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Sodomy and The East in The *Seven Sages of Rome*

Abstract

This article describes the perspectives offered by a popular late-medieval story collection, the *Seven Sages of Rome*, on the intertwining histories of homophobia and islamophobia. Looking at one of the collection's tales, *senescalcus*, the tale of the steward, it considers how the sodomitical past of the king in this story is incorporated into its moralization as well as the varying treatment of the sodomy motif across the tale's extant versions in English and French. Examination of the longer history of *senescalcus* reveals that the sodomy motif is introduced as the tale moves westwards from western Asia, where the *Seven Sages* originates. I contend that the inclusion of the sodomy motif in *senescalcus* reflects a tendency to associate sodomy with the east that was shaped by the experience of the crusades. The conclusion proposes that the *Seven Sages* fosters critical reflection on late-medieval European attitudes towards sodomy and eastern identities.[1]

Keywords

Seven Sages of Rome; *Book of Sindbad*; Sodomy; *Senescalcus*; *Roma*.

The *Seven Sages of Rome* is one of the collections of tales rooted in western and southern Asia that so thoroughly enriched European storytelling in the later Middle Ages. It takes its frame narrative and four of its tales from the *Book of Sindbad*, a work surviving in ten versions whose earliest, now lost redaction is thought to originate in Persia at the end of the eighth century CE. Over the following centuries, this putative Middle Persian text was translated into later forms of Persian and into Arabic, and from Arabic into Syriac, Greek, Hebrew, and Spanish.[2] It is via one or more of these later renditions that the *Book of Sindbad* became widely known in Europe, where in the second half of the twelfth century it appeared in French as the *Roman des sept sages de Rome*.[3] So speedily was this text adapted, translated, and copied thereafter that by the end of the Middle Ages, the *Seven Sages* was circulating in all the major European vernaculars and in Latin. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the text's most diligent bibliographer, Killis Campbell, counted at least forty different versions of the work surviving

1. This article was composed concurrently with a new text of the Middle English *Seven Sages of Rome* that I have prepared with Alison Wiggins for the Middle English Text Series (METS) published by the Teaching Association for Medieval Studies (TEAMS). I thank Alison for many stimulating conversations about the *Seven Sages*. Versions of this article were presented at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds (2023) and as part of the public lectures sponsored by the Centre d'Études Médiévales et Post-médiévales (CEMEP) at the University of Lausanne (2024). I am grateful to my audiences on both these occasions for much helpful feedback.

2. So Perry. For a defense of the earlier theory that the *Book of Sindbad* originates in India, see Upadhyaya. On the Indian origins of some of the collection's inset tales, see Artola.

3. On the diffusion of the *Book of Sindbad*, see further Belcher and Mallette.

in more than two hundred manuscripts and nearly two hundred and fifty early prints (xvii; more recently see too the repertories in Runte, Wikeley, and Farrell; and Bildhauer and Bonsall). For its late-medieval audiences, the *Seven Sages of Rome* would scarcely have required an introduction.

The long, pan-continental transmission of the *Seven Sages* materials affords twenty-first century researchers an excellent opportunity to chart developments in cultural attitudes over time and place. For example, studies of one of the collection's most famous tales, *canis*, the tale of the dog, have shown how it becomes more misogynist as it moves westward (Blackburn; Eichel-Lojkine).[4] In the versions of *canis* compiled in the *Book of Sindbad*, a faithful pet fights off an attack from a snake on his master's unattended baby but is then rashly killed by the master, who sees the animal covered in blood on his return home and suspects it of mauling the child. In the version of the tale transmitted in the *Seven Sages*, by contrast, it is often the master's wife who finds the bloody pet and incites her husband to kill it, so that the story's moral comes to concern not only the perils of acting rashly but also the dangers of following women's counsel. This development reminds us of the unfavourable position afforded to women in the European literary tradition at the same time as it demonstrates more fundamentally that, in terms of social justice, 'west' does not always trump 'east.'

4. The tradition of using Latin names to refer to the inset tales in the *Seven Sages* can be traced back to Goedeke.

This essay exploits the *Seven Sages* materials to offer a literary perspective on another aspect of prejudice, namely the history of homophobia. Looking at *senescalcus*, the tale of the steward, it considers how the sodomitical past of the king in this tale is incorporated into its moralization as well as the emphasizing, minimizing, or effacement of the sodomy theme across the extant versions of the text. Since the sodomy motif is not present in the versions of the story included in the *Book of Sindbad*, the argument also offers a rationale for the introduction of this element in its rendition in the *Seven Sages*. I contend that this modification reflects ways of thinking about sex between men and west Asia and North Africa that were shaped by the experience of the crusades. Analysis of another of the inset tales that is closely related to *senescalcus*, *Roma*, supports this point. The discussion concludes with a consideration of the attitudes that the *Seven Sages* fosters. I make the case that the text not only incorporates the later medieval stigmatisation of sodomy and eastern identities but also invites critical reflection on these interrelated trends.

The transmission history of the *Seven Sages* is complex. Refining a model developed by Gaston Paris, Campbell (xxi-xxxv) provides the overview of the textual evidence that remains standard. For the purposes of this essay, Campbell's scheme can be simplified as follows:

> The now lost first redaction of the *Seven Sages*, in French verse, V, gives rise to three more versions in French: K, in verse; D*, in derhymed prose; and A*, a prose abbreviation. A* then gives rise to numerous translations, referred to as the A group or branch, which includes all the Middle English versions as well as another French prose version, L, which follows A* closely except in its selection of inset tales at its close. The A group also includes: a Latin prose version H, which gives rise to its own group, including translations into French and English; a group of Italian texts, I; and another French prose version, M, which rewrites the *Seven Sages* to take account of the sequel romances that the work attracted.[5]

5. Runte (xviii) presents this information in the form of a stemma.

Although this summary presents the processes of translation and adaptation sequentially, it should be borne in mind that the chronology of the extant manuscripts does not always match the order of Campbell's scheme. The unique surviving copy of D* post-dates the earliest Middle English translations of A*, for example. It is also the case that readers could have simultaneous access to texts belonging to different branches of transmission. Thus the Middle Scots text of the *Seven Sages* can combine elements belonging to both Campbell's groups A and H (van Buuren 131–81). These points have implications for the ways in which we can model the reception of the *Seven Sages*. I return to this topic below.

In what follows, I focus initially on the treatment of *senescalcus* in the Middle English versions of the *Seven Sages*, all of which belong to Campbell's group A. There are eight manuscripts of the text, which their editors group into three subgroups, as is shown in Table 1. The sigla are Campbell's; the dates given for the manuscripts are from the Introduction to Whitelock's edition:

SIGLUM	VERSIONS AND EDITIONS USED, WITH MANUSCRIPT COPIES	MS DATE
	Northern version, ed. Campbell	
C	London, British Library, Cotton Galba E. IX	Early 1400s
R	Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson Poet. 175	Mid 1300s
	Midland version, ed. Whitelock	
D	Cambridge, University Library, Dd. 1. 17	Late 1300s
	Southern version, ed. Brunner	
A	Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates' 19.2.1 Auchinleck Manuscript	1330s
Ar	London, British Library, Arundel 140	Early 1400s
B	Oxford, Balliol College, 354	Early 1500s
E	London, British Library, Egerton 1995	Late 1400s
F	Cambridge, University Library, Ff. 2. 38	ca. 1500

Table 1. Middle English texts of the *Seven Sages*

The Middle English texts provide a good sample of the ways in which the sodomy motif in *senescalcus* could be handled. As the argument develops, reference is also made to the French versions of the *Seven Sages* as well as to texts belonging to Campbell's group H; the analysis is limited to versions having copies of *senescalcus* and/or *Roma*.[6] The versions of the *Book of Sindbad* that give the prehistory of *senescalcus* will also be consulted via French and English translations.

6. *Roma* is lacking in L (ed. Le Roux de Lincy) and both *senescalcus* and *Roma* are absent in M (ed. Runte).

The tale of the steward and its moralization

As it is told in Middle English, *senescalcus* combines two plots. In the first, a king asks his steward to procure him a mistress for the night and the steward sends his own wife to the king in order to keep the fee that his master promises to pay. The steward subsequently reveals his deception in a moment of frustration when the king refuses to relinquish his wife the next morning. At the conclusion of the tale, the steward is banished for his dishonesty and his wife is remarried either to the king or to one of his men. This story is combined with a second narrative element according to which the mistress is sought as part of a cure for a chronic swelling illness from which the king suffers. In most of the Middle English versions of *senescalcus*, this illness is linked to the king's avoidance of sex with women and/or to his sodomitical dalliances with young men.

The moralizations that are offered for *senescalcus* fit the story to the frame narrative of the *Seven Sages*, which relates a tale-telling contest between an empress and the seven sages of Rome. Over seven days, the empress tells seven stories designed to persuade her husband, the emperor, to kill his son, her stepson, because she fears that her treachery towards her husband will be discovered. At her instigation, the young prince has been returned to Rome from the school outside the city where he was being educated by the seven sages; having failed to seduce him, the empress falsely accuses the prince of attempted rape and demands his death as punishment. The prince cannot speak for himself for the first seven days of his return to Rome because prior to his departure for his father's court, he sees in the stars that he will be lost if he utters a word during this period. To keep the prince alive until this perilous moment has passed, the sages each respond to the empress's stories with a tale that stays the execution of the prince for a day. On the eighth day, the prince speaks for himself and reveals the perfidy of the empress; the empress is burned to death; and the prince is reconciled with his father.

In the *Seven Sages*, *senescalcus* is told by the empress as part of her argument that her stepson should be destroyed; in the A group texts, it is her fourth tale. The moral that the empress draws from the tale constructs a parallel between her husband and the steward in the story. Here she is in the earliest Middle English version of the *Seven Sages*, which survives in the famous Auchinleck Manuscript:

> Sire, and so wil hit fare bi ȝou
> Whan ȝe han loren ȝoure vertu.
> Out of londe þou best idriue
> Schal ich þe neuere ise til i live.
> No forse on me, after an emperour
> Mai me wedde a vauasour.
> I mai liue a wel god lif,
> þai i be nowt an emperours wif.
> Ac falle chaunce ase hard,
> As dede þe couaitous stiward,
> þat solde his wife for mone,
> But þou do als i rede þe
> (A1651–62, ed. Brunner).

> Lord, and so it will fare with you / when you have lost your *vertu*. / You will be driven out of the country / and I'll never see you again for as long as I live. / It's all the same to me. After an emperor / a vavasor [a lower ranking member of the landholding nobility] may wed me. / I may live a very good life, / even if I'm not an emperor's wife. / But may so terrible

7. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

> a fate befall you / as did the covetous steward, / who sold his wife for money, / unless you do as I advise you.[7]

The empress's moral focuses on the first plotline in her tale. Unless the emperor does as she says, he risks ending up banished like the covetous steward, who sold his wife. The second plotline including the sodomy motif is not entirely forgotten, however. The catastrophic banishment that the empress imagines for her husband is made conditional upon the emperor's loss of virtue (A1652–53). Middle English *vertu* can be glossed in many ways, but one of its senses is etymological, that is, "manliness," from Latin *vir* (see *MED* s.v. *vertu* 13.a). The implication is that the emperor in the frame narrative should hold onto the manhood that the sodomitical king in the tale lets slip. For the empress, manful action from the emperor would involve him killing his son in retribution for the rape of which she has accused him. Alongside these connections between the emperor in the frame narrative and the king and the steward in *senescalcus*, it seems that the empress also has a third linkage in mind between herself and the steward's wife. Her hope may be that sympathies generated on account of the sexual misuse of the steward's wife in the tale will rub off on her at the emperor's court.

The tale of the steward in the *Seven Sages* exemplifies the procedures of what Mary B. Speer calls "specular identification," whereby readers are invited to imagine the different ways in which the actors in the inset stories might mirror the actors in the frame ("Specularity"). In the case of *senescalcus*, the emperor in the frame narrative has something of both the steward and the king. The story of the steward also neatly demonstrates Yasmina Foehr-Janssens's argument that the tales condense a variety of competing motives and perspectives and thereby reilluminate the psychological complexity of the tale-telling contest ("La Parole condensée"). In this instance, the second connection between the emperor and the unmanly king in *senescalcus* relies upon the polyvalence of the Middle English word *vertu*. The more tentative enunciation of the empress's second parallel reflects the stakes involved. To accuse the emperor of covetousness is one thing but, it appears, to impugn his masculinity is an altogether riskier rhetorical strategy.

An awareness of the potentially explosive nature of accusations of sodomy also characterizes the tale's opening—although we risk missing the moment if we rely on the printed editions of the work. Here are the relevant lines from the Auchinleck Manuscript as they appear in Brunner's text:

Nou bene sene, sire and ihere!
A king was whilom of gret powere.
Al Poile and Calabre lond
Al he held hit in his hond.
Wimmen he louede swiþe lite,
And usede sinne sodomiȝte
So long he pleide wiȝ ȝong man,
A swele in his membres cam þan
(A1549–56, ed. Brunner).

Let it [the tale, which the emperor has requested] now be seen and heard, lord! / There was once a king of great power. / All Apulia and Calabria, / all that he held in his hands. / He loved women very little / and practised sodomitical sin. / He played with young men for so long / that a swelling came into his limbs.

The king loved women very little, we are told. In fact, he was a habitual sodomite, and the result of his dalliances with young men was an unpleasant swelling of his limbs. But the manuscript text is coyer than the edition. In the Auchinleck Manuscript, "sodomiȝte" is written out as three words giving the line "and usede sinne so do miȝte," which we might just about translate as "and sinned habitually as well he might" (fol. 93r; for an image, see Burnley and Wiggins). The scribe may not have understood the word, as Brunner suggests (217). But the possibility that this is a moment of deliberate euphemism cannot be discounted.

The handling of the sodomy motif in English and French

Variance across the extant Middle English texts of *senescalcus* suggests an uncertainty amongst the tale's redactors regarding the best way to deal with the sodomy motif in the tale. Only southern text B is more explicit than the Auchinleck version. There we are told that the Italian king sinned habitually by way of sodomy and had little to do with women:

He vside the synne of sodomyte
For he vsed wommen but a lyte.
He it hauntyd whils he was yonge man—
A swellyng in his membres cam

> (B, cited in my transcription from Oxford, Balliol College, 354, p. 72).
>
> He practised sodomitical sin / for he only used women infrequently. / He busied himself with that sin while he was a young man— / A swelling came into his members.

Elsewhere, references to the king's sexual activities are more oblique. In the northern version we read that the king had no delight in love or women and in the midland version he is said to hate women above all things:

> But in luf had he no delite;
> He vsed no wemen brown ne quite;
> Til at þe last þe riche king
> On his members had bolnyng
> (C1693–96, ed. Campbell).
>
> But he took no delight in love; / he frequented women neither dark nor pale; / until finally that powerful king / had a swelling in his members.
>
> In Pule was somtyme a kynge
> That hatyd wymmen of alle thyng;
> Neuer ȝyt in alle hys lyf
> He nolde neuer haue no wyf.
> In Romauns hyt tellys in a booke
> That a grete ivel hym tooke.
> The ivel passyd oueralle
> That hys body al toswal
> (D1516–23, ed. Whitelock).
>
> In Apulia there was once a king / who hated women above all things; / never in all his life / would he ever have a wife. / In French it is said in a book / that a great evil overtook him. / The evil spread everywhere / so that his body was entirely swollen.

Two of the southern texts write the sodomy motif out entirely, altering the opening so that the king becomes a serial womanizer. In E we are told that his sins were lechery and pride, that he delighted greatly in women, and that he used these bad habits in his youth; and in Ar we read that the king loved women day and night and sinned with all his might:

> He hauntyd lechery and pryde,
> Of wemen he hadde grete delyte.
> He hauntyd hyt whyle he was a yonge man
> And in to hys membrys a swelle ther cam
> (E, cited in my transcription from London, British Library, Egerton 1995, fol. 26r).
>
> He busied himself with lechery and pride, / he had much delight in women. / He busied himself so while he was a young man / and there came a swelling into his members.
>
> Syne he vsed with all his myȝt,
> Wommen he loued day & nyȝt.
> Mochell he haunted when he was ȝong man.
> Into his membres a swell þar came
> (Ar, cited in my transcription from London, British Library, Arundel 140, fol. 155v).
>
> He was sinful with all this might, / women he loved day and night. / Much he busied himself so when he was a young man. / Into his members there came a swelling.

Distaste for the sodomy motif may account for the total removal of the tale in southern text F. There *senescalcus* is replaced with *parricida*, an imperfect story appearing uniquely in this version that describes a boy's plot to kill his father (F1224–256).

Variation in the treatment of the sodomy motif in *senescalcus* also characterizes the French versions of the *Seven Sages*. Their fuller details are given in Table 2. The sigla are Campbell's; the dates are those given by their editors for the manuscripts listed:

Table 2. French texts of the *Seven Sages* including *senescalcus*.

SIGLUM	EDITIONS USED, WITH THEIR BASE COPIES	MS DATE
K	*Le Roman des sept sages*, ed. Speer and Foehr-Janssens Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 1553	Late 1200s
D*	*Deux rédactions du Roman des sept sages*, ed. Paris, 1–54 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 5036	1400s
A*	*Les sept sages de Rome,* ed. Derniame, Henin, and Nais Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 2137	Late 1200s
L	*Roman des sept sages*, ed. Le Roux de Lincy Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 19166	1200s

A* survives in 29 copies; this essay cites the edition by Derniame, Henin, and Nais, who give the text of Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 2137. This is also the manuscript that Brunner selects for his comparisons between A* and the Middle English texts. L survives in seven manuscripts and is cited below from the edition by Le Roux de Lincy that gives the text of Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 19166. K and D* are extant only in the manuscripts cited above (on the manuscripts of the French versions of the *Seven Sages*, see further Speer and Foehr-Janssens 12–20).

A* and L straightforwardly call the king in *senescalcus* a sodomite, adding that he hated women above all things:

> Sire, il ot .I. roi en puille qui fu sodomites. il desdaignoit fames seur toutes riens, et tant qu'il fu moult malades et enfla si que tuit si membre repostrent dedanz lui, tant que il manda .I. fusicien (A*, ed. Derniame, Henin, and Nais, 26).
>
> Lord, there was a king in Apulia who was a sodomite. He hated women above all things, and so much so that he became very ill and swelled up so that all his limbs were swallowed up by his body, with the result that he sent for a physician.
>
> Sire, il ot en Puile .i. roi qui estoit sodomites. Il desdaignoit fame seur toutes riens. Il n'en avoit cure de nule, jà tant ne fust belle. Et tant que il anfla et que il entra en une grant maladie et anfla si que tuit li menbre li repostrent dedanz lui. Et tant qu'il manda .i. fusicien (L, ed. Le Roux de Lincy 39).
>
> Lord, there was a king in Apulia who was a sodomite. He hated women above all things. He didn't care for any of them, no matter how beautiful they might be. And so much so that he swelled up and he became gravely ill and swelled up so that all his limbs were swallowed up by his body, with the result that he sent for a physician.

D* also calls the king a sodomite. In this text, the illness that afflicts him is obesity:

> "Il oult," dist elle, "jadis en Egypte ung roy moult puissant, mais de si mauvais courage estoit quil commettoit le pechié de sodomite, et fut dix ans et plus sans toucher a femme, dont il devint si gras que le ventre lui aloit jusques aux genoux, et si gros estoit comme ung tonnel, ne il ne pooit avoir santé

pour medecines ne remédes qu'il y meist" (D*, ed. Paris, *Deux rédactions* 9).

"There was," she said, "formerly in Egypt a very powerful king, but he was of such poor character that he committed sodomitical sin, and went ten years and more without touching a woman, for which reason he became so fat that his belly hung down to his knees, and he was as round as a barrel, and he couldn't find a cure no matter how many doctors and remedies he tried."

While sharing the diagnosis of obesity in D*, K says only that the king in the tale was held to be a sodomite:

Il ot ja .i. roi en Egypte
que l'en tenoit a soldomite;
.x. ans et plus bien se garda
c'onques a femme n'atoucha.
Li siens cors en devint si las
et si estoit il aussi cras
comme toriaus, et estoit gros,
dur le ventre comme le dos
(K1441–48, ed. Speer and Foehr-Janssens).

There was once in Egypt a king / that was held to be a sodomite; / for ten years and more he kept himself / from ever touching women. / At this his body became weak / and he grew as fat / as a bull, and became obese, / with a belly as hard as his back.

In K, it is the steward who comes up with the plan to cure the king. An especially intimate relationship between the men is indicated by the term with which the steward is introduced. He is called the king's *dru*, a term whose meanings range between "vassal" and "lover" (see Godefroy, *Dictionnaire* s.v. *dru* 1):

En sa maison avoit .i. dru,
biau baceler de grant vertu;
de la terre estoit seneschal
et en baillie ot tout l'ostal
(K1461–64, ed. Speer and Foehr-Janssens).

In his household he had a *dru*, / a handsome young man of

> great virtue; / he was steward of the land / and had the whole household in his charge.

The northern Middle English version also finds a homoerotic dimension in the relationship between the king and the steward. There the steward wishes he were a woman so that he could get for himself the fee that the king promises his mistress:

> And fol oft thinkes þe steward þan:
> "I wald I war a faire woman,
> So þat I might win þis golde,
> And do þarwith what I wolde"
> (C1725–28, ed. Campbell).
>
> And again and again the steward says to himself then: / "I wish I were a beautiful woman / so that I might win this gold / and do with it what I would like."

The variation in the handling of the sodomy motif across the extant versions of *senescalcus* suggests an awareness of the controversial nature of the connections that it draws between sodomy and the collapse of a ruler's power. In the English context, accusations of sodomy were levelled against both Edward II and Richard II with a view to damaging their reputation (see Federico. On politically motivated accusations of sodomy, see too Karras, "Knighthood," and Kuefler). More generally, the treatment of sodomy in the *Seven Sages* reflects what John Boswell calls the "rise of intolerance" from the twelfth into the fourteenth centuries. During this period, those accused of sodomy were pursued with new vigour along with heretics and Jews (Boswell 269–332; on the advent of a persecuting society in the period 950–1250, see too Moore). The composition of the earliest, now lost version of the *Seven Sages of Rome*, French verse text V, has been dated to 1155–1190 (Speer and Foehr-Janssens 65–74). This was during the time that the new intolerance was beginning to make itself felt and attending strategies of accusation, censorship, and euphemism were being developed.

These same strategies of accusation, censorship, and euphemism shape the various manifestations of the sodomy motif across the extant French and English versions of *senescalcus*. It should be pointed out that the effects of rising intolerance are not limited solely to the treatment of sex between men. The term 'sodomy' also related to sexual intercourse deemed unnatural more generally (see *MED*, s.v. *sodomie*). At two moments in text K, a deficiency in the rhyme scheme indicates that lines have been cut where straight sex is mentioned (for discussion, see Speer and Foehr-Janssens 213, n. 72). The first occurs in the text's retelling of *senescalcus*. Here the narrator describes what happens between the emperor and the steward's wife:

> Le seneschaus fu molt vilain,
> kar sa femme prist par la main,
> jouste le roi si l'a couchie
> …
> Molt le joïst et l'acola
> et dist k'il le marïera
> (K1577–82, ed. Speer and Foehr-Janssens).
>
> The steward acted very poorly / when he took his wife by the hand / and sat her down next to the king / … / He took his pleasure with her and kissed her / and said that he would find her a husband.

Boswell's thesis helps us to understand the variety of forms that the sodomy motif takes in the Middle English and Old French texts of *senescalcus*. It remains unclear why the motif should attach to this text in particular, however. There is no shortage of elderly and potentially impotent husbands in the inset stories of the *Seven Sages*, after all. One might well imagine how a sodomy motif could attach to *tentamina*, the tale of the tests, for example. In that story, a young woman married to an older, neglectful husband craves sex, and this is what sets the narrative in motion. With a view to determining more precisely the attraction between the sodomy motif and the tale of the steward, I want now to consider the longer history of *senescalcus*, which is one of the tales that the *Seven Sages* shares with the *Book of Sindbad*.

The introduction of the sodomy motif in the *Seven Sages*

The *Book of Sindbad* shares four tales with the *Seven Sages*—*canis*, *aper*, *senescalcus*, and *avis*; the stories of the dog, the boar, the steward, and the bird—as well as the frame narrative giving an account of the young prince's education; the taboo that prevents him from speaking at court; the accusation of rape against him; and the ensuing tale-telling contest in which the accuser and the prince's defenders attempt to direct the emperor's action. The *Seven Sages* makes some alterations to this overarching narrative. The location shifts westwards to Rome or, in K and D*, to Constantinople; the accusing woman, who is the ruler's concubine in the *Book of Sindbad*, becomes the stepmother-empress; and the tale-telling contest is made more equal. In the *Book of Sindbad*, the concubine gets only one story to two each from the king's advisors, but in the *Seven Sages*, the empress and the sages match each other story for story.

The history of the *Book of Sindbad* is difficult to unravel. The surviving manuscripts postdate the composition of the versions that they transmit, often by a significant margin, and the extant texts have paratextual materials referring back to precedent texts now lost. The most recent work on the transmission of the story collection argues that the Arabic version preserved as part of the *One Hundred and One Nights* is the closest analogue to the Middle Persian composition standing at the root of the tradition (Krönung). It is thus here that we are likeliest to find the earliest version of *senescalcus*. Because the version of the tale preserved in the *Book of Sindbad* takes place not in the king's chamber but in the bathhouse, scholarship typically refers to it as *balneator*, the bathkeeper's tale.

In the *Book of Sindbad*, *balneator* is one of the stories that the king's advisors tell to warn their master against hasty action; in the *One Hundred and One Nights*, it is the first story told by the ruler's fourth advisor. It tells of a bathkeeper who, upon noticing the reduced size of a fat prince's penis, weeps because he fears that the prince won't be able to father an heir. The prince confesses that he is also worried about this eventuality, especially since his marriage is pending, and he orders the bathkeeper to bring him a prostitute so that he can try out his manhood. Thinking the prince impotent and wishing to pocket the fee himself, the bathkeeper instead sends in his own wife. When the prince turns out to be perfectly capable of the deed, the bathkeeper is overcome with regret, rushes home, and hangs himself (ed. and transl. Fudge 247–49). In the *One Hundred and One Nights* as in all the versions of the *Book of Sindbad*, the sodomy motif is absent.[8]

The other versions of the *Book of Sindbad* keep the outline of the tale as it is told in the *One Hundred and One Nights* while paying greater attention to the wife.[9] The Greek version takes the story into the next morning, showing the bathkeeper's wife leaving the prince's side and reproaching her husband for allowing her to be violated (transl. Beneker and Gibson 58–63). In the other versions, the tale is adapted to serve as an example of the wiles of women. In the *One Thousand and One Nights*, while the wife is initially horrified by the prince's

8. While the sodomy motif is absent in the *Book of Sindbad*, *balneator* also sketches a queer perspective on male rulership via its initially equivocal presentation of the prince's body. I am grateful to Bettina Bildhauer for pointing this out to me.

9. I can account for six of the eight extant versions of *balneator*. The tale is not included in the paraphrase of the Persian verse version of the *Book of Sindbad* published by Clouston, apparently because it offended his sensibilities (61), and there is as yet no translation into a language that I can read of the Arabic text of the *Book of Sindbad* preserved in Istanbul, Şehid Ali Paşa Library, 2743. The tale of the bathkeeper is lacking in the Syriac version (transl. Gollancz) due to damage to the manuscript (113). It is absent by design in the later Persian version by Nakhshabi that includes material from the *Book of Sindbad* in its own tale-telling frame; there the woman accusing the prince has no tales of her own (transl. Simsar). For a checklist of the extant texts of the *Book of Sindbad*, see Krönung 366.

unanticipated approaches, she quickly warms to his love making (transl. Lyons, 2:562–63). In the Spanish text, the prince mocks the bathkeeper when he comes to retrieve his wife and the wife refuses to return home when called, saying that she must fulfil the terms of their contract (transl. Keller 29–30). In the Hebrew and the Persian prose texts, the wife also ignores her husband's instructions to leave the prince (ed. and transl. Epstein 208–219; transl. Bogdanović 139–43).

It will be apparent that a misogynist element is introduced as the tale of the bathkeeper is retold. Only the Greek version does not assume that the bathkeeper's wife transfers her affections to the young prince (the same trend towards the dispraise of women was observed in the long history of *canis*, above). A desire to discredit women might also account for the introduction of the sodomy motif in *senescalcus*. As Speer points out, when women make accusations of sodomy in medieval romance, those accusations are invariably shown to be fallacious and motivated by wounded pride. This is the case, for example, in Marie de France's *Lanval*, in which Guinevere unfairly accuses the hero of preferring the company of young men when he turns down her offer of love. When the redactor of the *Seven Sages* has the empress call the king in her tale a sodomite, and by extension impugn the masculinity of her husband, the purpose of this modification might be to signal to medieval audiences her divisiveness and her falseness (see Speer, "What Ails the Sodomite King?", drawing on Burgwinkle 89–90).

Speer's reading of *senescalcus* works best for those versions of the story like the French verse text K in which the king's sodomitical tendencies are only hinted at; in these instances, the empress might be accused of trafficking rumours. Speer's reading of the tale is part of a larger claim according to which the redactor of the *Seven Sages* repeatedly sets the empress up to fail by giving her stories that will discredit her. This goal becomes particularly clear, Speer suggests, when, as in the case of *senescalcus*, the empress is given tales to tell that are elsewhere told by her opponents. Like *balneator-senescalcus*, the tale of the treasure, *gaza*, also switches sides from the ruler's advisors to the empress in the course of the story collection's transmission (see Speer, "*Translatio* as *Inventio*." On the empress's self-defeating rhetoric, see too Jaunzems).

To my mind, the mobility of the collection's tales testifies more clearly to the lability of these fictions. The sages' tales can work against them too; their tales featuring isolated or neglected wives, such as *tentamina* and *inclusa*, seem especially apt to elicit what Cynthia Ho calls "truant sympathies" (96), that is, sympathies that run in the opposite direction to their tellers' arguments.[10] More importantly, even if the introduction of the sodomy motif can be imputed to an authorial vendetta against the empress, the question of why this particular line of attack is pursued in *senescalcus* remains open. The answer, I think, lies in the eastern connections of the tale, which can be perceived both in its location and in its close textual relationship with *Roma*, another of the inset tales.

10. On the propensity of *inclusa* to generate sympathy for its heroine, see too Foehr-Janssens, "Une Recluse."

Eastern elements in *senescalcus* and *Roma*

While the A group texts set *senescalcus* in Italy, K (1441) and D* (9) both have the story taking place in Egypt (citations above). This makes *senescalcus* the easternmost of the inset narratives. The one other contender for this distinction is *Roma*, another of the empress's stories. In *Roma*, Rome is besieged by enemies whom the texts call Saracens, a word used in Middle English and Old French to refer broadly to Muslims, often in the context of the crusades (see *MED* s.v. *Sarasine*; Godefroy, *Complément* s.v. *sarrasin*).[11] *Roma* describes how, overpowered by their besiegers, the Romans entrust their safekeeping to seven sages, the last of whom, Janus, strikes fear into the enemy by dancing on the ramparts of the town dressed in a fearsome two-faced disguise. The besieging forces are terrified and are routed when the Romans rush out of their town to fight them. This story of Roman success is said to lie at the origin both of the name of the first month of the year and of the late-medieval Christian tradition of the Feast of Fools.

11. On the use of the term in Middle English, see Calkin, esp. 1–4. More recently, see too Rajabzadeh. I am grateful to Elizabeth Tyler for alerting me to Rajabzadeh's work.

The presence of west Asian and north African elements in *Roma* and in two of the texts of *senescalcus* is noteworthy given the almost total effacement in the *Seven Sages* of the collection's debts to the *Book of Sindbad*.[12] What is more, these elements appear to have been deliberately introduced. None of the texts of *balneator* that I have consulted mentions Egypt. Only the Persian prose and verse versions situate its action in a named place, and there the location chosen is Kannauj, in India (transl. Bogdanović 139; Clouston 61). The crusader setting in *Roma* is similarly innovative. The two analogues for the tale identified by Paris – in the Pseudo-Bedan *De Divisionibus temporum* and in Philippe de Thaon's *Comput* – both situate the story at an earlier moment in the city's history, when Rome is besieged by barbarians, not Muslims ("Le Récit *Roma*").

12. See Foehr-Janssens, "De Jérusalem à Rome," "Le Désir et le savoir," and "Misogyny and the Trends of a European Success." On the tendency of European authors to avoid mention of cultural debts to eastern traditions, see Khanmohamadi.

My suggestion is that the thematic of sodomy in *senescalcus* cooccurred with the eastern elements in the earliest versions of the tale, now represented in texts K and D*. The connection between the discourses of sodomy and orientalism can also be seen in the textual history of *Roma*, which in Campbell's H branch attaches to *senescalcus*, so that the king who sleeps with his steward's wife becomes identical with the commander of the army besieging Rome (see further Foehr-Janssens, *L'Histoire des sept sages* 32–37). Mention of the man's sodomy is absent in the H group texts. In the French text of H published at Geneva in 1498 he must pay for sex because he is "enflé merveillieusement et contreffays" ("marvellously swollen and misshapen," ed. Paris, *Deux rédactions* 127) and in the English H text published by Wynkyn de Worde in 1520 it is a deformation in his face that puts the women off (ed. Gomme 99). But the original redactor of the H text was working from a copy of text A*, in which the king's sodomy is clearly identified (ed. Derniame, Henin, and Nais 26, cited above). In reception, readers knowing more than one version of the *Seven Sages* could also make the connection. The existence of redactions that mix the A and H branches of the text—such as the Middle Scottish version, mentioned above—demonstrates that some readers knew more than one version of the collection.[13]

The modifications that I have described can be attributed to a transhistorical tendency in western minds to associate the east with non-normative and excessive forms of sexuality (Boone; Clark). In the first half of the twelfth century, shortly before the first versions of the *Seven Sages* are thought to have been redacted, these associations were reshaped in reaction to a collapse in crusader fortunes after the successes of the First Crusade (1096–99). Klaus van Eickels and, more recently, Ruth Mazo Karras ("The Regulation of 'Sodomy'") trace the later medieval intensification of persecutions for sodomy back to the Council of Nablus in 1120, which issued canons prescribing unusually strict punishments for sexual sins; the punishment decreed for sodomy—burning—was especially harsh. While it is not clear that the Council's strictures were implemented, its actions testify to a logic that saw failure on the battlefield as divine punishment for the crusaders' sins. Roger of Salerno's crusader army of the Principality of Antioch had been decimated by the army of Ilghazi of Mardin, the Artuqid ruler of Aleppo, at the Battle of the Field of Blood in 1119. At Nablus, an attempt was made to reset the ethical commitments of the Christians living in the Holy Land.

In a parallel move, the sexual sins that were being so strictly proscribed among the Christian populations in west Asia were reattribut-

13. The Scottish text appears to have followed A* in its separate treatment of *Senescalcus* and *Roma*. It lacks a copy of *Roma*, however, probably due to a copying error (see van Buuren 336).

ed to the crusaders' Muslim neighbours. In his *Deeds of God through the Franks* (1107–08), Guibert of Nogent includes a biography of Muhammed that has the prophet prescribing not only polygamy but also sodomy, for example (cited in Eickels 54).[14] Later in the period, Guibert's claims are amplified by the Dominican William of Adam, who travelled extensively and whose comments address Egypt in particular. In *How to Defeat the Saracens* (c. 1317), William explains that the Egyptians' preference for carnal pleasure makes them unsuitable for warfare, which has resulted in their practice of buying slaves to fill their military ranks. With the slaves, William claims, there come male prostitutes, with whom Muslims not only have sex but also live openly, "just as a man and wife live publicly among us." The European slave traders who provide these men for the Egyptians come in for special criticism:

> And when they can find a Christian or Tartar boy who is physically suited for sale [...] After buying them they decorate them like a statue with silken and golden clothes; they wash their bodies and faces frequently by bathing and other washings; and they feed them with sumptuous foods and delicate drinks. This is done in order that they may be fatter, rosier and more delicate and may consequently appear more suitable and enticing to satisfy the lust of the Saracens.

When the Egyptians see these boys, William concludes, "like mad dogs they hurry to buy them [...] so that they can indulge their shamelessness with them" (ed. and transl. Constable 32–33).

It is not impossible that William of Adam was reporting on practices that he had observed and only partly understood (Rowson). Earlier in the period, however, reports on the sexual proclivities of Muslims more clearly reflect attempts to construct a hypersexualized, heretical counterpart against which Christian superiority could be reasserted (Tolan 105–34). Egypt, we know, was virtually *terra incognita* in Europe before the Fall of Acre (1291) altered pilgrimage routes such that Europeans were more routinely brought before the pyramids and the Nile (Graboïs).

Both *senescalcus* and *Roma* participate in the same practices of imagining west Asia and north Africa as do Guibert's and William's texts. In *Roma*, the Muslim army is presented as credulous and cowardly and the K and D* redactions of *senescalcus* suggest that Egyptian rulers are prey to unnatural or excessive sexual desires. Karras offers a bleak final assessment of the othering processes that crystallize at Nablus and that finally result in the manufacture of enemies not only

14. On the early European biographies of Muhammed, see further Arjana 32–41; Kangas; Luchistskaja; and Tolan 135–70.

abroad but also at home: the Saracen and the sodomite. She concludes that "the colonial or protocolonial encounter can be toxic to the colonizers as well as the colonized" ("The Regulation of 'Sodomy'" 986). Earlier in this essay, however, Karras is alive to the possibility that literary texts might offer a more nuanced response to the matter of medieval queer identities and representations (970). By way of a conclusion, I want to reapply this insight to *senescalcus* and *Roma* as they appear within the frame narrative of the *Seven Sages of Rome*.

Conclusion: the possibilities of fiction

The relative sparsity of criticism on the Middle English *Seven Sages of Rome* ought probably to be attributed to the perception that its moralizations are not only distasteful but also definitive. A surface reading of the collection sees the sages' stories about the untrustworthiness of women exemplified in the empress's own behaviour, which justifies her final punishment. This view of the Middle English version underlies its re-presentation as children's literature by Nicole Clifton.[15] Readers of the French versions of the text have been more open to its ethical and psychological complexities. In particular, Foehr-Janssens and Speer emphasize the potential for disjunction between the aims of the collection's tellers and their tales.[16] This disjunction can have various effects. For example, a tale like *senescalcus* might backfire on its teller, as Speer suggests, or its senses might proliferate beyond the immediate context of the tale-telling contest.

Both these arguments could be made for *Roma*. It is told by the empress to illustrate the deceptive powers of the seven sages. In the Middle English text, the empress moralizes the tale as follows (the Auchinleck copy of *Roma* breaks off partway through the tale due to damage to the manuscript. Here the text is cited from another text that is closely related to A):

> And thus shulle the vij wyse
> Dyssayue the thorowe hyr quentyse!
> Ye shalle be fayne, or ye sterue,
> Oppon youre kneys them to serue,
> For in ham certeys ys alle youre tryste,
> Ye wene eche of hem be as cryste
> (E2820–25, ed. Brunner).

15. Allen, Bahr (132–37), Ho, and Steel (17–40) offer more nuanced assessments, but none of these writers takes the *Seven Sages* as their primary topic.

16. More recently, see too Flynn, writing on the Middle Scots version, and essays by Bildhauer on a German version ("Every Narrator is Biased") and on the *Dolopathos*, an early Latin rendition of the *Seven Sages* materials ("Silencing a Woman's Accusation").

> And thus shall the seven wise men / deceive you through their trickery! / You shall be glad, before you die, / to serve them on your knees; / for truly you trust in them completely. / You mistakenly think that each of them is like Christ.

The emperor is blamed for trusting his advisors as if they were Christ Himself. What the empress neglects to mention—and what is embarrassing for her larger argument—is that the city being defended in the tale is Rome, the emperor's own town, and the site of the story-telling contest. It is tempting to suggest that, as may have happened in *senescalcus*, the empress has been given one of the sages' tales so that another of her examples works against her. In the Welsh version of the text, *Roma* is set "in the East" and the story is told by one of the sages (transl. Jones 652–53).[17]

But before we can recognize the difficulty in the empress's situation, we need to register what she is trying to do, namely to have us identify with the Muslims plotting to sack Rome. In a still stranger twist, the description of the Roman sage defending Rome in disguise takes on the demonic aspect traditionally ascribed to Muslims:

> He lete make hym a garnement,
> As blake as any arnement,
> And hyng theron squyrelle taylys,
> A thousand and mo samfaylys,
> And a veser he made hym more,
> Two facys behynde another byfore.
> And ij. nosys in eyther halfe,
> More horrybeler thenne any calfe,
> And the tonge also there on rede,
> As euyr was brennygne lede.
> (E2780–89, ed. Brunner)

> He had made for himself a garment / as black as any ink, / and he hung squirrel tails on it, / a thousand and more, without a doubt, / and he had a visor made for himself also, / with two faces: one behind and one in front. / And two noses [were shown] on each of the faces, / more horrible than any calf's. / And the tongue also [shown] thereon was red, / as bright as ever was burning led.

The blackness of the sage's garment, the calf-like noses on the mask, and the red tongue or tongues shown on it combine to create a strongly racialized image. One of the Middle English texts makes the

17. The Welsh text of the *Seven Sages* belongs to Campbell's group A but its readings often depart from those common to the other A texts. Its version of *Roma* also includes an inset tale emphasizing the value of the sages' advice. On the Welsh *Seven Sages*, see Gadsden.

fiendish appearance of the sage patent when it reports that the Muslim forces took the sage for a devil (Ar1848, ed. Brunner). Elsewhere, the pattern of misprision is brought full circle where the Muslims are said to mistake the disguised sage for an angel (C313134) or Christ (B2882–84; D2710–14; F2032–33).

In the world of *Roma*, Christians and Muslims swap roles. In the tale, Rome is defended by Christians who impersonate Muslims, and in the frame, Christians are called upon to side with Muslim forces besieging Rome. The implications of this role-swapping are important because the story is said to explain the foundation not only of the Christian calendar—this is how the month of January gets its name—but also of a carnivalesque feast, the Feast of Fools. The Feast of Fools marked a moment of inversion in church hierarchies that included opportunities for costuming and disguise; records survive of a practice of knotting fox tails around the head that recalls the disguise adopted by the sage in *Roma*.[18] Given this connection, one of the more difficult implications of *Roma* might be not simply that Christians and Muslims can be hard to distinguish but that every Christian harbours a Muslim within. The story of the steward might likewise counteract prevailing cultures of differentiation and persecution where it shows the perfidious motivations that can lie behind imputations of sodomy. By putting the tale in the mouth of the empress, the redactor of the *Seven Sages* casts doubt over the probity of her words and of accusations of sodomy more generally.

18. On the Feast of Fools, see the long note by Yann Dahhaoui in Foehr-Janssens and Speer 241–43.

The extant versions of the *Seven Sages* relate sodomy to the east with varying degrees of insistence. In some texts, the sodomy motif in *senescalcus* is muted, or written out entirely, apparently because it offended a redactor's sensibilities; in many texts, the tale is set not in Egypt, a land often associated with sodomy, but in Italy.[19] The connections that I have made between the introduction of the sodomy motif and orientalism draw on a picture of the transmission history of the *Seven Sages of Rome* that was not available to the text's medieval audiences. But in an environment where stories were heard and retold as well as read in books, *senescalcus* and *Roma* could circulate in forms that it is difficult for us now to classify. An individual's memory of these tales might collect elements from two or more versions of the text that modern editors coolly divide into distinct branches. For this reason, the *Seven Sages* materials can be consulted for a tantalizing glimpse into the ways in which medieval people might think through as well as simply undergo those shifts in attitude that see the histories of homophobia and islamophobia intertwine.

19. On Italy as a locus of male homosexuality, see Rocke's study of early fifteenth-century Florence.

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