the steward in order to honor him, allowed him to enter first].¹⁹⁹ This description hints at the social protocol of the members of the court; Zifar holds an important place of honor, though he is a newcomer. Zifar's masculine desirability is highlighted when he and the steward "ellos vinieron muy bien vestidos, e comoquier que el mayordomo era muy apuesto cavallero, toda la bondat le tollâ el cavallero de Dios" [entered elegantly dressed, and although the steward was a very handsome knight, the

¹⁹⁸ *Zifar*, 167.

¹⁹⁹ *Zifar*, 167.

Knight of God completely outshone him].²⁰⁰ His unparalleled physical attractiveness represents his unparalleled virtue.

This virtue continues to shine, as in proper submissive fashion, Zifar places the cause for the victory in God's hand. Rather than take pride in his own role, Zifar knows that his actions were ultimately guided by God, who places victory on the side of truth. The princess, however, upholds his masculinity, and urges her father to believe the word of his other knights, as she agrees that "bien creo que él mató a los otros e nos desçercó" [I truly believe he killed the others and lifted the siege].²⁰¹ The princess's belief in his reputation quickly spreads to the other nobles, who quickly agree that they should be married. What follows becomes the main test of Zifar's masculinity, as a result of the threat of instability.

The narrator quickly summarizes the events that follow the wedding:

mas todas los del regño que y eran lo resçebieron por señor e por rey después de los días de su señor el rey. Pero que lo ovo atender dos años, ca así lo tobo por bien el rey, porque era pequeña de días. Por este cavallero fueron cobradas muchas villas e muchos castiellos que eran perdidos en tienpo del rey su suegro, e fizo mucha justiçia en la tierra e puso muchas justiçias e muchas costunbres buenas, en manera que todos los de la tierra, grandes e pequeños, los querían grant bien. El rey su suegro, ante de los dos años, fue muerto, e él fincó rey e señor del regño, muy justiçiero e muy defendedor de su tierra, de guisa que cada uno avía su derecho e bien en pas.

[all the citizens of the kingdom present accepted him as their lord and future king. However, the Knight Zifar had to bide his time for two years, because the king considered the princess too young for marriage. Through this knight's efforts, many towns and castles that were lost during the reign of his father-in-law were recovered. He ruled the land fairly and made many good laws and established many good customs, so that the rich and poor of the kingdom were devoted to him. The king, his father-in-law, died before the two years had run their course, and he became king and defender of the kingdom. He was a fair, just ruler and a

²⁰⁰ *Zifar*, 167.

²⁰¹ ch. 80

powerful defender of his country, so that each person was tolerated impartially and lived in peace.]²⁰²

The above quotation demonstrates multiple contemporary concerns in such a small summation. The first, is that Zifar has the trust of the people he is going to rule at the time of his marriage. This establishes his authority over the coming years. Next, is the canon-law dilemma inherent in this being Zifar's second marriage. Though Zifar does not know it, his wife is still very much alive. Wendell Smith gives an excellent discussion of the way in which this seemingly curious sin on Zifar's part.²⁰³ For my own purposes of examining masculinity, this marriage is much more important through its role as publicly chaste, since the king deemed it necessary for them to abstain. While the chastity absolves Zifar of a possible sin, as Smith shows, it more importantly threatens his self control, which will be discussed further below.

Zifar is also given the opportunity to ingratiate himself within the kingdom, and gain the necessary skills to be a just king. As a noble, he introduces his own customs, and is able to rule the land in practice before assuming the full role of king. In this way, he gains experience and proper wisdom; all of which sustain his masculinity. Contemporary concerns are also cogently present within the above quotation. I would argue that a hint of *convivencia* is present in Zifar's tolerance in being impartial. More than that, the *Reconquista* of medieval Spain is highlighted in Zifar's military acts being recovery and defense, both of which were seen as the goals of the *Reconquista* itself. Rather than

²⁰² *Zifar*, 169.

²⁰³ See Wendell Smith, "Marital Canon-Law Dilemmas in El Libro del Cauallero Zifar," in *Corónica: A Journal Of Medieval Spanish Language And Literature* 27.3 (1999): 187-206.

viewing themselves as invaders, Spanish kings and their armies viewed themselves as as merely recovering what was rightfully theirs. In this, Zifar fully recovers his own masculinity as well as the masculinity of the country. Then, correctly and consistently, he upholds that masculinity in defending his realm, which is significantly repeated twice, suggesting unsuccessful threats to the country.

Importantly, he remembers his wife Grima and the two sons that he already has just before the initial two-year abstinence will come to an end. This is a significant threat to his newly earned position, and comes at the significant change in descriptors for Zifar. Upon his assumption of the throne of Mentón, the narrator ceases to refer to him as the Knight of God or by his name. At this point he is truly the King of Mentón, so the danger of consummating a marriage he has already been in for over a year—when he already has a wife who may still be alive—threatens the stability of the nation. It is therefore crucial that Zifar acts correctly to retain his new masculine power. This, again, he does through the use of his wisdom.

Zifar recognizes his marriage to the princess as a mortal sin, and in penance he admits to the princess that he must remain chaste for another two years. In her agreement to the continued abstinence, the princess serves as a proper helpmate to Zifar, which he properly acknowledges, as he thanks her “que tan grant sabor avedes de me tornar al amor de Dios” [for your goodness in returning me to God’s favor].²⁰⁴ This acknowledgement continues as “el rey lo gradesçió mucho a Dios, purque se así se endresçió la su entençión por bondat de esta reina” [the king was grateful to God, for

²⁰⁴ *Zifar*, 171.

through the goodness of the queen, God was guiding his way].²⁰⁵ This is truly the point in which their marriage becomes a spiritual one following Dyan Elliot's formulation. Before, the abstinence was public through the king's insistence due to the princess's age. However, now that she is of age, she consciously takes part in the vow, though this instance is one of privacy as "mantoviéronse muy bien e muy castamente" [they lived very discreetly] in spiritual marriage.²⁰⁶ Her wise rationality and choice to take part in the vow of abstinence serves as an extension of Zifar. In this, the queen serves as the protector of Zifar's chastity, and upholds his consistent masculinity.

Zifar's reputation takes importance again as his wife Grima makes her way towards his kingdom. Not knowing the true identity of the King of Mentón, she is lead to him through the advice from multiple men. The most significant description comes from the host of the hostel, who relates that the King of Mentón "que era muy buen ome e de Dios e que paresçía en las cosas que Dios fazía por él" [was a very good man, a good Christian, and that *it was obvious* through all the things that God did through him].²⁰⁷ Considering that honor was something that must be given by others, the fact that Zifar's goodness was obvious attests to the public validation of his virtue. The host continues to reinforce the trust the audience can put in Zifar, as he states that "çiertamente qual uso usa el ome, por tal se quiere ir toda vía; e si mal uso usare, las sus obras non pueden ser buenas; e si pierde el amor de Dios primaeramente, el amor del señor de la tierra; e non es seguro del cuerpo nin de lo que ha" [a man is known by his deeds, and if his actions are bad, his works cannot be good; and thus he falls from God's grace first and then from

²⁰⁵ *Zifar*, 171.

²⁰⁶ ch.81

²⁰⁷ *Zifar*, 174.

his lord's, and he is no longer secure in his person or his possessions].²⁰⁸ By this, we see the importance of a reputation being supported by deeds, and Zifar has no shortage of deeds to call upon. Through these virtuous deeds, Zifar *is* secure in his person and his possessions—he is secure in his masculinity. Additionally, the emphasis on his actions serves to reinforce Zifar's consistent nature through his continual security.

This host also highlights the role of the spiritual marriage in terms of Zifar's masculinity. For while “de lo qual se maravillavan mucho todos los del regno” [all the people in the kingdom wondered greatly about this matter], Zifar

fizo muy buena vida e muy stanta; también ha un año e más que él e la reina mantienen castidad, comoquier que se ama uno a otro muy verdaderamente, seyendo una de las más fermosas e de las más endresçadas de toda la tierra, e el rey en la mayor hedat que podría ser

[leads a good and saintly life, for he and his queen have maintained chastity for more than a year, although they truly love one another, and the queen is one of the most beautiful and best-natured, women in all the land, and the king is in the prime of life].²⁰⁹

The kingdom's concern over the childless marriage has the potential to be a threat to his masculinity, for the queen is very beautiful and Zifar is in the prime of his life. These, however, increase his masculinity through the self-control necessary to remain celibate as they highlight the queen's beauty that has the potential to emasculate him by enervating his mind. Moreover, while he does not personally procreate with his queen, Zifar *does* reproduce publicly. Not only through the recovery of the former king of Mentón's lands, as previously discussed, but also Zifar establishes a monastery at the sight in which he met the Knight Amigo.

²⁰⁸ 85.

²⁰⁹ *Zifar*, 174-5.

This childless marriage also threatens to bring instability to the kingdom, as there would be no heir to continue the line. Medieval Spain has a long history of Christian kings warring with one another due to questions of succession. For example, María de Molina (1265-1321) faced a significant threat to the validity of her rulership due to consanguinity in marrying her second cousin Sancho IV (1258-1295), and successfully acted as regent until her son Fernando IV (1285-1312) came of age. Through his public reproduction, as well as the following discussion, Zifar brings stability even in the face of danger.

Another potential threat to his social position occurs when he comes into contact with Grima. While in sin, Zifar cannot dare reveal their relationship, but Grima acts with proper discretion as

E ella dubdó en él porque la palabra avía cambiada e non fablava el lenguaje que solía, e demás que era más gordo que solía, e que le acía cresçido mucho la barba. E si le conosçió o non, como buena dueña, non se quiso descobrir porque él non perdiere la onra en que estava

[she was uncertain about his identity, because his speech had changed and he was not speaking the language to which he was accustomed. Furthermore, he was fatter than he used to be and his beard had grown longer. And whether she recognized him or not, because she was a prudent lady she did not want to expose him for he would then be dishonored].²¹⁰

Given that prudence is right reason put to action, this descriptor is significant for the way that Grima acts as a protector of his masculinity in keeping silent. The above description of Zifar, moreover, demonstrates the extent to which he has fully become one with his kingdom in that he has learned the language of his subjects. This is even more significant

²¹⁰ *Zifar*, 178.

in terms of the tradition of *convivencia* in which Christian populations living in close contact with Muslim communities often learned Arabic for the sake of pragmatism.

The role of these women is to enhance the masculinity of Zifar. Not only do they increase his desirability through their love and devotion for him, but also their actions are a direct reflection of Zifar. They are also helpmates in his salvation, as Grima founds monasteries and the queen protects his chastity. They both increase his power and uphold his masculinity. It is highly significant that Grima publicly reproduces on her own, without the aid of Zifar, because this action serves to increase Zifar's public and spiritual power.

However, a threat to Zifar's rationality occurs in the misunderstanding of Grima being found with their sons. Due to their handsomeness, when Zifar hears the news of Grima being found in bed with two knights, "el rey, con grant saña e como salido fuera de sentido" [the king was beside himself with an insane rage].²¹¹ In this, Zifar is overcome with emotion due to the insane rage; this is far from acting with his good native sense. St. Jerome writes, "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God," and Zifar thus works against the righteousness of God in the uncontrollable anger.²¹² However, this is, again, only a threat, because "anger is human and the repression of it [is] Christian." The rage is overcome, in the end, by his good native sense when he waits to fulfill her execution until he speaks with the knights with whom she was found, and in this Zifar prudently seeks the truth. Learning that these knights are in reality his sons, he quickly reverses the sentence against Grima. In this, Zifar's rationality is upheld against

²¹¹ *Zifar*, 184.

²¹² Jerome, "To Salvina," 299.

the threat, as he enacts the narrator's advice in the beginning of the tale that "razón es que el yerro que nuevamente es fecho que sea luego emendado por aquel que lo fizo" [it is right that if an error is made, the one who made it should be the one to correct it].²¹³

Importantly, Zifar does more than simply correct the error; he exerts his role as king and dubs Garfín and Roboán as knights. Through this act, Zifar's rulership is reinforced through the proper reciprocal relationship of vassal and lord. Moreover, as his sons, these knights further extend Zifar's masculinity through their own deeds as

e allí fazían muchas buenas cavallerías e atan señalados golpes, que todos se maravillavan e judgávanlos por muy buenos cavalleros, diziendo que nunca dos cavalleros tan mançebos viera que tantas buenas cavallerías feziesen nin tan esforçadamente nin tan sin miedo se parasen a los fechos muy grandes

[they accomplished so many great and outstanding feats that everyone was astonished and judged them to be superior knights. All said that there had never been two such youthful knights who had accomplished so many outstanding feats of chivalry so fearlessly. They never ceased to do great deeds].²¹⁴

This description comes not from Zifar's own observations, but importantly from Zifar's other subjects: the community publicly validates the masculinity of the young knights.

This description also powerfully introduces the consistent nature of their own masculinity, as it is "so many great and outstanding feats" that wins them their reputation rather than one pivotal deed.

The threats that Zifar has thus far encountered in his role as king have been personal, but the considerable threat to his kingship occurs in the rebellion from a vassal. As previously discussed, Zifar seeks justice; Aquinas asserts that "justice by its name implies equality" due to it being the will for every person to receive what is theirs by

²¹³ *Zifar*, 62.

²¹⁴ *Zifar*, 186.

right.²¹⁵ St. Jerome additionally relates a story of Nebridius, who treated the members of his court so well that “men who were in reality inferior to him were led by his attention to believe themselves his peers.”²¹⁶ In this case, the equal treatment is positive, as “it is no easy task to throw one’s rank into the shade by one’s virtue, or to gain the affection of men who are forced to yield you precedence.” Count Nason, however, revolts because when “los de vil lugar e mal acostunbrados, quanto más los loan, si algunt bien por aventura fazen, tanto más se orgulesçen con sobervia, non queriendo nin gradesçiendo a Dios la virtud que les faze” [men of low estate and ill breeding are praised, if they should chance to achieve some good, the more they are swollen with pride and refuse to be grateful to God for the grace shown them].²¹⁷ This important sin of pride highlights that Nason displays an aversion to God in his refusal. This description from the narrator highlights Zifar’s consistent correct leadership, in that *he* is fulfilling his end of the relationship between lord and vassal in praising the good actions of the count. Highlighting the text’s importance on lineage, it is Garfín and Roboán who fight the enemy, while Zifar leads from a distance.

In the tense one-on-one battle between Nason and Garfín, the narrator is surprisingly fair in the description of each party’s strength. This resembles the fair treatment of heathen armies within the *Cantar de Mio Cid*.²¹⁸ The Cid, the eponymous hero of the Reconquest, was known for fighting for both sides of the war. For the

²¹⁵ Aquinas, *Summa*, 1911.

²¹⁶ Jerome, “To Salvina,” 295.

²¹⁷ *Zifar*, 186.

²¹⁸ The oldest surviving Spanish epic, *Cantar de Mio Cid* was composed approximately between 1140 and 1207 and details the adventures of the Cid who liberated Valencia from Muslim rule in the early eleventh century.

purposes of the *Zifar*, the count, while bound to lose due to his irrational action, is a worthy opponent in terms of prowess. Garfín encounters the count while the traitor is on foot and Garfín is mounted. In this, Garfín has the clear upper hand, both in terms of the fight as well as in his position of masculine power; at this point, the count has sustained a heavy loss, and it is only this fight that will determine his fate. Garfín “se dexó venir e dióle una grant lançada a sobremano por el escudo, de guisa que le falsó el escudo e quebrantó la lança en él, pero que le non fizo mal ninguno” [delivered a great blow with his lance on the count’s shield, so that he pierced the shield and broke his lance, but he did the count no harm].²¹⁹ Their equal prowess is displayed through the fact that Garfín does not wound the count even though the blow was powerful enough to pierce the shield of the count and break Garfín’s lance. The count’s response is to level the playing field as he “ferió del espada un grant golpe al cavallo de Garfín en el espalda, de guisa que el cavallo non se podía tener nin mover” [swung his sword and struck Garfín’s horse a great blow on the back, so that the horse was paralyzed].²²⁰ Significantly, the blow to Garfín’s masculinity through the incapacitation of the horse comes when the count, described as only having the shield and sword, is left with the unsheathed phallic marker of his only claim to masculinity.

Moreover, through this act the young knight is literally put on more equal ground with the count, as they are both now fighting on foot. The equal threat they pose continues as “dióle un grant golpe, así que le trajó todo el catel del escudo. E ferió el conde a Garfín de guisa que le fendió el escudo todo, de çima fasta fondón, e córtole un

²¹⁹ *Zifar*, 193.

²²⁰ *Zifar*, 193.

poco en el braço” [Striking a mighty blow, [Garfín] sliced off the outer rim of his shield. The count struck back at Garfín in such a manner that he split [Garfín’s] shield from top to bottom, cutting him slightly on the arm].²²¹ At this juncture, the count taunts Garfín, who points out the irrational, incorrect behavior of the count, as

“Çertas, porque vos fallasçistes de la verdat al rey de Mentón, mi señor, e mentístele en el serviçio que le aviades a fazer, seyendo su vasallo e non vos desnaturando de él nin vos fallasçiendo, que le corriedes la tierra. E por ende, morredes como aquel que mengua en su verdat e en su lealtad”

[In truth, you have failed to be loyal to the king of Mentón, who is my lord, and you were untrue to the service you owed him, since you were his vassal. You did not sever your relation with him and he did not desert you. You raided throughout the land, and therefore you will die for being treacherous and disloyal].²²²

Each of the injunctions listed against the count center on the count’s refusal to fulfill his role in his relationship with Zifar, to whom he owes his allegiance. Garfín further points out the correct actions that could have justified the count’s actions, as no ties had been officially severed between lord and vassal. Rather than sever ties, the count irrationally chose to raid the land of his king. Throughout this condemnation, Garfín emphasizes the count’s lack of masculinity through the lack of rationality. Moreover, Garfín’s speech points out the inconstant loyalty of the count, which further detracts from the count’s masculinity.

The scene moves back to violence, as “E fuéronse uno contra otro esgrimiendo las espadas, ca sabían mucho de esgrima; e dábanse muy grandes golpes en los escudos, de guisa que todos los fezieron pedaços” [They charged each other, wielding their swords, for they were skilled in swordplay, and they struck each other great blows on their

²²¹ *Zifar*, 193.

²²² *Zifar*, 193.

sheilds, breaking them to pieces. Count Nason thrust with his dagger and gave Garfín a great gash on the cheek].²²³ That they are described in equal terms, as well as the fact that the count is able to would Garfín, attests to the threat of the count. However, Garfín answers with

diole un muy grant golpe que le cortó la manga del ganbax con el puño, de guisa que le cayó la mano en tierra con el espada. E tan de rezio enbió aquel goldpe Garfín, que le cortó del anca una gran piea e los dedos del pie, en manera que non se pudo tener el conde e cayó en tierra

[a great blow that cut through the sleeve of his ganbax, severing his hand, so that the hand holding his sword fell to the earth. And so strongly did Garfín strike that blow that he sliced a great piece from his haunch to his toes, so that the count was unable to stand and fell to the ground].²²⁴

The threat of the count is no match for the prowess of Garfín, who importantly takes from the count that which he needs to bear his sword, that potent marker of his masculinity. In an even greater display of masculine strength cripples the count with that same blow, so that the traitor is unable to stand. In the vertical difference of their physical positions, Garfín's masculinity is left standing tall while the count's is strewn on the ground.

Garfín's own masculinity is reinforced again in the public conversation. In response to Zifar's question as to who wounded the count, Garfín replies that it was "su atrevimiento e su desaventura e la mala verdat que traía" [his audacity, his misfortune, and his inherent treachery].²²⁵ This summation highlights the irrational, and emasculating, choices of the count. This emasculation continues through the rest of the interaction with Count Nason. The King of Mentón declares to the count that "non creo

²²³ *Zifar*, 194.

²²⁴ *Zifar*, 198.

²²⁵ *Zifar*, 199.

que con esa mano derecho me amenazedes de aquí adelante” [I don’t believe that you will threaten me with that right hand of yours hence].²²⁶ Alluding to the severed limb, and the consequence of not being able to hold a sword, Zifar emasculates the count in highlighting his loss of prowess.

The king goes further, and when the count tries to place his loss in terms of being unfortunate, Zifar forces him to “conosçerle hedes esta vegada mejoría” [admit his superiority this time], to which the count states “Çertas, e aún para sienpre; ca en tal estado me dexó, que le non pude enpesçer en ninguna cosa” [of course, and even forever, for he [Garfin] left me in such a condition that I could not hinder him in anything].²²⁷ Garfin has completely taken away the count’s ability to threaten the kingdom and its ruler’s masculinity. More than that, though, it was the count himself that caused not only the wound but also the loss of property and position. Garfin won the battle due more to the fact that he was fighting for justice than that he was a more experienced warrior. Through this scene, the chivalric masculinity of Garfin is established in its own right. Then, through public validation, it is upheld.

This scene is particularly significant as Garfin is the eldest son of Zifar. Susan Crane demonstrates the role of lineage in identity, as “ancestors define descendants because blood is not simply one’s own but is continuous through time.”²²⁸ Garfin is the heir to the throne of Mentón, so this establishment of masculinity is highly important in the way that it is an extension of Zifar’s masculinity. Garfin displays consistently correct actions, which reinforces the stability of the nation.

²²⁶ *Zifar*, 199.

²²⁷ *Zifar*, 200.

²²⁸ Crane, *Performance of Self*, 107.

Roboán, the younger son, also begins to establish his own masculinity in this interaction. After the defeat of Count Nason, his nephew raises his own army in order to finish what the count started. This knight, like the count, is described as a worthy adversary, as he is “muy buen cavallero de armas” [an excellent knight at arms].²²⁹ In response to this new threat, Roboán leads his own cavalry raid so that he, too, may accomplish “alguna buena señal de cavallería” [some great feat of arms].²³⁰ However, his own display of masculinity will not be as great in the eyes of the public, and Roboán tellingly states that

atal qual lo ganó mi hermano Garfín; ca non podiera mejor señal ganar que auella que ganó, ca lo ganó a grant pres e a grant onra de sí. E por aquella señal sabrán e conosçerán los omes el buen fecho que fizo preguntando cómo lo ovo, e bien verán e entenderán que la non ganó fuyendo.

[I could not win a greater honor than my brother Garfín has won, for he won it at great glory and cost to himself. By that feat, men will know and recognize the great deed that he performed, asking about it, and they will easily see and understand that he did not win it by fleeing.]²³¹

The threat that the count posed to the kingdom is seen as far greater than that of the nephew, so that Garfín’s accomplishment overshadows anything that Roboán might do. Importantly, this reputation is put in terms of sight, of knowing of the deed by recognizing Garfín’s masculinity. However, this scene still allows Roboán to gain important experience that will allow him to become a man in his own right.

For the battle between Roboán’s army and that of the nephew is, again, put in terms of equal strength. This, however, serves to reinforce the strength of Roboán as a

²²⁹ *Zifar*, 200.

²³⁰ *Zifar*, 202.

²³¹ *Zifar*, 202.

knight, due to the difficulty in victory. As his army falls upon that of the nephew's, "los otros se tovieron muy bien, a guisa de muy buenos cavalleros, e bolvi'ronse, feriéndose muy rezio los unos a los otros" [the enemy considered this a good move and in the manner of good knights wheeled about, and the armies fell to striking at one another].²³²

This is the beginning of Roboán's consistent correct action. In this fight, "Roboán andava en aquel fecho a guisa de muy buen cavallero e muy esforçado" [Roboán performed in that battle in the manner befitting a noble and mighty knight]. His prowess is also miraculous, as

el que se encontrava con Roboán non avía mester çerugiano, que luego iva a tierra o muerto o mal ferido; ca fazía muy esquivos golpes del espada e mucho espantales, de guisa que a un cavallero fue dar por çima del yelmo un golpe que le cortó la meitad de la cabeça e cayó la meitad en el onbro a la otra meitad iva enfiesta, e asiandido entre ellos my grant pieça por el canpo, de que se maravillavan mucho lo que lo veían

[whoever encountered Roboán had no need for a surgeon, for by then he was dropping to the ground either dead or badly wounded. Roboán was dealing such mighty and fearsome blows with his sword that he struck one knight a blow on top of his helmet and split his head in half. Half his head fell on his shoulder and the other half continued erect, and thus he rode among the troops for such a long time, so that those who saw him were astonished.]²³³

This instance has significant ramifications for the establishment of Roboán's masculinity. Not only is he a superior warrior, but the astonishing blow he gives to the knight that splits his head in half cogently represents Roboán splitting the masculinity of the enemy, as the head represents the seat of rationality in a man.

Roboán, though, is far from done proving himself in battle. He meets the nephew of Nason, and the two then "dexáronse venir uno contra otro e diéronse muy grandes

²³² *Zifar*, 203.

²³³ *Zifar*, 204.

golpes de las espadas” [charged against one another and struck each other mighty blows].²³⁴ This knight is a worthy opponent, and the fight will prove the masculinity of the victor. The nephew attempts to uphold Nason’s masculinity, as he declares that “ca nunca mejor cavallero fue en todo el regño de Mentón que él” [there was never a better knight in all the kingdom of Mentón than he].²³⁵ However, the audience knows that Nason’s masculinity is incorrect and inconsistent in his disloyalty to Zifar. The fierce battle continues as

de guisa que el sobrino del conde ferió a Roboán del estoque en la mexiella, así que le oviera a fazer perder los dientes; e Roboán ferió al sobrino del conde del espada en el rallo que tenía ante los ojos de travieso, en manera que le cortó el rallo e entróle el espada por la cara e quebrantóle amos ojos. E tan grande e tan fuerte fue la ferida, que non se pudo tener en el cavallo e cayó a tierra.

[The nephew of the count wounded Roboán with his dagger on the point of his chin and almost made him lose his teeth. Roboán struck the nephew of the count a slanting blow with his sword through the visor of his helmet. He cut through the helmet grid. His sword penetrated into his face and gouged out both his eyes. So deep and so bad was the wound that he could not stay on his horse and fell to earth.]²³⁶

This act solidifies the emerging masculinity of Roboán, as he deprives the nephew of his ability to know the world. The language of penetration, too, stands for his masculine prowess. The wound also makes the knight fall from his horse, thereby falling from his masculine position of power. By depriving the nephew of the count of his masculinity, Roboán establishes his.

This scene with the nephew highlights the agency in his actions. He irrationally raises war against Mentón when his uncle does not fulfill his role of loyalty to his king.

²³⁴ *Zifar*, 204.

²³⁵ *Zifar*, 204.

²³⁶ *Zifar*, 204.

Zifar wisely states this in the public conversation after Roboán's victory. Under a wicked ruler, "en al estades, ca devedes saber que a traidor non deven guardar omenage aquellos que lo fezieron" [those who pledge allegiance to a traitor are not bound by their pledge].²³⁷ In other episodes within the tale, relatives of irrational enemies wisely choose to stay out of the fight. The most irrational choice, after all, is to raise war against such a strong king as Zifar. These enemies also show a lack of humility in not being satisfied with what they already have. Out of greed, they choose to invade, attempting to expand their power. Instead, they are not only defeated, but their masculinity is eroded by the superior masculinity of the powerful men of Mentón. Additionally, the actions of Garfín and Roboán continue the consistent actions of Zifar, further highlighting the necessity of a consistent masculinity for the heroes.

Conclusion

The role of community is highly important in this tale. It serves to both threaten and validate the masculinity of Zifar. Through his role as the Knight of God, he liberates feminized communities and establishes and upholds a proper masculinity. The crux of Zifar's masculinity is his reason. It is through specific, ritualized choices on the battlefield and within the court that Zifar remains superior to all others. It is this that allows him to be a successful ruler. Significantly, he is not greedy; he never seeks to gain anything more than he should. He chooses the right side of battle through careful consideration of the facts.

His low position at the beginning of the tale allows the tale to highlight that the most important quality of a man is that he has accomplished deeds that prove his right to

²³⁷ *Zifar*, 208.

position. This low position is symbolized through the role of the horses' deaths, but he sustains his masculinity in the face of this through the repetition of wise and prudent choices. His prowess on the battlefield sets him apart from other knights, especially enemies. Zifar's piety is established throughout, as he never despairs in misfortune and is always ready and willing to follow the guidance of God.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

While *Sir Isumbras* and the *Libro del Caballero Zifar* share an astounding amount of characteristics, they differ in important ways. For while Isumbras is punished with what Raluca L. Radulescu refers to as “social invisibility,” Zifar is far from ever invisible.²³⁸ While he may not hold land or power over others, he is constantly in an important position within the communities he encounters. While he does not go looking for war, he does go searching for ways to serve God. The communities he encounters are feminized by their powerlessness in the face of an invading enemy, and his actions serve to reestablish the masculinity of that community. For by restoring power to the sovereign, a necessarily masculine social role, Zifar restores the masculinity of the society.

While Isumbras, too, defeats an invading army, he must reject the rewards offered by the Christian king. He departs unnoticed, and continues to add to his compound masculinity. Community is a threat to Isumbras because of his incorrect masculinity at the beginning of the tale. Any social position would be tainted with the threat of pride and of becoming static and therefore feminized. It is only when he has proved his piety that Isumbras can reassume position, and this position is only attained through his compound masculinity.

²³⁸ Radulescu, *Romance*, 41.

The titular characters' fall from position is also significantly different. Isumbras must undergo punishment for the sin of pride, and his story is one of personal revelation. While he does have a sense of masculinity, it is principally incorrect, proving to the audience that while an incorrect knight may have masculinity, it is not a masculinity that other men would want.

Meanwhile, Zifar is not sinful in the slightest. Rather, his fall is due to the envy of other counselors of his king that are threatened by his masculinity. Moreover, social position is a threat to Isumbras, while Zifar ingratiates himself within his communities. He is fully accepted as the King of Mentón, whereas Isumbras's power is only enforced through the annihilation of the enemy. Not only is Zifar accepted, but also he learns the language of his people and introduces his own customs that benefit the kingdom. Perhaps this fact owes to the close contact between Spanish and Muslim societies in medieval Spain. Zifar's masculinity is one of constancy, as the multiple threats he encounters allow him to repeatedly display the correct action.

There is a far greater concern with lineage in the *Zifar*, as Zifar must account for the sins of an ancestor. This concern continues in his role as king and father. Through the wisdom he has gained in the variety of tests, his masculinity remains intact. His correct action is the result of his rationality, which is both the main descriptor of his personality and the overarching feature of his masculinity.

Significantly, there is a lack of hostility toward the enemy on the part of the narrator of the *Zifar*. The treachery of the enemy is due to lack of rationality. In the case of Count Nason, this is an internal threat that arises because the count did not adhere to the feudal ritual of submission to his lord. The internal threat acts as a potential for

instability—reflecting medieval Spain’s instability—to which Zifar and his sons act in a consistently correct manner. *Sir Isumbras*, on the other hand, abounds in descriptions that highlight the religious difference between the hero and his enemies, though this, too, is the result of the irrational choice to follow a pagan religion. Through this, medieval England’s preoccupation with the Crusades of the Holy War remains prevalent.

Finally, the very nature of their masculinity is unquestioningly different, which has significant ramifications for their didactic messages. *Isumbras*’s compound masculinity highlights the necessity of the ruler to know his subjects; he must be able to interact with all social groups to be a successful leader. While Zifar demonstrates a consistent masculinity, in which rituals are especially important; the ideal hero knows how to act in the court, knows the rituals of war, and can fully partake in rituals of religion.

My scholarly contribution lies in the way in which I have extended the conversation on these text’s focus on lordship by examining it’s central feature: masculinity. That these characters both face critical threats to their masculinity through their loss of social position conflicts with any interpretation that aims to suggest an unquestioned masculinity. This study is particularly significant in its comparative nature, as it is through comparison that these masculinities become truly defined. The comparison, additionally, helps to highlight the contemporary influences present within each work, contributing to our understanding of the lesson that the audience would take away.

However, there are many avenues for further study. I was not able to discuss the adventures of Roboán, who represents a difficult threat to the constancy of masculinity

that his father Zifar represents. His story mirrors *Sir Isumbras* more than it mirrors the adventures of Zifar. Additionally, the women in these texts serve a central role in their own right, a topic I was also not able to address. Isumbras's wife and Zifar's wife Grima navigate the line between femininity and masculinity and offer insight into female rulers. Grima's role is highly significant in light of the power women held within Iberia, many of whom served to protect the interest of the crown as regents and queen lieutenants. There is much more to explore in these texts, and they will be sure to captivate scholars for years to come.

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