

**The Lady, the Giant, and the Land:  
The Monstrous in *Fierabras*<sup>1</sup>**

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Auguste Kroeber has noted that the success and renown of *Fierabras*, the twelfth-century French *chanson de geste* or chivalric fable, is not limited to France (xvi). The popularity of *Fierabras* is shown, on the one hand, in the multiple extant translations in manuscript and early print form in Provençal, Anglo-Norman, Middle English, Italian, Castilian, Portuguese, Latin, Irish, and German. Moreover, we can assess the influence of *Fierabras* through diverse literary references to the text, as well as works based on it. Miguel de Cervantes, for example, mentions Fierabras' balm and the relationship between Floripes and Guy de Bourgogne in *Don Quixote*. In addition, Pedro Calderón de la Barca wrote a comedy titled *La puente de Mantible*. To name some non-Iberian examples, François Rabelais's *Pantagruel* and *Barbour's Bruce* refer to Fierabras.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will use two versions of *Fierabras* to reflect on the deformation and defamiliarization of three elements in the text: the Saracen giant, the Saracen princess, and the location in which *Fierabras* takes place. The two versions I will be implicating are the late-fourteenth century Middle English version, *Sowdan of Babylon*, and the early-sixteenth century Castilian version, *Historia del Emperador Carlo Magno y delos doze pares de Francia & dela cruda batalla que ouo Oliveros con Fierabras, Rey de Alexandria, hijo del grande almirante Balan*. Both texts enable a reading on the use of characters (like Fierabras and Floripes), and places (the Iberian Peninsula, Italy, the south of France) to imagine a Christian Western European self vis-à-vis the non-Christian "other". My analysis here ultimately reflects issues of physicality and identity that I am further developing elsewhere.

The depiction of Fierabras as the Saracen opponent differs in these two versions of the *roman*. Both his physical description and behavior greatly diverge, showing the different approaches of the "other" in England as it directly relates to the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) and the newly formed kingdom of Castile and Aragon (1474-1504). In the first case, the "other" is an enemy located at a distance; in the second one, the opponent is close to home and even within it. According to the French poem, Fierabras is a fierce and rich king, a fifteen-foot tall gigantic knight. His physical figure and deeds would make him the best knight, "si este pagano se tornasse christiano [if this pagan became Christian]" (fol 12v). In several other texts the same phrases appear, "if he would [only] profess the right creed..." and eventually these knights would become Christians, or die in battle. Within this context, the greatness of Fierabras makes him a worthy opponent, at least in most versions of this *chanson*. In

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<sup>2</sup> See Emil Hausknecht's introduction to his edition of *The Romance of the Sowdone of Babylone*.

the Castilian version, Fierabras's description notes him as a man of marvelous size or "grandor" (6v), and knows that his height and magnitude causes fright. But Fierabras is not only a "great" man in size, he also holds noble and chivalrous traits in more than one sense. According to *Historia del emperador*, Fierabras has a generous heart, unable to act treacherously or vilely.<sup>3</sup> Fierabras also claims to have generosity and noble blood (11r), a fact recognized by Oliver. During the battle against the Carolingian peer, the Saracen king acts according to all the chivalric rules: he refuses to fight against a lesser knight, declines to ride until his opponent has mounted, does not attack Oliver on foot while mounted, as well as offers to leave part of his armor in order to be in equal terms when Oliver loses his sword. The emphasis on Fierabras's chivalry and greatness prepares the reader/audience to accept the Saracen as a worthy convert. In the Iberian Peninsula, issues of conversion are critical during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century because their authenticity was debated in the case of both Jews and Moors.

Despite the importance of the description of this Saracen king, the Middle English version does not depict him as gigantic in moral or physical stature; instead, he does not follow the order of chivalry, or have a good heart. On the contrary, Ferumbras stands as "a doughty man [...] of dede" (l. 207) as his deeds are the result of prowess in the battlefield. Ferumbras is a strong and skillful knight who conquers Rome and attains the relics, vaguely mentioned in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century version. Although he does not initially engage in battle against Oliver, who claims to be a recently dubbed young knight (l. 1136), Ferumbras fights against his supposed inferior only to discover that his rival is one of the Peers. In any case, his nobility only matters in terms of being a worthy and strong opponent to Charlemagne and his peers. Furthermore, Ferumbras customs, diet, and his alliances are exoticized: he drinks the blood of beasts (l. 684), eats fried serpents (l. 687), and surrounds himself with black, blue, and yellow Saracens from all over Africa, Asia, and Europe (ll. 999-1006). The Saracen, rather than monstrous via his gigantic stature, instead is exotic because of his deportment and geopolitical associations. Once vanquished by Oliver and baptized by the bishop, Ferumbras almost completely disappears from the text only to reappear when he opposes the treacherous Ganelon in order to save Charlemagne and to intervene when the emperor is ready to kill Laban (or Balan, as known in other versions). With his christening, Ferumbras becomes just a loyal knight in the service of Emperor Charlemagne. Baptism thus becomes a powerful ritual of renewal, apparently unquestioned in England during the fifteenth century.

Though conversion through baptism is a commonplace in medieval texts dealing with Saracens (located either in the Holy Land, Iberian Peninsula, or Mediterranean coast of North Africa), there are few examples where the convert mentions her/his divided sense of belonging to kin and creed. One of these examples appears in *Historia del emperador*, where the gigantic Fierabras requests Charlemagne to send a

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<sup>3</sup> "Magnanimo coraçon" (6v); "Nunca en mi coraçon reyno traycion ni vileza" (9r).

messenger to Balan demanding his conversion because “though my father is a Turk and I am Christian, I have not lost the love that I am obliged to feel for him” (32v).<sup>4</sup> Although in *Sowdan* Ferumbras begs Charlemagne to refrain from killing his father and advocates that he be christened (ll. 3113-14), his feelings are not conflicted. Once Laban rejects baptism, Ferumbras appears unmoved about his own father’s fate, he notes, “Lete him take his endynge, / For he loueth not Cristyante,” he tells the emperor (ll. 3181-82). Whereas in the Iberian version Fierabras grieves the death of Christians; he still finds himself marveled by his father’s deeds in battle. In large part he feels ashamed for being disloyal to Charlemagne because he trembles at the idea of seizing his father (34v). In other words, *Historia del emperador* provides the reader with a more humane character, even before his conversion; *Sowdan* depicts the heathen as less compassionate. Furthermore, most characters in the Middle English text show little emotion with the exception of Laban, who openly parades his anger.

Similarly, Floripes, Fierabras’s sister, is depicted as far more caring and gentle in *Historia del emperador*. A brave and sometimes violent maiden, Floripes saves the Christian knights against her father and his army. In the Castilian version, Floripes recognizes that she has “forsaken [her] gods, the love of [her] father and relatives, and all the land” (20r) for the love of Guy of Bourgogne.<sup>5</sup> This early admission takes place before betrothed to Guy, functioning as a prefiguration of Balan’s later accusation –claiming his daughter as being driven by lust. This charge appears in most versions of *Fierabras*, but in the Iberian text Floripes’s admission serves as evidence of her consciousness of loss and her readiness to convert. Moreover, her description as fair-skinned and beautiful also becomes a precursor to her ability to be assimilated regardless of her aggressive behavior, as Suzanne Conklin Akbari has shown in *Idols in the East* (166). Nevertheless, in *Sowdan*, Floripes is never described, not even before her baptism. Therefore, her “proto-Christianity” –meaning her predisposition to become a Christian- solely results from her love for Guy, even if he initially rejects her because he would only take as wife a woman that Charlemagne personally assigns him.

Floripes does not represent a maidenly woman; nor do most of the Saracen women depicted in Western European medieval texts. Some of these Muslim women, like the Sultana in Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*, are aggressive and desire power. However, seldom do these women act as violently as Floripes who kills Brutamont (the gaoler) and Maragunde (her lady). In fact, Saracen women seldom involve themselves in political affairs. Though, on occasion, Floripes does counsel her father regarding the treatment of Christian prisoners, especially in *Sowdan*; these recommendations cover up her intention to save the knights, showing that women are not to be trusted. Nonetheless, *Sowdan* does not have any of the explicit misogynist comments found in *Historia del emperador* and other versions. Notably, these are remarks voiced by Saracens and not by the Christian knights. The Iberian version by far renders a less

<sup>4</sup> “Aunque mi padre es turco et yo cristiano, ni por ello he perdido el amor que le devo.”

<sup>5</sup> “Olvidado mis dioses y el amor del padre, de los parientes et de toda la tierra.”

violent characterization of the princess. Though she acts very aggressively (she kills the gaoler and the lady, and requests to be armed in order to defend the tower) Floripes behaves as a maiden (blushes, feels embarrassed, weeps of fright for the knights' life, and begs for his father's conversion). Nicolás de Piemonte, in his Castilian adaptation of Jehan Bagnyon's prosification, increases Floripes's modesty and virtuosity, and retains her physical description. This version, I think, not only prepares the reader to accept the Saracen princess as a worthy convert, but as a lawful spouse to the nephew of Charlemagne and future mother of his progeny. Though for Fierabras and Floripes there is possible salvation through conversion and baptism, it is not the case to all other characters.

Hybrid bodies, however, are not redeemed by conversion, as pointed out by Akbari (166). In the insular tradition, Alagolofure is one of the monstrous antagonists, particularly because of his hybrid nature. This "geaute stronge" (l. 2135) who guards the bridge near Mauntrible is described as having "a leopard's head, boar's tusks, and black skin" (ll. 2192-94). Curiously enough, in *Historia del emperador Galafre* –the same character though with a slightly different name– is not described as a monster, but as a horrible giant with human-like features. His big red eyes, wide nose, thick lips, and really dark skin make him very evidently different from his Christian enemies; however, Galafre cannot be baptized in either text. Together with his wife Barrok/Amiote, the giant is defeated in battle and killed. Instead their gigantic babies undergo christening and are renamed after the most famous peers –Oliver and Roland– yet they cannot survive without their mother, despite the "cleansing" ritual that baptism represents. These giants are monstrous only in *Sowdan*, as Marianne Ailes has noted, adding that "It is [...] impossible to say whether [*Sowdan*'s] reading comes from its source, is the result of misunderstanding, or if this is deliberate alteration of the text, suggesting that the giant is not human" (779).

So far, in *Sowdan of Babylon* we have seen Ferumbras as an exotic Saracen body, related to armies of blue, yellow, and black men; Floripes as a violent and aggressive maiden who decides whom she will wed and rejects all her kin and people; and Alagolofure, Ascopartes's kin, as a monstrous being because of his hybrid features. The last element I would now like to consider in this paper is that of geographical location in these various versions of *Fierabras*. While in some texts the narrative takes place in Spain, in *Historia del emperador Carlo Magno* the events happen elsewhere. These displacements, I claim, are a deformation of the narrative's setting, and respond to an "authorial" decision (in a manner of speaking). Ailes has noted in her *Comparative Study* that originally the plot was located in Rome and that later it was moved to Spain. Ailes includes in her analysis the introduction to the story, *Rome perdu et reconquise* (as Joseph Bédier calls it) or *Balan* (according to Gaston Paris), which gives place to the *Destruction de Rome*; yet this introduction only appears in the English tradition. Thus, Italy is the main location for the initial part of most insular texts, while most of the second part of the narrative is said to take place in Spain.

In terms of location, the river where Oliver throws the caskets of balm in the French verse versions is the “far de Rome” (A l. 1049, E l. 1103). This element implies that the battle between Oliver and Fierabras takes place outside of Rome, at least in the French poem. But *Sowdan* has no specific reference to the river where the bottles of balm are tossed, it is just a river; the same happens in *Historia del emperador*. Another element considered in the localization of the story relates to the explicit reference to Spain. In *Sowdan*, Laban’s description notes him as the lord of Spain (l. 2164). His main city is Egremoure (also Agremoure) (l. 718), which is located in Spain (ll. 717-19), but he is Sultan of Babylon. Furthermore, after having Laban killed, Charlemagne gives Guy and Fierabras all the land of Spain (ll. 3195-98), leaving no doubt about this location. Nevertheless, according to Piemonte’s adaptation to Castilian, Balan is the emir (*almirante*) of Turkey (fol. 34v) and his men are “turcos” or “paganos,” not Moors. Furthermore, most versions concur on the localization in Spain, a fact that has led many scholars to locate the bridge of Mantrible and the river in Spain. André de Mandach, for example, is convinced that the river under the bridge, Flagot in most versions, derives its name from *flumen Tago* (39). de Mandach is following Francisco Márquez Villanueva, author of one of the few works on the Castilian text, who mentions the existence of a Roman bridge over river Tajo (*Tagus*, in Latin) known as Mantible, located in Alconétar, Spain (104). The identification of this location as the site of *Fierabras* might be the result of the text’s popularity, yet these references to Spain are not present in *Historia del emperador*.

Piemonte’s translation of Jehan Bagnyon’s stands independently from other versions, locating Balan’s court without the Iberian Peninsula in Aguas Muertas instead of Egremore or Aigremour. While the latter might not be a real place, regardless de Mandach claims that there are plenty of locations in Galicia and Portugal called *Agra Maior* (39), Aguas Muertas (*Aigues Mortes* in Provençal) is a port located between Montpellier and Marseille in the south of France. According to Sir Theodor A. Cook (200), in 1248, King Louis IX bought this place from the abbot of Psalmodi. The tower known as Matafère was already built by the early-thirteenth century, along with some fortification mentioned in the agreement between the king and the abbot. Also of note, the Seventh Crusade departed from Aguas Muertas. Possibly this is not the “original location” of an unreal event is the matter of *Fierabras*, yet Nicolás de Piemonte relocates the “racial other.” In the English versions, this “other” includes Saracens, Turks, Indians, Arabs, and Ethiopians as part of the army (*Sowdan* ll. 3095-98). The Castilian version only mentions Turks, responding clearly to the threat posed by the Ottoman Empire by the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries. While the French verse versions of *Fierabras* locates the action in the Iberian Peninsula, just like the other *chansons de geste* dealing with the “matter of Spain, the peninsular text relocates the events elsewhere. Such relocation directly responds the “matter of Spain”, in a similar way that Iberian heroic epics stand as counter-narratives to Charlemagne’s incursion to the peninsula, according to Ramón Menéndez Pidal and other scholars (Díaz Mas, Print 113, and Cid Martínez). Ultimately, moving events to

a different geographical site illustrates the late medieval need to imagine this nascent nation as a “pure, contained space” and, moreover, responds to the orientalizing of Spain by its “European rivals,” mentioned in Barbara Fuchs’s *Exotic Nation* (3).

Through characters such as Fierabras, Alagolofure/Galafre, Floripes and Barrok/Amiote, the medieval text provides an imaginary rendition of the Saracen “other” and his/her allies. Gigantic and strong, black as devils, even, perhaps, yellow or blue, these enemies to Christendom appear monstrous to both medieval and contemporary audiences; however, monsterizing the “other” is not just a medieval or early modern practice as exemplified in how the religious “other” has been deemed a monster (or monstrous) in recent times, particularly after 9/11. From *The Romaunce of the Sowdone of Babylone*, these “others” were located in one of the most active contact zones in the European continent: Iberia. Only an inhabitant of that area would think to relocate the enemy elsewhere, as does Nicolás de Piemonte in his *Historia del emperador Carlo Magno*, to recuperate the desired blood purity of the peninsula.

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