



The King of Tars (Teams Middle English Texts)

John H. Chandler

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The King of Tars, an early Middle English romance (ca. 1330 or earlier), emphasizes ideas about race, gender, and religion. It is a short poem whose purpose is to highlight and celebrate the power of Christianity, and yet it defies classification. It is neither a saint's life or a romance, nor a political drama or a miracle tale; rather it is a story inseminated by all of these genres. As a hagiographic work, its focus on temporal situations, especially political stability and inheritance, distracts the audience from the dream-vision and miracles on which the plot relies; as a romance, its focus on a female protagonist, rather than a male, seems oddly out of place. It is only when the various generic categories are layered together that the poem is best understood.

Its role as entertainment is undeniable, but that entertainment thinly veils didactic intent. Many of the effects and plot developments--the transformations, namelessness of the principal characters, and exotic setting in the East--should be read through the lens of religious instruction. An early variant of the Constance tale, whose most famous English versions are told by Gower's Genius in the *Confessio Amantis* and Chaucer's *Man of Law*, the poem addresses religious interests through rhetorical trappings that parse, reinforce, educate, and entertain simultaneously.

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