King Arthur in the Lands of the Saracens.

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> We were taught that our civilization stemmed from
> classical and Christian roots: Greco-Roman and Judeo-
> Christian, and that the classical elements had been largely
> lost until the rediscovery known as the Renaissance. But,
> now that the world is smaller, communication easier,
> organized religion more relaxed and scholarly exchange
> more widespread, our common ground with the Arabian
> tradition is being recognized. Medieval culture is, in fact,
> Greek, Latin, and *Arab* (italics mine).
>   E.L. Ranelagh

Throughout the bulk of the Arthurian literary tradition, romancers, novelists, poets, and historians of King Arthur and his Knights have relegated the world's medieval games to that of the European chessboard. This Eurocentric mentality—that is unfortunately not uncharacteristic of an astounding number of western medievalists— has (un)intentionally participated in the widening of the cultural gaps between Islam and the West. Such an inflexible essentialism might debunk many medievalists' assumptions of "the uncontested humanism and universalism of the Arthurian tradition. What is meant here is that any liberal humanization of the Arthurian literature from a western critical and cultural standpoint cannot be divorced from what Maria Rosa Menocal aptly labels as "the myth of westerness in medieval literary historiography"(1). This becomes particularity significant if one, for instance, explores the cultural and literary reception of the Arthurian text in the very land of the "other" of King Arthur and his Knights, that is to say, the lands of the "Saracens".[i]

Through a comparative reading of the themes of chivalry and courtly love, I will try, in the first part of my paper, to highlight the literary and cultural elements that might attract a Middle Easterner to the Arthurian literature. Setting the example of Sir Thomas Malory' s *Morte D'Arthur*, I will try in the second part, to interrogate the Arthurian discourse of alterity and explore the polemical representation of Islam so as to unveil some of the literary and cultural elements that might, indeed, make King Arthur feel unwelcome in the lands of the "Saracens".

Chivalry is indubitably a major source of literary and cultural identification that can make of the Arthurian tradition both readable and enjoyable in the Middle East. In fact, one must not forget that throughout centuries and centuries, both pre-Islamic and Islamic Arabs have hailed the knight and his horse in an almost unequaled way in human history.[2] Both the knight and his horse have been a source of power, pride, poetry, and tribal celebration and romance. The observations of A. F. L. Beetson, renowned for his study of Arabic literature until the Umayyad dynasty, and albeit their Orientalist spice, merit quoting in this regard: "The idea of chivalrous behavior," Beetson observes "was part of the inter-tribal moral code. The Arabs were great horsemen, as good breeders of horses as they were of camels, and they claim their pedigree horses were descended from the *Jin*"(63).

Although the heydays of Arab chivalry have dramatically dwindled, both the Arab knight and the Arab horse are still engraved in the collective memory of all Arabs across the world. Chivalry, one must not forget, is still colonizing a great space of the folklore of the *mashriq* and the *maghrib* where festivals of *al-furussia* are annually organized. The real desert, as such, is the most revealing *mnemotopos*.

The infatuation of Arabs with the cult of chivalry has encouraged some comparatists to see the very idea of Western chivalry as deeply rooted in the Arab cult of *al-furussiya*. In many

other cases, it is our job as comparatists to conclude so. Marion Zimmer Bradley in her *Mists of Avalon* (1982), to set a postmodern Arthurian text, inadvertently acknowledges this "theory" through Gwydion (Mordred), who informs King Arthur of unrivaled horses and conquering knights that come from the land of the "Saracens": "My uncle and my lord," says Gwydon, "the best horses come from further still. The Spaniards themselves buy horses from Africa, from a desert country there. Now these Saracens are beginning to overrun Spain itself" (831).

The influence of Arab chivalry on that of the West can also be conjectured from the lack of a Germanic root for the English word chivalry.[3] The Arabic *al-furrussia* derives from *faras* (horse) and *faris* (knight) and has its root in the verb *farasa*. The English word for chivalry, however, is borrowed from French (*chevaucher/cheval / chevalier),* which, by its turn might have been influenced by the Spanish (*caballo/ caballero).* This would make more sense if one calls to mind the Arab domination of Spain from 711 to 1492, which included most of the Iberian Peninsula and extended across the Pyrenees and southern France during the early times. It is unfortunate that the majority of western medievalists have not exhibited a serious readiness to investigate the matter despite the abundance of a plethora of philological and historical clues[4]. This academic discomfort, according to E. Lasater, is intrinsically related to "nationalistic interests and prejudices" (7).

Reading through any Arthurian text, King Arthur and his knights would evoke in Middle Eastern readers a feeling of redolence and nostalgia for a lost glory that was achieved by the same chivalric codes of King Arthur and his knights. It is not surprising, therefore, to see statesmen in many Middle-Eastern countries publicly exhibiting their chivalrous skills in their search for political consolidation. Such a "political" chivalry has always been endorsed by references to poems, tales, romances, and even to Quranic and Sunnah injunctions.[5]

The cultural identification with the Arthurian code of chivalry is essentially related to its striking similarity to the Arabs' *akhlakiyat al-furrussia* (the codes of chivalry). Like his Arthurian counterpart, the word *faris* does not; in anyway, suggest an invincible strength, or an unrivaled prowess. It is rather a Lancelot-like way of life and behavior including philanthropy, mercy, gallantry, and recognition of the other's prowess. "To the domain of chivalry," Beeston tells us, "belonged ideas of gallantry to women, holding to pledges, avoidance of tricks in combat, and treachery, and refraining from fighting an unarmed opponent" (31). It is the above-mentioned Arab-Muslim chivalric qualities that drew the attention and admiration of a rival West, even in such a callous time as that of the crusades[6].

Like the Arthurian chivalry, courtly love, a central theme in the Arthurian saga, can be another rich source of aesthetic satisfaction and cultural identification for a Middle easterner. Thematically speaking, courtly love, with all its concomitants, has always occupied a fertile territory in the landscape of Arabic literature. Thereby, one may venture to say that the bulk of romances, tales, poems, and theories of love[7] in the Arabic culture is unrivaled in the world. The centrality of courtly love in Arabic literature and culture has drawn the attention of more and more unprejudiced comparatists who have become convinced of the Arabic ancestry of the western courtly love tradition.

It is Lasater, however, who pronounced the most courageous statement in his book *Spain to England: A Comparative Study of Arabic, European, and English Literature of the Middle Ages*. Lasater argues that courtly love was foreign to "the Germanic temper of Medieval Europe". French and English lyric poetry is, according to him, find their origin in the troubadour tradition of Province, which is deeply rooted in Andalusian poetry. Lasater writes:

Romantic love, long a characteristic of Arabic poetry, is found in Arab Spain over a century before the first troubadours flourished, already so developed that it could have served as a blueprint for courtly love for the poets of the Provence. Through the Provencal poets, courtly love was further developed and spread into France and into England where it is found in lyric poetry, both secular and religious. (55)

As far as the Arthurian tradition is concerned, one might venture to say that the forgotten Arabic influence can be tracked by exploring the striking similarities between the Arthurian love tales and the older *ishq* tales of Arabia. "Tristan and Isolt", for example, is suggestively structured around a leitmotif that is archetypal in the Arabic tradition of love: love, marriage, separation, madness, and death. The tale of Tristan and Isolt would quickly bring into the mind of a Middle Easterner the unforgettable love tale of Qays *wa Layla*.

The romance of *Qays wa Layla* is one of the most breathtaking love romances in Islamic culture since it was equally influential in the three major literatures of Islam: Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Abu al Faraj al Isfahani, in his momentous *Book of Songs*, tells us that the original version of the romance took place in Medina in the first century of *hijra* (670-680 A.D). It is the real love story of Qays ibn Dharih, the milk brother of Hussein, the Prophet's grandson. After felling in love and marrying Lubna bint al Hubab al Kabiya, Qays succumbed to the twenty-year pressure of his jealous mother and father who chastised him for madly loving a futile wife. Qays, a lovelorn could not stand the hardship of separation so he was taken by madness. While roaming around the tent of his beloved, Qays heard that another man wooed Lubna. This drove Qays to his death.

Newstad in "The Origin and Growth of the Tristan Romance" briefly discusses the indebtedness of the romance of Tristan to the Arabic romance of *Qays wa Layla*. Yet, it is Lasater again that strongly sees it as deeply rooted in the Arabic tradition, albeit the Celtic mood

that dominates it. This origin, according lo Lasater, was the result of the contacts between Southern France and Muslim Spain (147). Bearing in mind that Lasater and Menocal are among a handful of contemporary medievalists that still defend what has been academically known as the Arabist theory in the study of western troubadour tradition.

The Arabist theory was first promulgated in the sixteenth century by Giammaria Barbieri in his *Dell' Origine Della Poesia*, advocated by Juan Andres in the eighteenth century, and became "a conventional maxim of criticism" during the nineteenth century. It is however, during the age of colonialism and western domination of the Muslim world that such a theory has became culturally insulting. Menocal writes:

> It is clear, in any case, that it was at this moment [the age of western colonialism] that the Arabist theory not only ceased to be one of those theories advocated, denied, or discussed; it became virtually taboo. While the other theories, none of which violated any fundamental principle of Europeanness as it was then emerging, were spun out and set against each other, the older Arabist one, which was clearly at odds with the larger views that were affecting not only members of the profession but all Europeans' views of the world and of themselves, slipped into oblivion and undiscussability. (82)

The Arthurian tradition, as I have tried to explore in the first part of my paper, is teeming with tales of chivalry and courtly love that can make of this major tradition of western literature and culture both readable and enjoyable in the Middle East. Through it, one can also, revive the long overlooked influence of Arab-Muslim culture in Medieval Europe and consolidate the efforts triggered by some brave western comparatists such as Ranelagh, Lasater, and Menocal. Yet, the issue that is at stake when it comes to exploring the marketing of the Arthurian tradition in the Middle East is the overt islamophobic discourse of king Arthur. This can, indeed, compromise the success of king Arthur in the very lands of the "Saracens".

Materialist critics of European Medieval literature acknowledge the fact that throughout the Middle Ages, literature had been a vehicle for religious propaganda and consolidation. The Christian discourse had dominated both the political and the textual. Thus, it had actively participated in fashioning the medieval crusading worldview. Since Christian Europe was haunted by the specter of a religiously and territorially conquering Islam, it was "Mohammedanism"[8] and the "Saracens" that defined the very idea of the "other" in medieval literature.

The Saracens became, to use Dorothee Metlitzki's phrase, "a crucial public theme" which permeated the political, military, and religious life of Christian Europe (116). Not surprisingly, this same public theme turned into a major literary theme across different parts of Europe. In France, for instance, the Saracens appear in many famous texts such as *La Chanson de Roland*, *L`entrée de Spagne*, *La Voyage a Jerusalem*, to name but a few. In England, it is basically the Arthurian epics and romances that popularized the Saracens as a major medieval literary theme.

The medieval attempts to construct an Arthurian identity were dependent on the literary fashioning of a vilified and a threatening "Saracen". It is not exaggerating; therefore, to claim that the textual King Arthur did exactly what the historical Charlemagne, for instance, did during the crusades. According to Ziaddin Sardar, the Arthurian tradition "Gave the contemporary crusades a history, locating their motifs, concerns, and rationale by harking back to the time of Charlemagne when the Muslim tide had been turned back from the heart of Europe"(12). Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* is our case in study.

Although one must admit that Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* is, generically speaking, not a classical medieval Saracen romance like that of *La Chanson de Roland* or *The Sowdome of*

Babylon, to name but a few, this referential medieval text harbors a stereotypical representation of the "Saracens". The Saracens' intermittent appearance in the narrative, albeit structurally insignificant, ideologically, it was very meaningful. Their presence seems to remind the medieval readers of those "heathens", whose religion is not only a "heresy" but also an "affliction from God". It is only king Arthur and his knights who will rid Christendom of their "terror". Malory does not undermine their existence. They are, indeed, there, and they are a danger even to a relatively remote country, which medieval England really was.

The Saracens in *Morte D'Arthur* are depicted as demonic agents of war and destruction. They are in a perpetual state of devilish alert. Always a the disposal of a more civilized enemy: the Roman emperor Lucuis, who can summon them at any time since they are constantly ready to wage wars that are not only morally unjust but thousands of miles away from their homelands. Parasitic as they are, the Saracens are not fully individualized. They are reflected through a less barbarian "other". They are the "other" of the 'other'.

The Saracens' alleged allegiance to the Romans, as depicted by Malory, is axial in our interrogation of the transfiguration of history in this medieval narrative. In this, *Morte D'Arthur* religiously follows other medieval romances and epics[9]. Historically speaking, this allegiance was simply impossible due to the rivalry that had always characterized the relationship between Rome and Eastern civilizations, let alone between medieval Rome and Islam. In fact, history's record is replete with devastating wars that took place around the Mediterranean between Romans on one hand and Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and Arab-Muslim on the other hand. The Roman /Saracen alliance in *Morte D'Arthur* translates the ideological shuttle of medieval literature between history as it happened, or could have happened, and history as Medieval writers would have it been happened.

In Malory's case, the *telos* of this historical gymnastics is to put the ahistorical King Arthur in the very geo-history of the medieval map. Accordingly, the lands from which Malory's "Sarezens" flock out to help the Roman emperor represent the territorial expansion of medieval Islam: North Africa, Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Turkey, Armenia, and India. Metlitzki in this regard is worth quoting:

> The Saracens are the same kind of foil and wonder in both. Before the crusades, the public at large was aware that the Spanish Saracens were allied to Berbers of North Africa, that the Saracen Empire includes Persians, Turks, Armenians, Syrians, that the forces of the Saracen world were grouped under the Emir of Babylon, that is to say the Fatimide commander of the Faithful in Cairo to whom the title and power of the Caliphate that shifted from Baghdad in the Twelfth century. (119)

Malory's Saracens a, we are told, are "horryble peple," who sided with a Roman tyrant to destroy the Christian utopia of Camelot that King Arthur and his knights had striven to construct: "And thus, the emperor with all hys horrible peple," Malory tells us "drew to passe almayne to destroy Arthures londys" (117). In a striking opposition to the Roman emperor and his "people," the Saracens, the "democratic" king Arthur assembled his parliament to declare a holy and just war against the Roman emperor and "his" Saracens: "Aftir the utas of seynte Hyllary that all shuld be assembled for to holde a parlement at Yorke within the wallys"(111).

Malory constructs a binary opposition between the "democracy" and civilization of King Arthur and the autocracy and barbarism of the "others'. This medieval religious and political Manicheanism is no better dramatized than through King Arthur's nightmarish vision of the "other" the night of the decisive battle. It is this very nightmare that unveils much of the discourse of altelrity in this medieval narrative. Actually, what seems to me the most significant

moment in this tale regarding what might be read as Malory's orientalist discourse is Arthur's dream or vision of the black bear that loomed from his "orient". The narrative momentarily digresses from the tempo-spatiality of the expected battle and takes us, as if with Sindbad's magic carpet, to the far Orient – the very physical *topos* of the Saracens.

During his "oriental dream", King Arthur sees a dragon. This dragon was interpreted by King Arthur's' "philosophers" as his divinely given invincible power. The dragon vision would soon be intercepted by the fearsome black bear: "Then hym semed there com oute of the Oryent a grimly bear, all black in a clowd and hys pawys were as byg as a poste. He was all torongled with lugerande lokys, and he was the fowlyst beste that ever ony man sye"(118). Although it seems axiomatic to see the emperor Lucius in the black bear as King Arthur's philosophers would interpret it as a token of a tyrant "betokyn a tyrant" (118), "medievally" speaking, this giant bear visualizes the very image of the Saracen in general, and Muhammad in particular, for as one may venture to say, Lucius is neither depicted as the first military danger, nor the cultural other.

This might be supported through a close reference to Malory's 'live' transmission of the battle between King Arthur and the Roman emperor. Malory does not seem to capitalize on the war between "English" and Romans. He, rather, seems to focus on the battle between Christians and "Saracens". In his dramatic narration of the battle, Malory zooms in on the dual battles between Arthur's Christian knights and the Saracens. Sir Cador, for instance, when killing the King of "Lybye," does not seem to be satisfied with killing him. He is elated at cursing him and humiliating his corpse: "now, haste thow corne- boote agayne warde and the devyll have thy bonys that ever thou were borne." (129). Such an encroachment of the Arthurian code of chivalry is even celebrated when the enemy is a non-Christian "Saracen". This is what Dorothy

Everett concludes when she surveys the un-chivalric treatment of the Saracens in medieval battles "The utter humiliation of the enemy is an end that justifies every perversion of decency in the chivalric hero" (199).

Like what we see in a plethora of Hollywood Vietnam War films when the real enemy is the Soviets, not the Vietnamese, the real enemy in Malory's battle is, indeed, the Saracens, not the Romans. Malory's unyielding differentiation between the two is evidently very suggestive of his perception and depiction of Arthur's targeted enemy. Never does Malory refer to Arthur's enemies as one. They are always the Romans and the "Saracens". Arthur and his knights, we are incessantly reminded, overwhelm the "Saracens". Arthur's knights, for instance, glorify Sir Lancelot, after they know that he killed more than five hundred "Saracens". Yet, there is no mention of the number of the Romans he might have killed.

Similar to the vision of the black bear and the defeat of the "Saracens", Arthur's fight with the "Grete gyaunts of Gene," (131) convinces us of the real identity of the enemy and the "other" in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*. Like the ugliness and blackness of the bear, the great giant of Genes is another reference to the Saracens as symbols of bestiality, paganism, and otherness. The giantess, blackness, and bestiality are typical medieval attributes of the Saracens. "Saracens are often portrayed in the epics and in later romances", we are told by Lasater, "as tall, hideous, huge, often misshapen, frequently as black moors or Negroes, and usually with eyes as red as glowing coals associated with ferocity" (142).

To conclude, it is evident that King Arthur and his Knights could be a source of cultural identification and aesthetic satisfaction in the very lands of the Saracens. Chivalry and courtly love are two thematic examples that can make of the Arthurian text not only readable, but also enjoyable for readers in the Middle East. Narratives of chivalry and courtly love, one has to

remember, are, indeed, very central in the Arabic literary tradition. Accordingly, it is not surprising to discover through the Arthurian tradition "a forgotten heritage", as Menocal calls it, which can even challenge the very Western "appropriation" of medieval courtly love and chivalry. King Arthur, however, can also be a source of cultural alienation for readers in the Middle East because of the *islamophobic* discourse of the Arthurian tradition and its stereotypical representation of the "Saracens". It is the very otherness of the "Saracens" in the Arthurian saga that might make King Arthur and his knights feel quite unwelcome in the very lands of the "Saracens".

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[1]According to different western accounts, Arabs (Muslims) had been known as (H)Agarians in reference to Hagar, Ishmael's mother, until Mohamed called them Saracens! For a more detailed account of this, see Bojen Olsommer *Nos Ancetres les Sarrasins* (Edition Bertil Galland, 1981), p.13. The word Saracen, however, does not exclusively refer to Arabs as a race; it rather refers to all Muslims who were interchangeably called Mohammedans, Saracens, pagans, infidels, Moors, Turks, and Tatars. Bernard Lewis compares the various names of Muslims by Christians in the middle ages and the Renaissance, to the Muslim's naming of European Christians in the Middle Ages. "Muslim writers show a similar, indeed, an identical, reluctance, and refer to their Christian rivals and enemies as Romans, Slavs, or Franks depending on when and where the encountered them" (*Islam and the West*, Oxford, 1993), p.7.

[2]One might refer the reader to the anthologies of *hamasa* collected by Abu Tammam and al-Buhturi. *Hamasa* in Reynold A. Nicholson's words "Denotes the virtues most highly prized by the Arabs—bravery in battle, patience in misfortune, persistence in revenge, protection of the weak and defiance of the strong."(Cambridge, 1966), p.79.

[3]The English *horse* and *knight* and the German *Pferd* and *Ritter*

[4]Despite the very ideological sensitivity of this topic, westerners who applaud the western influence on modern Arabic literature must not be horrified to acknowledge the Arabic influence on western literature especially during the Middle Ages, the Early Modern Period, and the Romantic Period.

[5]"Teach your children swimming, archery, and chivalry," the famous saying by Omar al-Khatab on the value of teaching chivalry and equestrian skills to young Muslims is a relevant example.

[6]Saladin, the paragon of medieval Muslim chivalry is the most compelling evidence. Saladin's chivalric behavior touched even Dante Alighieri who in both *Who's Who of Heroes and Villains*, and *The Divine Comedy* exhibited his respect for this Muslim hero especially in comparison to the Prophet Mohammed and the caliph Ali.

[7]Here, I am particularly thinking of ibn Hazm's *The Dove Neck Ring*.

[8]It was not surprising, for instance, to read that Muhammad was a Roman Catholic monk, who was sent by the Catholic Church to convert Arabia. "Abetted, however, by the devil, and fuelled by a vaulting political ambition and an unrivaled mastery of Arabic, he declared himself a prophet and contrived a heretic religion". For an exhaustive account of the representation of Islam during the middle ages, see, for instance Norman Daniel *Islam and the West: the Making of an Image* (Edinburgh, 1960), The *Arabs and Medieval Europe* (London, 1975) and John V. Tolan 's *Saracens; Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*((New York, 2002).

[9] In *La Chanson de Roland*, for instance, the Saracens replace the Basques, the historical enemies of Roland and his army.