

Elias, Marcel. 2024. *English Literature and the Crusades: Anxieties of Holy War, 1291–1453*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. x + 231. ISBN 9781108832212.

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Marcel Elias's book offers a reconsideration of how late medieval English literature defines relations between Christianity, Islam, and the idea of holy war. The study concentrates on Middle English crusade romances produced between the fall of Acre in 1291 and the Ottoman siege of Constantinople in 1453, and places these texts in a context shaped by uncertainty, moral unease, and recurrent self-interrogation, rather than by ideological confidence or cultural dominance. The central claim of the study is that, after the loss of the Holy Land, crusading persisted less as a triumphant project than as a troubled cultural formation, marked by doubts about divine support, Christian virtue, and the ethical legitimacy of religious violence—a position shared with recent scholarship (Tyerman 2006; Riley-Smith 2009).

Elias's argument revises the relationship between medieval literature and critical frameworks associated with Edward Said. Although *Orientalism* (Said 1978) has been influential in studies of medieval representations of Islam, Elias suggests that some medievalist uses of this book have emphasized coherence, continuity, and ideological function at the expense of contradiction and variability. For Elias, the value of Said's work lies less in its function as a fixed explanatory model for medieval texts than in its capacity to keep heterogeneity, internal dissent, and historical contingency in view—an emphasis developed further in *Culture and Imperialism* (Said 1993). *English Literature and the Crusades* draws on this later strand of Said's thought in its readings of late medieval romance. The book therefore sits between the critique and extension of Said: it follows the trajectory from *Orientalism* to *Culture and Imperialism* by shifting from an analysis of dominance and representation to a focus on ambivalence, fracture, and self-critique within imperial—or, here, crusading—cultures. Elias's key term, "reverse Orientalism," is a kinship to this critical lineage. The author uses this definition to describe a recurring representational pattern in which Muslim characters are granted moral authority and used to criticize Christian conduct, without entailing an abandonment of Orientalist stereotypes. Elias argues that medieval romances often operate with two representational logics at once: one depicts Muslims through familiar tropes of

alterity, excess, or idolatry; the other attributes to them virtues—justice, discipline, fidelity, moderation—that are presented as lacking in Christian communities. Reverse Orientalism thus describes a logic of inversion and mirroring, in which the Muslim other becomes a measure through which Christian failure is made visible.

This argument challenges a common tendency in medieval postcolonial criticism (Cohen 2000), which has often treated crusade literature primarily as an ideological instrument that naturalizes Christian superiority and authorizes violence against Islam. Elias does not dispute that these functions are present; he argues, however, that they coexist with pressures shaped by historical experience, above all military defeat and territorial loss (Tyerman 2006). Once Christian dominance could no longer be assumed, romance could also provide a setting for self-critique, often through Muslim figures whose success called for explanation. In this sense, reverse Orientalism is best understood as an index of cultural anxiety rather than as a deliberate counter-discourse, and it intersects with broader accounts of how medieval communities negotiated difference and violence (Heng 2018; Nirenberg 1996).

Anxiety is another conceptual pillar of the study and provides the emotional and epistemological framework for reverse Orientalism. Elias approaches the term historically, attending to its medieval semantic range rather than importing modern psychological categories. In his usage, anxiety denotes a persistent condition of unease: concern without resolution, sustained over time. In Elias's account, anxiety is not simply an episodic response to discrete defeats; it becomes a defining feature of post-1291 crusade culture.

This emphasis aligns the book with recent work in the history of emotions (Rosenwein 2006) and extends that work to interreligious representation. Emotional language in crusade romance does more than heighten narrative intensity or characterize individual figures; it also encodes collective concerns about providence, morality, and communal identity. Scenes of anger, despair, fear, shame, and grief are both expressive and interpretative, offering terms through which historical failure could be processed and debated.

The introduction clearly sets out these methodological commitments. Elias places his approach at the intersection of historicism, medieval postcolonial studies, and emotion studies, and argues that these perspectives support each other. His focus on the period after 1291 is also methodologically productive. Much scholarship has concentrated on earlier crusade literature, written in moments of expansion or relative confidence; Elias instead examines a phase shaped by loss, retrenchment, and geopolitical marginalization. Middle English romance, with its generic openness and tolerance for contradiction, is presented as a useful medium for articulating the tensions of this historical moment.

The four chapters of the book apply this framework to a series of well-known Middle English romances. Their aim is not to recast these works as covertly tolerant texts; it is to clarify the anxieties that shape their engagement with Islam and crusading ideology.

Chapter 1, devoted to *The Siege of Milan* and *The Sultan of Babylon*, examines how royal emotions and conflicts with divine authority become vehicles for political and theological critique. Elias highlights episodes in which Christian characters rebuke God, Christ, or the Virgin Mary for failing to protect the faithful. These scenes are often treated as narrative excesses or generic anomalies; Elias instead places them within a broader tradition of complaint literature that developed in response to repeated crusading failures. Thus, he reads blasphemous speech as a culturally intelligible response to the collapse of providential expectations, rather than as a marginal phenomenon. Anxiety here takes the form of a crisis of trust in divine governance, which unsettles the conventional hierarchies between human obedience and divine reward.

Chapter 2, which revolves around the *Otuel* romances, develops the concept of reverse Orientalism most directly. Elias reinterprets the Muslim warrior's conversion to Christianity chiefly as a device for exposing Christian inadequacy, and not as a narrative of assimilation. Elias notes that Otuel's moral and martial superiority is established prior to conversion, and this sequence lends weight to his later criticisms of Christian pride, envy, and factionalism. The convert thus functions as both an insider and an outsider, able to articulate judgments that native Christian figures cannot voice without risking communal cohesion. The chapter argues, accordingly, that admiration for Muslim virtue can coexist with—and sharpen—anxiety about Christian reliance on external models of discipline and strength.

Chapter 3 turns to *Guy of Warwick* and shifts the focus from communal politics to individual motivation. Elias places the romance within late medieval debates about chivalric crusading, especially the tension between worldly ambition and spiritual devotion. Love, friendship, and fame appear as ethically ambiguous motives that complicate claims to religious legitimacy. The distinction between self-interested social bonds and charitable *caritas* extends the book's emotional analysis and shows how anxiety operates at the level of intention and outcome. Crusading is marked by fear of defeat and by uncertainty about whether it can be separated from vainglory and instrumental self-advancement.

The final chapter, focused on *The Siege of Jerusalem* and *Richard Coeur de Lion*, addresses a more acute anxiety associated with crusading: the concern that holy war itself might be morally corrosive. Elias shows how narratives of excessive violence, including cannibalism, serve as concentrated figures for ethical unease. Such moments do not amount to a straightforward condemnation of crusading nor do they function as an unqualified endorsement. Instead, they

register a tension between the perceived necessity of violence and its ability to transgress Christian moral boundaries. Anxiety, in this context, remains unresolved and may intensify: acts meant to restore Christian dominance can threaten the values they claim to defend.

Across these readings, *English Literature and the Crusades* emphasizes interpretative instability. The romances Elias examines do not articulate a unified ideological programme and do not resolve the questions they raise. This openness underwrites the book's account of medieval Orientalism. Drawing on *Culture and Imperialism*, Elias treats crusade culture as internally divided, shaped by competing impulses toward domination, repentance, admiration, and fear. The study therefore shifts attention away from what the crusade literature asserts and toward what it negotiates.

The author's major contribution is marked by the consistency of the lens he applies to familiar materials, more than by the novelty of the individual texts he discusses. Reverse Orientalism and anxiety together provide a framework that accounts for contradiction without forcing resolution. Elias's central question is not whether medieval literature is Orientalist or tolerant, propagandistic or critical; it is how these romances register the pressures of historical failure and moral uncertainty. *English Literature and the Crusades* invites a reassessment of late medieval English romance as a genre shaped by unease and self-questioning, rather than by confidence and ideological assurance. The book also reframes how crusade literature is approached: it presents a corpus in which the limits of Christian identity and authority are repeatedly tested and shown to be unstable. For scholars of medieval Orientalism, crusade history, and the study of emotion, Elias offers excellent interpretative tools that can be applied beyond the texts discussed here.

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