



OUTSIDERS

*The Humanity and Inhumanity of Giants
in Medieval French Prose Romance*

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Introduction

The study that follows is an examination of giants and their complex role in medieval French literature: principally prose romance set in the Arthurian or pre-Arthurian world, but sometimes also touching on other genres in both verse and prose. At the outset, I wish to clarify a point of terminology. My discussion of giants in these texts is sometimes cast in terms of relations and oppositions between “giants” and “humans.” I make this distinction not to deny the humanity of giants but to distinguish them from “ordinary” people. Medieval texts typically refer to giants as “homme” and giantesses as “dame” or “pucelle,” and there is no question that they are fundamentally human beings—however degraded or marginalized this humanity may at times be. In some ways, the category of “giant” is comparable to other racial or ethnic categories found in medieval literature, such as Saxon, Norman, Welsh, or Saracen; and it will be an important aspect of this study to examine the ways in which giants are a fantasy race, yet another of the diverse ethnic groups inhabiting Arthurian Britain, and a vehicle for reflection on the nature of both racial and cultural differences. Still, the common use of *geant* and *geante* clearly marks these men, women, and girls as set apart from the other human subjects of the Arthurian world.

Even when giants form alliances with pagan lords, they are likely to assume a high-handed attitude, exacting tribute and brooking no interference with their affairs, or any challenge to their supremacy. It thus seems important to distinguish between giants of all kinds, wherever they may live, and the other characters with whom they interact. Since *ordinary human knight, nongiant, or regular-sized person* is too cumbersome to use on a regular basis, I will also use the terms *giant* and *human* to clarify this distinction.

It is further worth noting that medieval literature as a whole presents two very different kinds of giants: those who are descended from a fully giant lineage and those who are giants only through some accident of birth or exotic upbringing. Most giants in Arthurian romance are of the former type, with varying combinations and degrees of human potential for cultural refinement and ethical behavior on the one hand, or bestial savagery on the other. Giants of the other kind are most commonly found among the Saracens that populate the *chanson de geste*, a genre whose giants tend to inhabit the two extremes of assimilable humanity and monstrous or demonic inhumanity.¹ A third category that we will encounter is that of half-blood giants, whose identity may be somewhat ambiguous: they are likely to be assimilable into chivalric life, but generally not entirely, and not without conflict. In all cases, however, giants are a focal point for racial, social, cultural, and ideological clashes; and there are three principal contexts in which these issues will be examined.

Species, Race, and Culture: Defining Human Identity

Le discours sur le monstre est, en réalité, un discours sur l'homme.

[Discourse about monsters is, in reality, a discourse about man.]

—Annie Cazenave, “Monstres et merveilles”

In speaking of racist and sexist stereotypes, Kobena Mercer states that “we are dealing not with persons, but with the imaginary and symbolic positions through which the contingent, historical and psychic construction of personhood is spoken.”² Mercer’s comment pertains to the discourse of modern colonial and postcolonial societies, but the

same can certainly be said of both the giants and the other characters populating medieval art and literature. Giants, no more a cultural fantasy than the shifting stereotypes of race, class, and gender embodied by Arthurian knights and ladies, are one of the means by which medieval Europeans imagined the limits of personhood.

Robert Bartlett's influential work on medieval concepts of race and ethnicity draws on the much-quoted formulation by the early medieval writer Regino de Prüm (d. 915): "Diversae nationes populorum inter se discrepant genere, moribus, lingua, legibus" (The different human nations are distinguished from one another by descent, customs, language, and laws).³ Giants speak the same language as anyone else, but they do have their own distinctive bloodlines, as well as their typical forms of behavior—and while giants might not be seen as operating according to a rule of law, they could be described as adhering to customary practices, some of which at times do take on a legal dimension within the giant's realm. Bartlett and others have argued that custom, law, and language are all acquired behaviors, and as such subject to change, so that blood descent is the only racial feature that is inherited and inalterable.⁴ This may be true of actual, real-life people—though in practice, of course, the imposition of a new language, legal system, religion, or other code of behavior often meets with fierce resistance—and is sometimes also true of the Saracens, pagans, and other exotic people who populate medieval literature. But it is much less clear that it holds true for giants. Certain behaviors—violence, arrogance, intransigence, a free or even obsessive indulgence in libidinous drives—characterize giants regardless of their circumstances and appear to be as essential to their nature as their prodigious size and strength. Medieval literature offers countless examples of people who backslide into moral laziness or depravity, only to repent and atone for their transgressions; of those who lack an ethical sense or a grasp of courtly refinements, but who better themselves through religious instruction and penance, or through a formative experience such as love or warfare; of pagans who convert to Christianity, perhaps even becoming saints, as well as those who resist to the end. The concept of foreign races as assimilable, and of humans as capable of radical change, lies at the core of evangelical Christianity. But giants represent an alternate racial fantasy, one more essentialist in the way that it combines moral character—or lack thereof—and a

propensity for irrational violence with the physical characteristics and bloodlines of giants. As an imagined race, giants offer a view of racial and cultural alterity, and thus of human nature overall, somewhat different from that embodied in the admirable pagans, rogue knights, and isolated kingdoms that figure in narratives of moral or religious conversion, the abolition of evil customs, and overall cultural assimilation.

However important differences of custom, law, and religion may be in medieval discourses of human difference, it is equally important to consider the role attributed to climate and geography. As is well documented, a tradition reaching from antiquity through the Middle Ages emphasized the extent to which bodily humors—and thus such features as hair type, skin color, and temperament—are affected by conditions in the earth's climactic zones, with their varying degrees of heat or cold, wetness or dryness.⁵ Cultural and environmental models of human diversity interact in medieval texts in ways that are not entirely consistent. Saracens, for example, are first and foremost marked by differences of custom and law. Their little-understood religion defines them as enemies of the Christian faith; they are portrayed as engaging in alien practices such as idolatry and polygamy, as well as indulging a taste for lavish and exotic architecture, clothing, and other accouterments. Only sometimes, however, are they also marked as racially other. Saracens may have black or impenetrable skin, spiky hair, or other features ranging from the merely different to the outright demonic, and this is especially likely to be the case when they hail from more southerly realms, their bodies shaped by a harsh desert environment. Even within the same text, however, they may also be indistinguishable in appearance from their Christian European counterparts. And as is well documented, Saracens are also far from homogeneous in their degree of cultural alterity. Most are implacably hostile to Christianity, but some readily embrace religious conversion in their eagerness to join forces with the heroic Christian warriors at their doorstep. Cultural alterity may at times be identified with physiological difference, and it may be portrayed as intrinsic to a person's very nature; it may also be almost inconsequential, as easily shed as an item of exotic dress.

Considerable variation may obtain even among members of the same Saracen family, in accordance with their narrative role. In the Guillaume d'Orange cycle, for example, the Saracen queen Orable is a

white-skinned, impeccably mannered beauty who readily falls in love with Guillaume, converts to Christianity in order to marry him (taking on the baptismal name Guiborc), and becomes an unflinching supporter of the Christian cause. Her brother Rainouart is a giant, complete with a violent temper, a prodigious appetite for food and drink, unruly behavior, and a fanatical devotion to his enormous cudgel. King Louis, who bought him at a slave market, clearly views a Saracen giant as one who is beyond redemption, commenting, “Por sa grandor nel poi onques amer, / . . . Onc nel voil fere bautizier ne lever” (I could never love him because of his size . . . I don’t ever want to have him baptised and raised from the font).⁶ This attitude is shown to be an unfounded and indeed pernicious prejudice, however, as Rainouart literally begs to be baptized and to be allowed to fight alongside Guillaume, to whom he is fiercely loyal. Guiborc’s strong-willed, uncompromising personality may derive in part from the stereotypical intensity of Saracens as depicted in *chansons de geste*, but it also makes her the perfect match for the equally impulsive and irascible Guillaume; Rainouart, his slapstick caricature, is the perfect sidekick. Their father Desramez, however, a king in Spain and possibly also a giant, is the sworn enemy of Guillaume and of Christendom in general; and whereas Rainouart is “biax” (v. 3595; handsome), Desramez’s appearance reflects his sinister character:

Desramez fu fort et grant et corsuz,
 Long ot le col, noirs ert et toz chenus;
 En tote Espagne n’ot paien si membruz.
 (vv. 6113–15)

[Desramez was strong and big and muscular, he had a long neck, he was black and completely white-haired; in all of Spain there was no pagan so powerfully built.]

The Saracen armies fought by Guillaume and Rainouart in the aftermath of Guillaume’s marriage to Guiborc—the allies of Desramez and his brother, to whom Guiborc was originally married—run the full gamut from ordinary human knights and richly armored kings to grotesque and monstrous figures: Agrapart, a three-foot-tall dwarf who bites and claws his victims (vv. 6256–611); Rainouart’s cousin Aenré,

said to have devoured many a Frenchman (vv. 6028–42); Grishart, a knight whose hunchback daughter Guinehart eats raw human flesh (vv. 6675–77); and Grishart’s fifteen-foot-tall sister Flohart, whose smoky breath has a toxic effect on the Frankish troops (vv. 6716–81).

This degree of variation is possible partly because medieval culture did not have a fully consistent, canonical theory of race, and partly because the entertainment value, ideological import, and narrative intrigue of literary texts could all take precedence over any pretense to historically or scientifically accurate depictions of real or imagined people and places. As Lynn Tarte Ramey has commented, any reading of the Saracen in medieval French literature “must take into account the personal or collective ends for which the Other was introduced in the first place.”⁷ “Saracens” were used to support a wide range of erotic, doctrinal, and military fantasies, in which an exotic foreign woman might be either alluring or horrific; adherents to an alien religion might acknowledge the universal appeal of Christian doctrine in their ready conversion or might embody the intransigence and wickedness of the infidel in their benighted resistance; a sophisticated foreign culture might be a source of human and material resources from which much good could be salvaged and assimilated or a demonized anticulture just waiting to be crushed by the superior forces of European Christendom.⁸

Independently of the occasional giant-sized member of an otherwise normal family, giants are imagined by medieval writers as existing throughout the known world; they tend to share the religious practices of the pagan or pseudo-Muslim peoples of the region in which they live, sometimes even joining with Saxons or other pagans in battles against Arthur and his Christian predecessors, or with Muslim armies in fighting European crusaders. In terms of physiognomy, giants are also likely to resemble their neighbors in certain respects. African or Near Eastern giants, for example, often have the dark complexion supposedly caused by the intense heat and sunlight of southerly latitudes, while the Norwegian Gueant aux Cheveux Dorez in *Perceforest* is a Nordic blond. Giants’ most essential features, however—large size and violent temperaments—seem unaffected by factors of climate and geography. In any given location, giants exist as a people both similar to, but also differentiated from, the other inhabitants of that area; and whereas giants may be in league with Saracens or other peoples regarded as enemies by Western Chris-

tendom, they are also often in conflict with the nongiant population, particularly in the Arthurian world. If a giant is the ruler of an island, a feudal manor, or a kingdom, his subjects are generally ordinary people, chafing under his despotic rule; if he dwells apart, isolated in his castle or lair, he is likely to be a menace to the surrounding population on whom he preys. Giants, subject to the influences of climate and geography, exhibit the same spectrum of bodily diversity as other human beings, and they follow many of the same cultural practices; but they are also always a separate presence. In a sense, giants are a parallel form of humanity, a larger-than-life doubling of the human race with their own distinct bloodlines, their characteristically extreme behavior, and their unmistakable bodily proportions.

As Abdul JanMohamed notes, colonialist discourse depends on “a transformation of racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference.”⁹ Such ideas have a long history; David M. Goldenberg, for example, has traced the characterization of people inhabiting the extreme northern and southern latitudes—particularly black Africans—as occupying a position higher than that of animals but nonetheless subhuman in their savagery. From an initial formulation by classical writers such as Aristotle, these stereotypes were perpetuated throughout the Middle Ages in both Islamic and Christian traditions.¹⁰ In a similar vein Steven F. Kruger comments that, in medieval thought, sexual difference was sometimes cast in ethnic or racial terms—as in the use of the term *sodomite* both for the residents of the cursed city of Sodom and for practitioners of a loosely defined sexual deviancy—while “religious difference . . . and racial or ethnic difference are often associated with sexual ‘crimes.’”¹¹ Kruger further notes that the blend of moral character and blood descent in medieval concepts of race results in a double focus, whereby racial identity is at once changeable and immutable: “For the Middle Ages, sexuality, race, and religion are all constructed at least partly in moral terms—as choices that might be changed—and partly as biological difference, which would suggest perhaps a more determinate and unchangeable (sexual, racial, or religious) ‘nature.’”¹² As strongly stereotyped embodiments of the racial and cultural other, giants are a classic instance of the moralization of race. The qualities so often attributed to conquered, enslaved, or colonized races in the modern era—cannibalism, brute lust, senseless violence, inability to grasp abstract

concepts, and even the eroticization of the sensual native woman—are already present in medieval depictions of giants, vividly constructed stereotypes of a hostile race resisting subjugation by those bringing the blessings of civilization. The Arthurian giants are an imaginative reconstruction of exotic aliens in a setting closer to home—distant not in space but in time. The distinctive bodily features of giants, along with their predictable behavior, crystallize into a stereotype of racial identity that combines both moral and physical deviance from the idealized norms of European Christians.

Tales of barbaric, uncultured giants, then, were a place in which fears and desires aroused by cultural and racial alterity could be freely explored. As such, these narratives both mirror and shape the lurid accounts of religious, racial, or ethnic groups targeted for conquest, subjugation, or expulsion by historical or fictional monarchs—be they Saxon or Celtic, Jewish or Muslim, European, African, or Asian.¹³ The racial and cultural other could thus be imagined in contrasting modes that support slightly different fantasies and political ideologies. On the one hand, the willing Saracen converts to Christianity—gallant knights or beautiful princesses—as well as the virtuous Indian ascetics or the uncouth Welsh lad who turns out to be the Grail knight Perceval, offer a model of assimilation, of difference that is not so different after all: a comforting promise that aristocratic refinement, feudal homage and loyalty, and Christian ideology are universal values that can indeed be a means of uniting disparate peoples, both within Europe and throughout the world at large.¹⁴ At the same time, savage giants and other racial fantasies—from the sodomite Welshmen and the Irish with their proclivity for bestiality, as described by Gerald of Wales, to demonic Saracen warriors and the monstrous races—counter this with a model of intractable otherness and depravity that fully justifies conquest, subjugation, and extermination.

As background to a study of giants as figures of aberrant humanity, foils for the idealized heroes and heroines of epic and romance, we may consider various analogies in modern cultural, scientific, and political discourses. First, medieval giants might be seen as occupying a position somewhat similar to that of Neanderthals in nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought. *Homo neanderthalensis* was identified as a distinct species in 1856, just three years before Darwin published *On the Origin of*

Species. Neanderthals were recognized as clearly human in at least some sense, but they were also constructed as irretrievably different from us. Hulking, brutish, and dim-witted, they lacked the cognitive skills, technological sophistication, and strategies of social cooperation that allowed our ancestors, *Homo sapiens*, to spread through the world and make it theirs. Largely through extermination, though perhaps also to some small extent through absorption by interbreeding, these creatures gave way and vanished before the onward march of modern humans, the natural inheritors and rulers of the land. Such is the story that, for the past century and a half, has defined the human species that inhabited large parts of Europe and Asia before the arrival of our distant ancestors. This view has been challenged to some extent in recent years; ongoing archaeological discoveries along with the use of newly developed techniques, such as DNA analysis, continue to refine and expand the scientific understanding of humanity's cultural and biological prehistory. In the popular imagination, however, the club-wielding Neanderthal is an icon of all that our superior human intelligence has enabled us to overcome. An evolutionary dead end, more ape than man, our Neanderthal predecessors are imagined as a kind of hinge that linked us to a dark, bestial past while also highlighting the extent to which we, endowed as we always already were with language, culture, and a spirit of innovation, occupy a unique and privileged position distinct from all other animal species. At the same time, the recent revisionist view of Neanderthals as capable of cultural and technological sophistication is a reflection of contemporary aversion to racial stereotyping of any sort, and thus itself an effort to realize an inclusive sense of human diversity, hallmark of what we now see as our better nature. For better and for worse, Neanderthals continue to occupy a privileged place in discourses of race, culture, and humanity.¹⁵

Similarly, in medieval legend, giants are the indigenous inhabitants of Britain and other parts of Europe, encountered when "our ancestors" arrived—not from Africa in this telling of history, but from Troy and, later, the Holy Land—and began to settle and cultivate the land. Medieval thought could not imagine either humans or giants as descended from animals, but giants were again a hinge linking humans to a much darker past, sometimes seen as demonic and other times as the cursed lineages of Cain and Ham. And like Neanderthals, they were

portrayed as humans of a kind, while nonetheless usually lacking the refinement and rational discretion needed for true assimilation into a courtly, chivalric community.¹⁶ The very way that both giants and Neanderthals were depicted confirmed not only their status as a race doomed to extinction but also ours as one destined to a position of stewardship. As caricatures of savagery and voracity, bereft of the most important features that define human preeminence in the natural order, giants, like Neanderthals, function in the cultural imagination as a means of defining both the errors and excesses that threaten our frail humanity, and the means that we uniquely have at our disposal to regulate our lives and rise above mere animal instinct. As generations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers grappled with the implications of the evolutionary model, it was perhaps a consolation to believe that if humans really were descended from apes, still it was in the failed lineage of Neanderthals that this apishness was fully channeled, while *Homo sapiens*—as the name implies—are defined above all by their uniquely human intellect. And from the medieval perspective, though humans are marked by Original Sin and share with giants a common origin in those first parents beguiled by the serpent, it was reassuring to imagine an alternate line of descent—in a sense, a race of scapegoats. David Lewis-Williams comments that “the Neanderthal debate is not merely an esoteric dispute among inhabitants of an ivory tower: it has major implications for the way in which we see life today.”¹⁷ Similarly, medieval tales of giants are not just fanciful entertainment; they are a vehicle for reflections about the nature of culture, power, and human identity.

Neanderthals are not the only modern analogy for giants; we may also read them more generally through the lens of racial and ethnic difference, particularly as these differences have been constructed in the violent conflicts of colonial and postcolonial subjugation and resistance. Again, giants are the primal aboriginals at the origins of British history, who had to be cleared from the land along with wild animals and impenetrable forests to make way for conquest and settlement by successive waves of Trojans, Romans, and others. In the Arthurian era, they may be the inhabitants of island or mountain kingdoms to which access is needed as stopping points for traveling merchants and knights on quests or diplomatic missions. They are also frequently found in the Saracen kingdoms targeted in *chansons de geste*, ostensibly in the name of

spreading Christianity, but clearly also for their opulent cities and lucrative trade networks. Whether at home or abroad, giants consistently obstruct the exploitation of natural resources, the establishment of commercial and diplomatic networks, the process of royal conquest and expansionism, and the spread of Christianity. As such, their cultural image is analogous not only to that of Neanderthals in modern archaeological discourse but also to Native Americans, Africans, Asians, or Australians as these people have figured in the imagination of Euro-American warriors, explorers, settlers, and entrepreneurs. I do not, of course, mean to imply that all of these peoples were ever perceived or imagined in exactly the same way, that interactions between incomers and natives always took the same form, or that they were stereotyped in support of the same ideological agendas in all times and places.¹⁸ Nor can we expect that fictional giants will occupy precisely the same position in the cultural imagination as did any of the peoples who really were encountered by Europeans as they spread throughout the world. Nonetheless, the analogy is a useful one in unpacking the complex and sometimes contradictory treatment of giants in medieval texts.

In particular, if we think of giants as figures for colonized people resisting the incursions of an incoming race, their behavior can be understood as evoking a fear comparable to that of the modern obsession with guerrilla warfare and terrorism. The intransigence of giants, who may systematically kill anyone who enters their territory, and who generally fight to the death with no concept of compromise or truce, constructs this enemy in remarkably similar terms to those used in our own times for the “fundamentalist” and “militant” enemies of the West. The giants’ obsessive behavior and the rigidity of their customs, which typically allow no option but violence unto death, is implicitly contrasted with that of Arthurian chivalry, in which knights are expected to have internalized a moral compass enabling them to assess individual encounters on their own terms and to negotiate a suitable outcome of absolute victory, compromise, or truce, and of vengeance and punishment or forgiveness and reconciliation. And while I do not mean to identify medieval cultural ideology with that of post-Enlightenment liberalism, this conception of “us” as flexible in our application of violence and vengeance, and “them” as inflexibly determined by received laws and customs, does reflect Wendy Brown’s characterization of the

modern liberal subject as one presumed to be guided, not by blind obedience to cultural and religious imperatives, but by a rational sense of universalizable morality. As Brown puts it, “The liberal formulation of the individuated subject as constituted by rationality and will figures a nonindividuated opposite who is so *because of* the underdevelopment of both rationality and will.”¹⁹ Giants, overall, tend to be constructed along lines that recall the two models developed by Freud and other post-Enlightenment thinkers for premodern humans: in Brown’s words, the “lone savage” or the “primitive tribalist.”²⁰ The imagined “culture wars” of knight and giant, in more ways than one, can be seen as the distant foundations of the conflicts and self-justifications currently at play in Western civilization.

The War on Giants

Et certes, se ilz savoient ore a Taraquin la verité de la mort a cest jayant, ilz acourroient tuit ça maintenant, car ilz ne desiroient rien du monde autant comme ilz faisoient sa mort. [And if the people in Taraquin knew that truly this giant is dead, they would all come running right away, for there is nothing they desired so much in all the world as his death.]

—*Suite du roman de Merlin*

Terrorism, in modern political discourse, is the fear that haunts the political landscape, constantly being eradicated as terrorists are arrested or killed, yet never disappearing.²¹ And in the Arthurian world giants, though constantly eradicated by generations of knights and saints, are similarly always present, a fantasy that serves a powerful purpose too important to be given up. Slavoj Žižek has suggested that “authentic community is possible only in conditions of permanent threat.”²² And giants in medieval romance, by providing a permanent threat against which the Arthurian court defines itself, perpetuate the idea of an Arthurian hegemony preyed on by giants but always resisting them: a glorious foundation and mirror of the feudal society and court culture of medieval Europe. Like terrorists, giants evoke the specter of cultural decline and divergence, the fear of an entirely unknowable future that is not continuous with or generated by our law, our narrative trajectory.