

Josian's Empire Building: Female Saracen Body and Matrilineage in *Bevis of Hampton*

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1

Allas, moder, thee faire ble!
Evel becometh thee, houre to be,
To holde bordel,
And alle wif houren for thee sake. (307-10)

Upon discovering that his mother has plotted his father's assassination, the seven-year-old Bevis denounces her and all women as accursed whores. Then he vows to avenge his father's murder when he comes of age, for which he receives a slap in his face. From the very outset, the Middle English romance *Bevis of Hampton* (c. 1324) presents licentious women as the bane of rightful patrilineal succession. With her unbridled sexual desire, Bevis's mother yearns for a "yong knight" who "wolde me loven dai and night, / Cleppen an kissen with al is [his] might / And make me blis" (61, 64-66), instead of her decrepit husband, who would rather be in church than in her bedroom (59-60). She instigates the German emperor, her ex-lover, to slay her husband and establishes him as the new lord over herself and her dead husband's land. Afterwards, she sells her own son to Saracen merchants, expelling him from his own

lawful patrimony.

The patrilineal status quo is gravely threatened by the perfidious wife/mother, which the narrative hereafter attempts to correct by showcasing a heroine who remains staunchly loyal to the hero despite his mistrust and apathy. Josian apparently satisfies the demands of patriarchy exemplarily. As a chaste Saracen princess devoted to a Christian knight, she repels all other male advances, converts to Christianity, and bears two sons for Bevis. Without her valuable assistance, he would not have been able to create a trans-European Christian empire at the end of the narrative. Josian appears to be the perfect antithesis to Bevis's mother: she safeguards his bloodline and helps him reclaim and expand his patrimony, while his mother invites foreign intrusion and precludes his dynastic agenda.

This faithful heroine, however, does not allay the male apprehension that women are unreliable. On the contrary, Josian is afforded numerous opportunities to display her remarkable agency in the course of supporting Bevis. Having internalized early in his life the belief that “[w] ikked beth fele wimmen to fonde”—that many women prove to be wicked (548)—Bevis remains emotionally and physically distant from Josian throughout the narrative. He needs an eligible wife to sire legitimate sons and consolidate his lineage, yet he is not particularly attracted by Josian's aggressive courtship and frequently absent when her chastity is in danger. As a result, Josian must rely solely on her own resources to protect herself and prove that she is a good wife. For this purpose, she makes the most of her femininity and religious otherness as a Saracen virgin princess. Ironically, however, her demonstration of fidelity keeps troubling the traditional notion of femininity and putting her conversion status into perspective.

Critics have noted the prominent and unsettling presence of this unique female figure. Myra Seaman argues that Josian and her gender

performance are key to understanding Middle English romances like *Bevis of Hampton*, which are clearly distinguishable from their Old French counterparts in this respect. According to her, Josian appropriates the conventional expectations of her as a romance heroine, accomplishing feats of a hero under the guise of femininity. She “performs the feminine intentionally and ironically in order, ultimately, to assume masculine roles” (64), and her deviation “critiques the claims of a natural connection between individual females and the particular notion of woman promoted by chivalric romance” (74). Whereas Seaman concludes that Josian’s agency and “critical performance of the feminine” are safely contained by her “socially productive” desires (71), Bonnie J. Erwin has it that her “deviations from Christian norms of femininity” and “residual Saraceness” reveal male anxiety about women’s conversion (381). According to Erwin, *Bevis of Hampton* suggests that “there is an inherent instability to feminine identity—that even admirable women are unpredictable and may use their unruly desires to challenge men or political structures ruled by men” (382). The romance complicates the prospects of achieving religious unity by feminizing the desire behind conversion, all the while suggesting that feminine desire pose potential threat to both men and society (386). While I agree with Erwin that Josian’s desire is not as neatly regulated as it appears to be, I argue that her female Saracen body compromises Bevis’s patrilineal enterprise more seriously than she thinks. Her body escapes male scrutiny and confirms the fruit of her womb as her successors.

This paper aims to explore male anxiety about the female body and illuminate the possibility of matrilineage in *Bevis of Hampton* by analyzing the text in conjunction with a contemporary gynecological text, *De secretis mulierum*, as well as other fourteenth-century romances with conversion plotlines. The intertextual reading between them elucidates how subtly Josian undermines the ideology of patrilineage

through her apparently irreproachable somatic performance of femininity and through her aberrant ethnic identity. She circumvents fourteenth-century devices of controlling female body and patrilineal inheritance, thwarting all efforts to uncover truth about her body and establishing her two sons as heirs of her Saracen bloodline. Consequently, the empire that emerges at the end of the narrative is Josian's as well as—and more than—Bevis's.

2

In *Bevis of Hampton*, the regulation of the female body comes to be a pressing matter. *Bevis of Hampton* is a Middle English adaptation of the Anglo-Norman romance *Boeve de Haumtone*. Like other Middle English romances of Anglo-Norman origin, it follows “a pattern of dispossession and reinstatement” (Crane 18). A typical hero of the romance in this pattern begins his career with his rightful inheritance forfeited but reclaims it in the end, reestablishing a dynasty of his own. While the title characters of *King Horn* and *Havelok the Dane* lose their patrimony to Saracen pirates and the usurping male guardian respectively, it is the mother who dispossesses Bevis of his earldom of Hampton. Declaring all women to be potential whores at the age of seven, Bevis shows more faith in his horse than his lover—he wishes Josian to be “ase lele, / Alse is me stede Arondel” (2033-34). Yet, in “a world in which patriarchal succession and inheritance are paramount,” he still needs to marry a woman if he is to reinstate his lineage and ensure that his legacy will pass on to his offspring (Field 162). Therefore, Josian is presented as an epitome of chastity and devotion, autonomously defending her body even when the hero appears to have forsaken her.

In Bevis's world, however, men can never establish a transparent understanding of even the most faithful of women. Rosalind Field argues

that Anglo-Norman romances “introduces a heroine who may well be active, even forward, but who contributes to, rather than distracts from, the hero’s best interests” (162). Josian is definitely active and forward, and she seems to serve the hero’s best interests. On closer analysis, however, her body proves to be difficult to decipher since the secret of her virginity and maternity remains elusive not only to the characters in the romance, including Bevis himself, but also to its audience. Rather than genuinely protecting Bevis’s interests, Josian’s incomprehensible body demands the hero to rely solely on her words that she is indeed benefiting him.

Surveilling female virginity was a tricky business in late medieval society—not only in the world of romance but also in real life. During the fourteenth century, *De secretis mulierum* (*Of the Secrets of Women*) was widely circulated in Europe—a phenomenon suggesting intensified male interest in controlling the procreative female body. This late-thirteenth-century gynecological text falsely attributed to Albertus Magnus claims to reveal “certain hidden, secret things about the nature of women” (59). These “secret things” are not just any information on the female body but specific knowledge on the female reproductive system (Green, “From” 14).¹⁾ The text of *De secretis mulierum* and the related commentaries, which circulated along with the original text, dedicate large sections to discussing how to identify female virginity and its corruption. But clues for detecting virginity prove to be delusive even in this medical tradition obsessed with deciphering the enigma of the female body. *De secretis mulierum* first presents particular patterns

1) Monica H. Green remarks that although *De secretis mulierum* was never widely disseminated in England, the general atmosphere of curiosity in the matters of reproduction and clerical misogyny in the field of gynecology, which contributed to the renown of *De secretis mulierum* in the Continent, did affect the English readers of gynecological texts (*Making* 228).

of women's demeanor—"shame, modesty, fear, a faultless gait and speech, casting eyes down before men and the acts of men"—as the proof of chastity (128). However, the text suggests that some clever women, who can pretend to be chaste, should be tested by their urine for surer confirmation. Commentary B, one of the two commentaries published alongside the text, elaborates on the bodily traits of virginity, declaring that "a true sign of the woman's virginity is if it is difficult to perform the act and it causes a sore on his member" (129). This "true sign," nevertheless, is immediately qualified by the following proviso: "This is only true, however, if she did not cause her vulva to contract by using an ointment or another medicine so that she would be thought a virgin, as many women are in the habit of doing" (129). That is to say, even women with sexual experience can perform virginity successfully if they possess the right medical knowledge.

Medieval romances typically employ a trial by ordeal as a method of testing female chastity, only to expose the utter incompetency of such method. As Kathleen Coyne Kelly points out, romances exploit the ambiguity inherent in an ordeal of chastity and reveal "not necessarily the fidelity and infidelity of wife or lover, but the impossibility of knowing so" (77). In various romances, the heroine either evade the discovery of their adultery by swearing an equivocal oath or fail the ordeal only to have the blame transferred elsewhere. That is to say, the result of a legal procedure has no power to confirm or contest her verbal testament, and the public has no choice but to accept her declaration of chastity, even if she did commit adultery. In such romances, an adulterous queen typically has a barren body; the possibility of an illegitimate child succeeding the throne is thus forestalled and the king's bloodline dies out as a result. Josian, in contrast, is given a crucial role in Bevis's project of reestablishing his patrilineage. Although never overtly adulterous, she is more hard-pressed to prove her chastity than

unfaithful barren queens, for she must provide legitimate children for Bevis. Since the usual method of oaths and trials are dysfunctional, *Bevis of Hampton* requires something else if it is to guarantee its heroine's integrity.

Yet, Josian's virginity is verbally performed without any male authentication. Prior to marrying Bevis, Josian is forced to marry King Yvor by her father's command. Here she makes it clear that, for the love of Bevis, she will wear a ring with such power that while it is on her finger, "[t]o [her] schel no man have welling" (1472). At this point, this ring appears to be used later as proof of her virginity. The ring, however, mysteriously disappears from the narrative without a trace after her speech. Bevis refuses to love Josian after reuniting with her on the grounds that the patriarch in Jerusalem "forbed him upon his lif, / That he never toke wif, / Boute she were clene maide," and that she has already been married to Yvor for seven years (1967-69). Josian's answer to him is as follows:

Led me hom to thee contré,
And boutte thee finde me maide wimman,
Be that eni man saie can,
Send me aghen to me fon
Al naked in me smok alon! (2202-06)

She does not confirm her virginity by exhibiting the magic power of the ring, but simply challenges "eni man" to doubt her maidenhood. As demonstrated in other romances with outright adulterous queens, what "eni man saie can" and what ensues from such accusation can never verify a woman's infidelity in the romance genre. If Josian insists on her virginity, Bevis has no choice but to accept her words as proof even if there is no conclusive evidence, and this is exactly what he does: he immediately agrees on her terms and takes her with him. Under the

guise of producing material evidence of virginity, the magic ring turns out to have no more substance than a mere utterance. Afterwards, Earl Miles attempts to rape Josian and gives her a perfect opportunity to practice the vestal magic of the ring; Josian, however, chooses to murder the rapist instead of wearing the ring. The virtue of the ring, in fact, is never validated in the narrative. It may have been simply forgotten, but it may also have been dispensable from the beginning.

Furthermore, Josian's performance of virginity complicates the relationship between her body and Bevis's masculinity. The more Josian manifests her virginity, the more he feels emasculated. When she encounters two lions in the woods after eloping with Bevis to escape Yvor, she is given another chance to perform her virginity, this time through her actions. The lions cannot shame her because she is "Kinges doughter, *quene and maide both*" (2393; my emphasis). Josian's ability to hold a lion by its neck unharmed, therefore, may be the single definite proof that she is still a virgin despite her married status. That she is superb in this feminine virtue of virginity and in her royal blood, however, does not make her more desirable to Bevis. Whenever Josian intervenes in his fight with the lions and restrains one lion for him, he vehemently rejects her assistance, exclaiming:

Dame, forsoth, ywys,
I myght yelp of lytel prys,
There I had a lyon quelde,
The while a woman another helde!
Thow shalt never umbriade me,
When thou comest hoom to my contré: (2413-18)

Bevis is deeply mortified by her interference since it imperils his honor and masculinity. A few moments later, he even threatens to kill her along with the lions if she keeps seizing the lion to save his life.

Josian has to be a virgin to marry Bevis, but she is prohibited from proving her virginity through her deeds. Paradoxically, Bevis realizes that his patriarchal authority is safer when her virginity remains only as a verbal statement.

Josian's performance of virginity exposes the contradiction inherent in the physical test of virginity recorded in *De secretis mulierum*. As Sarah Alison Miller notes, the true sign of female virginity makes the male body vulnerable in *De secretis mulierum*:

To know the signs of virginity is to penetrate the female body in intercourse. But this penetrating knowledge simultaneously requires that the boundaries of the male body be violated in order for the sign of virginity, that is the sore on the male member, to become legible. These signs predicated on the narrowness of the virgin vaginal passage borrow experiences of first intercourse generally associated with the female body—pain, a “sore” on the genitals—and transfers them, so that it is the male body that suffers the wound of defloration. (76-77)

Just as the virgin's vagina corporeally hurts the phallus, Josian's act of displaying her virginity afflicts Bevis's masculinity. Bevis can never absolutely dominate Josian's body to his full satisfaction. Either he must depend on her statement of fidelity, hoping that her body is indeed chaste, or he must sacrifice his masculinity in exchange for palpable proof of her chastity. Even though Josian does not overtly disrupt Bevis's lineage like her maritidal mother-in-law, her body is fundamentally just as uncontrollable.

Josian's body becomes even more problematic when she delivers Bevis's sons. Bevis offers to help her during parturition, which she refuses on the ground that woman's “privé” should be known “[t]o no man thourgh me” (3631). According to Karma Lochrie, “[t]he Middle English word for privacy, *privete*, designated both the condition of being

private and concealment, or secrecy,” and medieval gender ideology “associated the feminine with the private, secret, and immoral” (136, 135). Josian insists on the secrecy of the private female body several times to repel unwelcome male intrusions. When Earl Miles forces her to marry him and tries to rape her on the wedding night, she demands him to drive out the wedding crowds gathered to observe their consummation, so that “no man se [their] *privité*” (3200). Thereupon, Miles arranges a private space, expecting that he would be able to “ride” her when left alone with her, but she uses this opportunity to mete out private justice and hang him by a “knotte riding,” or a noose (3220), and “let him so ride al the night” (3224). Again, when Ascopard kidnaps her to return her to Yvor, she appeals on the necessity “[t]o do [her] *nedes in privité*” (3661). Ascopard immediately grants her a moment by herself, assuming that she will perform postpartum care on her body. In this private moment, however, Josian secretly consumes an herb that will make her resemble a leper, thus discouraging Yvor’s attempt to remarry her. Seaman rightly notes that “[t]he combination of her keen awareness of what others demand of her as a woman, and her willingness and capacity to act in opposition to this representation, allows Josian to remove herself from these threatening circumstances” (68). What she does not mention, however, is how her performance of feminine *privité* extends to her husband Bevis. Bevis’s presence in the birthing chamber counts as an unwelcome male intrusion, and if she chose to, she could deceive Bevis in her private moment just as she tricked Miles, Ascopard, and Yvor.

Josian’s desire to guard her *privité* from Bevis is troubling when we consider the importance of a legitimate heir in Bevis’s world and in fourteenth-century English society. As Gail McMurray Gibson points out, the medieval birthing chamber “existed, first and foremost, to produce the male children that were the essential links in the chain

of male order and control" (11). Therefore, even though men could not directly enter the scene of birth, they lingered nearby to probe into the process of childbirth and uncover any secrets regarding pregnancy and parturition. According to Harris-Stoertz, "one can certainly find an increased willingness on the part of men to intervene in childbirth matters in a number of significant ways as early as the twelfth century" (265). One of the ways to involve men in childbirth was to require them to serve as witnesses to childbirth. Women could observe the process of childbirth firsthand but could not testify in court, so men outside the birthing room had to hear the newborn baby's cry and bear witness (276). By going into labor alone and requesting Bevis to leave the scene, Josian makes it impossible to verify the legitimacy or eldership of her twin boys. Bevis removes himself far enough so that "hii ne mighte hire paines here," so he is unable to hear his sons' cry and play the role of a legal witness (3636). Legally, therefore, there is no man to testify to the birth of Bevis's twins or to determine their legitimacy and eldership.

In fact, Josian's *privité* turns her body into a complete mystery accessible to no one. Jeremy Gilbert points out that a secret must be disclosed to someone to qualify as such:

There must surely be a difference between a secret and something which is simply not known, otherwise the concept "secret" has no specificity whatsoever, and I would suggest that in the imagination of most people a "secret" is something, very specifically, which is *shared by some*—perhaps only by two, perhaps only by one subject and their "conscience," their confessor, or God—but shared nonetheless. (26)

Or as Lochrie convincingly argues, secrecy "functions to create masculine communities of writers/narrators and readers and to exclude the feminine" in the medieval books of secrets (136). The female reproductive body is shaped into a secret in *De secretis mulierum* by

being discovered to and circulated among the selected male audience. In contrast, no one can discover or circulate the secret of Josian's body because the truth of her body is impossible to capture or uncover. Neither Bevis nor the audience of the romance knows what is, or is not, behind the world created by her speech. Her virginity exists only as a verbal proclamation, and the performance that should lead to its verification threatens masculinity and must be stopped. Her *privités* point to a different act in each situation with a different man—consummation with Miles, childbirth with Bevis, and postpartum care with Ascopard. Sexual and reproductive *privités* of women are never revealed to these men or the audience because she performs wholly different, “masculine” acts of executing a rapist or exercising medical knowledge she has learned from “meisters grete / Of Boloynes . . . and of Tulete,” or because she temporarily disappears from the narrative during parturition (3673-74). Thus, her body exists as “something which is simply not known.”

3

In medieval scientific notion, the female body during gestation functions merely as a supply house for base materials and as a conduit of paternal characteristics. According to the Aristotelian model of procreation, which was the dominant medical theory in medieval Europe, “the semen is able to shape and communicate the male parent's form to the blood contributed by the female; and that blood can, in turn, receive form and nourish the fetus, which the male principle has defined” (Cadden 23). The maternal body, void of any seed, provided the basic matter upon which the generative paternal seed inscribed the father's hereditary form. Even *De secretis mulierum*, which introduces another theory based on the Galenic two-seed model, contends that “in

the male seed there is a certain generating spirit which penetrates the entire seminal mass, and this spirit has the power to form all members" (64). The embryo is "a certain fleshy mass formed from these two [male and female] seeds," but only the male seed possesses the "spirit that is the efficient principle" (65, 64).²⁾ This model of generation scientifically supports the system of patrilineage. If a woman could not provide her child with any heritable genetic features biologically, it would be perfectly natural that "a woman's birth family . . . would generally have little or no genealogical import" (Florschuetz 29). Then, it would be the father's blood that determines the shaping of children and the future of the dynasty.

Yet, in some romances with conversion plotlines, sons frequently turn out to be closer to their mothers than to their fathers. In Geoffrey Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* (c. 1387-1400), for instance, Custance—the protagonist and the daughter of the Roman Emperor—gives birth to a son who resembles her "[a]s possible is a creature to be" (II.1031). Stranded on the shores of Northumberland, she successfully converts the pagan inhabitants and marries their king Alla. After delivering a son, however, she is cast out into the ocean with her newborn baby due to her mother-in-law's apprehension that she will contaminate Alla's bloodline through her "straunge" heterogeneity (II.700). After many tribulations on her rudderless ship, she is saved by a Roman senator

2) This explanation diverges from the original Galenic procreation theory. According to the Galenic understanding, male and female reproductive organs are anatomically and functionally identical, except for a minor difference in their placement. Based on this opinion of male and female genitals, Galen argued that "females, like males, not only produced semen but produced semen capable of communicating motion to the fetus and influencing its character and appearance" (Cadden 34). The text and the commentaries of *De secretis mulierum* use the terminology of "female seed," but do not regard the woman's seed to have the ability to effect spirits in fetuses.

and follows him back to her homeland unbeknownst to her husband and her father, raising her child, Maurice, by herself. When Alla makes a pilgrimage to Rome and asks about the identity of the “faire child” at the senator’s feast, not realizing that he is his son, the senator answers: “A moder he hath, but fader hath he noon” (II.1018, 1020). Maurice temporarily exists as a fatherless child. While the identity of his mother is firmly established from the start, that of his father is only belatedly revealed.

Indeed, the mother’s image is so deeply engraved on the son that Alla and the Roman Emperor immediately recall Custance when they see Maurice. As Florschuetz observes, “[t]he striking resemblance between mother and son effectively marks Custance rather than Alla as the dominant source of lineal transmission, and it does so in such a way that no one who sees them apart or together can deny their relation” (55). Custance’s image stamped on her son eventually disqualifies Alla from establishing Maurice as his successor to the Northumbrian throne. At the end of the narrative, Maurice becomes the emperor of his mother’s native land of Rome, leaving Northumberland without any legitimate heir of Alla’s line to take the throne.

In *The King of Tars* (c. 1330 or earlier), on the other hand, the lump child, begotten between the Princess of Tars and the Sultan of Damascus, transforms from a lifeless flesh sired by an inadequate father to a perfect child born solely from his mother. The Sultan wins the princess as his wife by the force of arms and coerces her to convert to Islam. The princess pretends to convert, but secretly retains her Christian faith. Her double life continues unsuspected until she bears a child without any limb or face. The child looks like a “rond of flesche yschore” because he is born of the miscegenation between a Christian wife and a Saracen husband (577). He turns into a beautiful white boy—“[f]eirer child might non be bore”—only after he is christened Jon.

It is at this point that the Sultan is revealed to be ethnically “blac” (775, 793). Jon’s Christian mother, who is “[a]s white as fether of swan” like her son, tells her unconverted black-skinned Saracen husband that he did not bear the child and has no right to consider himself his father or her husband: “Bot thou were christned so it is— / Thou no hast no part theron ywis, / Noither of the child ne of me” (12, 808-10). The Sultan retroactively claims paternity only after he converts to Christianity and wears white skin thereupon.

The lump child invalidates the Aristotelian one-seed model in which only fathers possess the unique power to mold the embryonic flesh into human beings. Critics have noted that the birth of the lump child is based on Aristotelian conception theory: the baby receives the basic matter from his Christian mother but fails to obtain the adequate spirit and form from his Saracen father.³⁾ This is not exactly the case in *The King of Tars*, however. The princess can remedy the infant’s lifelessness by observing the Christian ritual of baptism. If so, a woman does not require the human male seed to generate a healthy child; she only needs to mix her menstrual blood with her true faith in God. If her husband refuses to believe in her God, she can discard him altogether, depriving him of his paternity and husbandhood. Even if her body lacks the seed, the princess is more than just a passive receptacle; in the struggle between the incompatible matter and form, initiated by religious/racial miscegenation, the mother’s matter has won and rendered the father’s form-giving seed useless.

These conversion romances allow women genetic power to form their children, unlike the dominant procreational model of the time. Maurice and Jon owe their body and identity to their mothers, and each father experiences difficulty claiming that the child in question is his own. Late

3) See Gilbert 105-06, Ramey 69-70.

medieval medical theories, law codes, and literatures of genealogy write off the influence of women to endorse the ascendancy of patrilineage, but that is not quite possible in the romances of conversion. As Jennifer R. Goodman notes, “[t]hese tales of conversion stress the decisive importance of the secular woman—the maiden who becomes a wife—as a force in history.” In the genre of romance, conversion is “not an enterprise of the clergy but of the marriageable female” (126). As the central figure of the narrative, the wife does not simply serve as an empty transmitter of her husband’s bloodline. It follows, therefore, that Maurice resembles only his mother, and that Jon is initially born as a lump of flesh, not as a Saracen boy. This crucial role of the “marriageable female” is not limited to Christian heroines who marry pagan kings but extended to their Saracen counterparts in gender-reversed conversion narratives. Just like Custance and the Princess of Tars, Josian can imbue her child with her form.

In the case of Christian princesses, the son’s likeness to his mother ultimately serves to strengthen God’s paternal authority. Maurice and Jon’s biological fathers with their defective heathen past are replaced with the one true Father. Custance and the Princess of Tars exercise more influence on their sons than their husbands, but they do so as instruments of God. Carolyn Dinshaw argues that in *The Man of Law’s Tale*, “[t]he woman’s image binds father and son, and, later, grandfather and son (1095-96) in what must be called the patriarchal gaze” (109). It is questionable, however, whether Custance actually connects the biological father Alla with his son, considering that Alla never succeeds in establishing his son as his heir. It is also unclear if Maurice ever sets his foot back on his birthland after his parents reconcile. Yet Dinshaw’s observation that the son is bound to his grandfather—maternal grandfather, to be more precise—is indisputable. Custance brings her son back to the center of Christianity, away from

Northumberland, which is still described as “hethenesse” by Custance despite its recent conversion (II.1112). The family created at the end of the narrative, consisting of Custance, Maurice, and the Emperor, parallels the relationship between the Virgin, the Son, and God the Father. In comparison, Jon is more blatantly portrayed as God’s son; he obtains his flesh from the princess and his form and spirit from God. His transformation to a white boy resembling his mother proves the might of God and causes the Christianization of Damascus. Maurice and Jon’s affinity to their mother deviates from the dominant scientific theory of the time, but reaffirms the superiority of the Father and Christianity.

Contrary to the scions of Christian princesses, Guy and Miles—Josian’s sons—manifest their biological connection to their mother specifically through their *heathennesse*. Ascopard captures Josian right after she gives birth to twin boys, and the newborn babies are left behind at their place of birth without their mother. When Bevis discovers them, they are described as “twei hethene knave childer, / Swithe faire children with alle, / Alse hii were fro the moder falle” (3714-16). They are born fair but heathen, precisely like their mother Josian when Bevis first met her: “So faire she was and bright of mod, / . . . / Boute of Cristene lawe she kouthe naught” (521-26). Bevis entrusts his infant sons respectively with a forester and a fisherman, ordering each of them to “cristen this hethen childe” (3734). Lynn T. Ramey argues that “the term ‘heathen’ may . . . serve to underscore the Saracen origins of their mother” (81). Emphasized twice in their infancy, however, the twins’ heathennesse does more than just reminding the audience of their mother’s ethnic background. It suggests that they are born as their mother’s sons, inheriting Saraceness from her. Josian’s otherness remains unassimilated even after her conversion and passes down to her sons as a hereditary condition.

More importantly, they stay as their mother’s sons even after baptism

and maturation. To fight with the repressive King Edgar of England near the end of the narrative, Guy and Miles respectively ride a “rabit”—an Arabian horse—and a “dromedary” camel into London (4475, 4481). That is to say, their Saracen matrilineage is not wiped out but visibly displayed in the last battle. Josian also performs her Saracen origin after converting to Christianity. After her baptism and marriage, she twice utilizes the skills that she learned in “Ermonie,” her native land Armenia (3671; 3905). She applies “fysik and sirgirie” to disguise herself as a leper and later practices “minstralcie” to support Saber when he falls ill after rescuing her from Yvor (3672, 3906). Guy and Miles are portrayed not as Christians by birth like their father, but as converted Saracens who occasionally perform their otherness and reaffirm their relation to their mother.

It is thus impossible to regard the empire created at the end of the romance purely on patrilineal terms. Ramey argues that converted Saracen women in medieval romances are allowed to marry important Christian men because “wealth and status in European society largely passed through the father,” and that “[f]ollowing the logic of medieval Aristotelian science, . . . women provide only the material and men the form and soul” (81). This is what legal and medical authorities of the fourteenth century England would like to believe, but not what actually happens in *Bevis of Hampton*. The twins have received “hethen” forms and souls from their mother, and one of them even inherits a kingdom from the mother’s side. While Ramey claims that “Guy, named after his paternal grandfather, inherits Hampton” (81), he eventually becomes king of Armenia, which is an inheritance from his maternal grandfather. Neither Guy nor Miles directly succeeds to their paternal grandfather’s earldom of Hampton.

Guy’s accession to the throne of Armenia is comparable to Maurice’s succession of his maternal grandfather as the Roman Emperor, but

critically different in one respect. While Maurice, Custance, and the Emperor are all born Christians, Josian and Guy convert to Christianity, and Ermin remains a Saracen until his death. Angela Florschuetz notes that “[i]n the fantasy of lineage that the final domestic arrangement of the Emperor, Custance, and Maurice enacts, the Man of Law subtly asserts a model that allows us to imagine Custance as the empty vessel through which her father’s bloodline is transmitted unadulterated to her son” (58). Such fantasy is unavailable in *Bevis of Hampton*, however. Ermin’s purely Saracen blood cannot affect his Christian grandsons. If a biological father can be denied his paternity on the basis of his religious alterity according to medieval imagination as testified in *The King of Tars*, it is also possible that Ermin’s hereditary influence is nonexistent in his now-Christian daughter and grandson. If he receives baptism, he may be able to retroactively become the point of origin for Guy, but he dies unconverted, and it is Guy who Christianizes Armenia “with dent of sword” after his death (4019). Guy is crowned king of Armenia through his kinship with his mother, and there is a clear gap between him and his grandfather.

Nor is it possible to incorporate Josian’s matrilineage into the order of God the Father. Regarding Maurice’s inheritance of Rome, Florschuetz convincingly argues:

Custance’s superior imperial bloodline also ostensibly helps to explain the transfer of Maurice as the heir to Rome rather than to Northumberland, as in England a man of lower descent who married an heiress would often see his sons go on to take the family names and regalia of his wife’s more prestigious family instead of his own. (57)

It is plausible that the contemporary audience would have considered Custance’s imperial lineage to be more exalted than Alla’s newly

converted ex-pagan bloodline. This explanation, however, cannot be applied to Josian, who is ethnically Saracen, and her son Guy. Then, no conventional interpretation is available for Josian's atypical maternal inheritance, which goes against the grain of prevailing legal, scientific, and religious assumptions.

Josian is distinguishable not only from unbaptized Saracens like her father, but also from born Christians like her husband. In the Middle Ages, according to Steven F. Kruger, there were "Christian anxieties about Jewish and Muslim bodies" and "uncertainty about whether religious conversion truly transformed those bodies, cleansing them of their impurities, repairing their imperfections, and removing the tinges of animality that clung to them in Christian fantasies" (167). *The King of Tars* attempts to assuage these concerns by imagining religious conversion as a process of bodily metamorphosis. The neophyte Sultan's body changes along with his religion, and he transforms from an ethnically black man to a white one. He becomes indistinguishable from any other white Christians, just as the King of Tars is a "trewe Cristen king" and his daughter is as white as a swan even though Tars is a country located in the East (4). In *Bevis of Hampton*, however, no such consolation exists. Josian's Saracen trait, not just limited to herself but heritable, remains unremovable even after her conversion. Despite her residual otherness, or "impurities" and "imperfections," her marriage to a Christian knight endures. In fact, it is ironically her Saraceness that helps her stay as Bevis's wife. Her knowledge of medicine rescues her from being raped by her Saracen ex-husband Yvor; her skill in minstrelsy sustains Saber and herself during their journey back to Bevis and enables her to reach him just in time to thwart his second marriage to a Christian princess of Aumbefore.

Saracens are frequently depicted as duplicitous in *Bevis of Hampton* and other romances. Both Ermin and Ascopard owe their life to

Bevis, but they instantly betray him when they see the chance to do so. Similarly, the Sultanness, Custance's first mother-in-law, fakes conversion in such a way in *The Man of Law's Tale* that nobody suspects her until "[t]he Soudan and the Cristene everichone / Been al tohewe and stiked at the bord" (II.429-30). Saracens' treachery is inscrutable; it remains a secret until they decide to reveal their true intention. Josian is no exception; as Erwin points out, "[h]er wily acts and penchant for disguises make it clear that her interior beliefs and motivations cannot be reliably read by others" (382). Yet, while deceptive Saracens are often eliminated from the narrative, Josian enjoys her status as the matron of the Christian empire until the very end of the narrative. Bevis can only hope that she will not practice her Saracen cunning on him as she did on Yvor. Josian is simply impenetrable and uncontrollable, and there is no way for the male figures in her world to alleviate their anxieties over her.

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Not only does Josian play a crucial part in obtaining Armenia, but she also contributes to Bevis's acquisition of Mombraunt. The battles between Bevis and Yvor are caused by Josian's successive marriages to them and each man's struggle to keep her as his own wife. After losing Josian to Bevis once again, Yvor wages war on her father Ermin's land. Bevis's whole family, at this point, is staying with Ermin in Armenia since Bevis has ceded his father's estate to the king of England. Bevis wins the first combat, and Yvor ransoms himself out of the prison. The narrative attempts to downplay Josian's role by inserting an episode in which Yvor steals Arundel the horse and Bevis recovers it through his uncle's cunning, thereby sparking the second battle between them. Bevis indeed displays more trust and love towards his horse than his

wife. He relinquishes his Hampton estate to save his horse when it kills the prince of England, whereas he previously left his wife behind in a foreign country to win back his estate. But howsoever Bevis attempts to minimize Josian's influence on himself, it is undeniable that he wins Mombraunt through her connection to the land. When he finally kills Yvor, Bevis is crowned as the king of Mombraunt, "And Josian bright and schene, / Now is she ther twies quene" (4255-56). Josian remains queen of Mombraunt for two consecutive reigns while Bevis takes Yvor's place. The man who is successfully married to her ultimately acquires the right to rule Mombraunt. As this episode demonstrates, Josian's significance in the empire-building process cannot be easily diminished. Even during Bevis's all-English last battle, carried out in London to regain Hampton from King Edgar, Josian personally sends her sons to the battlefield to aid Bevis and to march through the streets of London on an Arabian horse and a camel.

Josian's mysterious female body and her identity as a converted Saracen threaten Bevis's masculinity and Christian heroism, yet at the same time, these are the *sine qua non* for his territorial expansion. Bevis could not have ascended the throne of Mombraunt without her previous marriage to Yvor, which makes her proclaimed virginity dubious at best; his son could not have inherited or Christianized Armenia if not for Josian's Saracen lineage. *Bevis of Hampton* creates an autonomous Saracen princess to fulfill a Christian expansionist fantasy. In so doing, however, it opens the possibility of endangering the hero's patrilineage and Christian order. Thanks to her ineffable Saracen heritage, Josian effectively escapes patriarchy's surveillance over the female body and establishes a dynasty of her own, in which her Saracen ethnicity dies hard despite her easy and willing conversion. This troubling achievement of Josian cannot be dismissed as insignificant. Her privileged position as the heroine of a conversion romance, along with

her enigmatically elusive body, suggests that the huge and far-flung territories created for her husband's lineage at the end of the narrative are entitled to be called her own.

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ABSTRACT

Josian's Empire Building:
Female Saracen Body and Matrilineage
in *Bevis of Hampton*

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Josian, the heroine of the Middle English romance *Bevis of Hampton*, seemingly conforms to patriarchal expectations, effectively aiding the hero Bevis in expanding his territory and securing his lineage. Yet, while supporting Bevis as a faithful lover, Josian is permitted to exhibit remarkable agency by performing her femininity and Saraceness. Her body produced through these performances ultimately complicates Bevis's patrilineal expansionist endeavor and forms a matrilineal empire. This paper, focusing on Josian, aims to explore male anxiety about the female body and illuminate the possibility of matrilineage in *Bevis of Hampton* by examining the text alongside a contemporary gynecological text, *De secretis mulierum*, as well as two other fourteenth-century romances featuring conversion narratives—*The King of Tars* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*. The intertextual reading between them elucidates how Josian circumvents fourteenth-century devices of controlling female body and patrilineal inheritance. Her somatic performance of femininity renders the truth about her virginal/pregnant body impenetrable to all, even to Bevis and the audience of the text, while her status as the heroine of conversion narrative allows her to pass her Saracen identity to her two sons. These sons, who play crucial parts in Bevis's territorial expansion, are manifested more

evidently as Josian's heirs; consequently, the empire that emerges at the end of the narrative is Josian's as well as—and more than—Bevis's.

Key Words *Bevis of Hampton*; female body; matrilineage; Saracen; medieval gynecology; conversion narrative; *De secretis mulierum*; *The King of Tars*; *The Man of Law's Tale*