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The Representation and Narrative Function of the Language of the Saracens in French Medieval Literature (13th-14th Centuries)

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Abstract In French medieval literature, the Saracens are recurring characters that authors represent in different ways. Of all the characteristics used to describe them, however, their language does not seem to have attracted much interest. While this characteristic is addressed less frequently than others (such as anthroponymy or religion), language remains, nonetheless, a significant feature that takes many forms. This article aims to give a first overview of how the language of the Saracens is described and its narrative function. This research will examine the small number of texts that explicitly represent the Saracen language.

Keywords Multilingualism. Arabic. Old French. French medieval literature. Jeu de Saint Nicolas. Livre de l'eschiele Mahomet. Livre des merveilles. Jean Bodel. Jean de Mandeville.

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1 Introduction

In French medieval literature, the Saracens are recurring characters that authors represent in different ways, at the interface of myth and reality.[1] To create and depict alterity, these authors develop what Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas (2003, 10) calls the "rhetoric of otherness",[2] which is based on common characteristics – such as religion, onomastics, and physical qualities – or less common aspects, such as language. A significant proportion of authors tend to ignore the existence of linguistic differences between Christians and Saracens. This absence has been noted since the earliest European sources that recorded the first contacts with Islam and the first literary texts (König 2019, 64-6; Girbea 2014, 149; Schulze-Busacker 1987; Daniel 1984, 56-7). On a few rare occasions, literary works make references to the 'Saracen' language that usually involve an imprecisely defined reality that often extends beyond Arabic to other languages, real or imaginary. Even rarer are occurrences of what I shall call linguistic enclaves (Hasenohr 1990b, 289-90), i.e. the insertion of passages of variable length in a foreign language "dans un entourage linguistiquement différent et prépondérant" (Elwert 1960, 416). The use of linguistic enclaves is a phenomenon whose existence is well attested in French medieval literature, and which fulfils several functions,[3] depending on the foreign language involved. An author may, for example, resort to this process when addressing an audience capable of perceiving and understanding the implications of these linguistic combinations, or intentionally use a language that eludes the audience. In the case of Arabic enclaves, this situation is taken a step further, since it is very probable that neither the author

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1 In this paper, I will use the term *sarrasin* ('Saracen') to mean an Arab-Muslim character, real or fictional. On the image of the Saracens in French medieval literature, see: Turner 2019; Girbea 2014; Tarte Ramey 2014; Besnardeau 2007; Tolan 2003; Daniel 1984; Bancourt 1982.

2 She herself borrows the term from F. Hartog (1980).

3 The most frequently occurring example of bilingualism is Latin. There is a vast literature on the subject, which is beyond the scope of this paper. For a global approach to the phenomenon of vernacular bilingualism in French medieval literature, cf. Jeay 2008, 19-40; Zumthor 1960, 301-36 and 561-94. Other texts, such as the *Roman de Renart*, play on English-French bilingualism for humorous and caricatural purposes: cf. Lalou 1988, 543-62. In *Florimont*, Aimon de Varennes includes some words and expressions purportedly in Greek, cf. Psichari 1891, 507-50. This phenomenon also occurs in other vernacular texts: cf. Schnapp 1990, 175-206. In the *Tavola Ritonda*, Lancelot has skills in pseudo-Arabic (*in lingua saracina*), cf. Heijkant 1997, 88; Murgia 2015, 197-8. Instances are also documented in Latin plays, cf. Revol 1999, 491-506.

nor the audience had the necessary proficiency in the language in question (Jones 2005, 307).

This article aims to define how the language of the Saracens is represented and described, and its narrative function, by analysing the small number of French medieval texts that exploit linguistic enclaves in Arabic or pseudo-Arabic. I focus on texts containing occurrences of elaborate linguistic enclaves to which a specific role has been assigned within the narrative. Texts that only contain a smattering of Arabic words will therefore be excluded from the research corpus. I address these issues by focusing on three representative examples, each belonging to a different literary genre: Jean Bodel's *Jeu de Saint Nicolas* (c. 1200), a play with epic reminiscences, written in Arras; the *Livre de l'eschiele Mahomet* (c. 1264), the Old French version of a text itself translated from Arabic; and Jean de Mandeville's *Livre des merveilles* (1351-71), a carefully fabricated travelogue. Each text takes a different approach which justifies the presence of linguistic enclaves in Arabic or pseudo-Arabic; the use of these enclaves is therefore influenced by the aims of each text, as well as by the aesthetics and purposes of the genre to which they belong.

2 Figuring the Language of the Saracens in French Medieval Literature. A General Overview

Before addressing the subject in detail, a few methodological clarifications are in order. Dealing with the Saracen language involves determining what it is, and how it is perceived and referred to in French medieval literature. The first observation is that in the eyes of medieval authors this language corresponds, like the term *sarrasin*, to a porous reality with a highly variable degree of precision. The most common designation is *sarrazinois*, a coinage that refers broadly to the language of the Saracens. While most modern translators render the term as 'Arabic', it is clear that it "means Arabic as much and as little as Saracen means Arab" (Daniel 1984, 57). Behind this noun lies a "linguistic Babel", to borrow François Suard's expression (1991-92, 265), of foreign tongues "all of which […] are virtually interchangeable as languages of the Muslim adversary" (Jones 2005, 300). The same observation applies to more specific names. Besides *arabech* or *arabic*, the language of the Saracen is also called *persan*, *turquois*, or *besdouyn*.[4] In addition, the linguistic capability

4 *Persan* (Raynaud, Lemaître 1914, v. 19862); *turquois* (Lachet 2010, vv. 327-8); *besdouyn* (Surdel 1996, v. 10261); *arabech*/*arabic* (Hardy 2011, vv. 6103, 6305). It is interesting to note that *arabech*, *turquois* and *persan* represent the three dominant languages of *Mashriq* at the time. While it is certain that for the public these languages are inter-

of a character who can speak with a Saracen often takes the form of an enumeration of various languages, sometimes without any linguistic kinship, or which are not used at all by the same groups or in the same regions.[5] Lastly, the Arabic language or *sarrazinois* can be subsumed under more generic formulas, such as *en son langage*, *en langue païenne*, or *en son latin*.[6] Just as the language of the Saracens is designated by various names, so too, when quoted directly, it can sometimes take the form of borrowings from Arabic, other misidentified languages, or even a language made up from scratch. In this respect, I use the term 'Arabic' when the enclave can be traced back to a real source; I will, on the other hand, use the word *sarrazinois* or 'pseudo-Arabic' when the language in question cannot be identified with an existing idiom or is an invention.

There are two main treatments of the Saracen language in the French medieval corpus. In the first and most frequently encountered case, the sole mention of the name of the language is sufficient to mark the existence of linguistic otherness and to suggest to the reader that a change of idiom is taking place, without moving away from French. Across all literary genres, the language of the Other functions as an argument for verisimilitude or contributes to the effect of reality that some authors develop; but its role does not end there. The example of the *chansons de geste* has received the most attention from scholars. Catherine M. Jones (2005) has identified three narrative contexts where mastery of the Saracen language is required or mentioned. It is found in conjunction with the disguise motif, where it supplements the arsenal of the Christian in disguise,[7] in the context of mediated communication and diplomacy (Arabic is the prerogative of professional interpreters called *drugements* or *latiniers*), and in the general upbringing of specific female characters. The issue has also been raised in the romance corpus. In addition to the uses that the romance shares with the *chanson de geste*, interest in the diversity of languages also underscores an ambiguity of identity (Girbea 2014, 149-54; Besnardeau 2007, 158-62).

changeable in their role as the language of the Saracens, their presence is not accidental and is undoubtedly a trace of repeated contacts between Europe and the Near East.

5 The best-known example of this phenomenon is the presentation of Gillebert's linguistic skills in the *Prise d'Orange*, which places the Basque language between Turkish, African and Bedouin (*Tu as el regne assez parlé turquois | Et aufriquant, bedoïn et basclois*). Moreover, it is not uncommon to find Greek included in the linguistic arsenal of the Saracen or of the Christian who wishes to communicate with him (Besnardeau 2007, 523).

6 We find, for example, in the *Chanson d'Antioche*, the formulas *en son langage* (Guidot 2011, vv. 588-9) and *en son latin* (v. 8045); the formula *langue païenne* is found, *inter alia*, in the *Entrée d'Espagne* (Infurna 2011, v. 8882).

7 This aspect has been further developed by François Suard (1980).

In the second case, the language of the Saracens is represented by linguistic enclaves that range from a single word to a whole sentence. These may be taken directly from the Arabic language or, as mentioned above, from another language – which the author assumes to be Arabic, or tries to pass off as such – or from a fabricated idiom. When these enclaves convey transliterations of Arabic, three categories of source for the insertion of foreign words can be isolated.[8] The main linguistic transmission path is embodied in the French translations of texts that go back to Arabic originals. These cases, which are quite rare, primarily involve the corpus of scientific works, with a clear dominance of astronomical and medical fields (Galderisi 2011).[9] Outside these fields, there are French translations of historical and ethnographic texts, such as Jean de Vignay's *Miroir historial* (c. 1330) and Jean le Long's *Livre des peregrinacions* (1354). These two examples retain discrete traces of an Arabic source. In the case of the former, it is a third-hand textual source, since Vignay rendered into Middle French an Arabic disputation which was first translated into Latin in 1142 before being integrated into Vignay's source text, the *Speculum historiale*.[10] In the latter case, Jean le Long translates a Latin text whose original author, Riccoldo di Monte Croce, had a proven knowledge of Arabic. The translator thus retains the few words in Arabic that Riccoldo included in his book.[11]

Secondly, Arabic vocabulary comes from the author's personal experience, from a direct encounter with the language in question. This situation is mainly evident in ethnographic accounts and travel reports. A well-known case is Marco Polo's *Devisement dou monde*.[12] During his various commercial missions, the Venetian traveller de-

8 Daniel G. König (2019) has produced a remarkable study on this subject, referring to the linguistic entanglement of Arabic and Latin.

9 It must be noted that no French translation is made directly from an Arabic source text. There is always at least one intermediary (usually Latin).

10 There are four loanwords from Arabic in book XXIV, chs 39-67 of the *Miroir historial*. These chapters are based on the Latin translation of the *Risālat al-Kindī*, a Christian-Muslim dialogue probably written at the court of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn (Bottini 2009). The *Miroir historial* contains, for example, the expression *aller a alabach, c'est a dire en pelerinage en vostre meson de Meques* (*Miroir historial*, XXIV, ch. 60), in which *alabach* is a corrupted form of *al-ḥajj*, 'the pilgrimage'. Interestingly, another later text also based on the Latin translation of the *Risāla*, Jean Germain's *Trésor des simples* (1447-51), retains a larger proportion of the different transliterations of Arabic contained in its source. Moreover, Jean Germain preserves and expands the debate on the language of the Qur'ān to the best of his ability and knowledge. Cf. *Trésor des simples*, book II, chs 11, 13.

11 The *Livre des peregrinacions* (Robecchi 2020) retains half a dozen of these direct loanwords, such as *Elchemarum* (*al-qamar*, 'the moon') and *elgen* (*al-jinn*, 'the jinn').

12 For a bibliographic synthesis and a survey of foreign vocabulary in Marco Polo's text, see: Andreose 2018; 2020; Ménard 2009; 2012; Mancini 1992; 1994; as well as the fundamental *Notes* by Pelliot 1959-73.

veloped a polyglotism that is reflected in his work. The insertion of a foreign term generally takes the following form:

> et encore s'apelent tuit celz rois Çulcarnein, en saraisin lor langajes, que vaut a dire en fransois Alixandre. (F LVI 3)[13]

It is important to note that direct experience does not necessarily presuppose a knowledge of Arabic on the part of the author, as in the case of Jean de Joinville's *Vie de Saint Louis*. When he accompanied Louis IX on his crusade project, Joinville became familiar with cultural and linguistic aspects of the Arab-Muslim world through "drugements ('dragomen'), qui savoient le sarrazinnois et le françois, […] qui enromançoient le sarrazinois" (Monfrin 1995, 340, § 335). In this way, he was able to introduce into his text a few terms he learned on his journey overseas.

Finally, the texts discussed in the previous two categories can in turn serve as a source for later literary works. Through this process, certain Arabic terms are transmitted and reused in the aesthetics of literary works belonging to various genres. One such example is Jean de Mandeville, who is analysed in more detail below.

These direct borrowings from Arabic serve above all to designate characters, titles, or concepts specific to the Arabic-speaking world – both cultural and religious. They are not part of any particularly elaborate staging and respond primarily to lexical needs; they provide a degree of precision that reinforces verisimilitude, without any implication that they are serving the narrative.

3 The *Jeu de saint Nicolas*. Fictionalizing the Language of the Saracens

Written and performed around 1200, the *Jeu de Saint Nicolas* is a play firmly rooted in a plural context. Produced in the Arras milieu, it also offers a dramaturgical narrative with epic reminiscences, set in the aftermath of the failure of the Third Crusade (Calkin, Kinoshita 2012; Rey-Flaud 1980, 129-48). The play is based on a carefully considered structure that places Christian and Saracen societies in tension, the latter being an inversion of the former. It tells the story of a *preudom*, a virtuous man, captured by the Saracens. His captivity does not prevent him from continuing to pray to his statue of

13 For the Franco-Italian redaction ('F') of Marco Polo's *Devisement dou monde*, I follow the edition by Eusebi, Burgio 2018 (text and glossary), also readable in Simion, Burgio, 2015. The name *çulcarnein* (ar. *ḏū al-qarnayn*), which literally means 'the one with two horns', has often been identified as referring to Alexander the Great (cf. the entry *Zulcarnein* by Maria Piccoli in the *Lemmario* of Simion, Burgio, 2015; Watt 1997, 127b).

Saint Nicolas. The Saracen king, intrigued by the unshakable faith of the *preudom*, decides to put the saint's powers to the test by making him the sole protector of his treasure. If the saint fails to protect it, the *preudom* will forfeit his life. Attracted by this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, three thieves steal the treasure without encountering the slightest opposition from the saint. However, Saint Nicolas intervenes afterwards and forces the thieves to return the fruit of their larceny. Following this episode, the Saracen leader converts to Christianity and rejects his principal deity, Tervagan.

Throughout the play, Tervagan expresses himself through gestures, laughter and crying. Each of these communicative acts is considered to be meaningful, but requires the intervention of an interpreter, in this case the *seneschal*. Tervagan communicates for the first time by means of a spoken and articulated language after the Saracen king's conversion, in the presence of the king himself and the *preudom*:

> Tervagans
> Palas aron ozinomas
> Baske bano tudan donas
> Geheamel cla orlaÿ
> Berec.he. patanras taÿ.
> Li preudom
> Rois, que voloit il ore dire?
> Li Roys
> Preudom, il muert de duel et d'ire
> De che c'a Dieu me sui turkiés ;
> Mais n'ai mais soing de son prologe.
> Senescal, de la synagoge,
> Alés, si me le trebuchiés.
> (Henri 1981, vv. 1512-21)

From a formal perspective, the tirade has a normal function in the metric and rhythmic pattern (Zumthor 1975, 52-3). It takes the form of a quatrain of octosyllables with rhyming couplets (*-as* and *-aÿ*). However, it remains unintelligible, leading the *preudom* to question the king about its meaning. The king then offers a conjectural interpretation rather than a faithful translation of the last words of the abandoned idol.

Much has already been written about Tervagan's speech, its significance, and its origin. Very early on, it was perceived as untranslatable gibberish, a made-up language. The first to propose a translation of this mysterious line was Henri Guiter, who interpreted it as a corrupted

form of Basque (Guiter 1967; 1977).[14] However, later scholars have given only limited consideration to this hypothesis and continue to see it as an invented language, often with a range of plausible real languages at its source. Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet identify an Arabo-Hellenic influence (Schnapp 1991, 279; Cerquiglini-Toulet 2017). Comparing Tervagan's tirade with that of Salatin in the *Miracle de Théophile*, Cerquiglini-Toulet states that "ces langues sont en fait inventées dans la ressemblance à une langue existante: arabe, hébreu, latin" (Cerquiglini-Toulet 2017, 27). While in the *Miracle de Théophile*, Salatin's tirade is more akin to a form of Hebrew used in a pseudo-cabalistic setting,[15] Tervagan's seems less obvious, and presents sonorities and phonetic combinations that differ significantly from those of Arabic. Moreover, the probability that Bodel had even a vague notion of Arabic is very slight. It is more likely to be a fictionalized Saracenic language, in the sense of an imitation of how the author imagines Arabic to be or, quite simply, a language that evokes the sounds of a foreign language with an "oriental coloration" (Cazal 1998, 295), a phonaesthetic parody of an indeterminate oriental language (Kirk 2021, 18).[16]

14 He translates Tervagan's tirade as follows (Guiter 1977, 10-11): "J'avais donc enterré la bonne vieille langue, domaine suffisant. Mais le saint à qui j'ai affaire n'était pas l'ami de ces lieux de cette manière: Lui ne sait même pas la langue française".

15 Salatin's character is ambiguous; his origins are not mentioned in the text. According to Gilbert Dahan, he is both Jewish and Arabic, the incarnation of the 'Other' (Dahan 1977, 468). Various internal indications point to a Judaizing character rather than an Arabic one, which is why his tirade has been excluded from my study corpus. The linguistic enclave appears when the sorcerer invokes the Devil: *Ici parole Salatins au deable et dist*: […] | *Os tu, Sathanz?* […] | *Ne m'os tu pas?* | *Je te ferai plus que le pas* | *Venir, je cuit;* | *Et si tu vendras encore anuit,* | *Quar ta demoree me nuit* | *Si ai beé.* | *Ci conjure Salatins le deable*: | *Bagahi laca bachahé* | *Lamac cahi achabahé* | *Karrelyos* | *Lamac lamec bachalyos* | *Cabahagi sabalyos* | *Baryolas* | *Lagazatha cabyolas* | *Samahac et famyolas* | *Harrahya* | *Or vient li Deables qui est conjuré et dist*: | *Tu as bien dit ce qu'il y a* | *Cil qui t'aprist riens n'oublïa.* | *Molt me travailles* (Dufournet 1987, vv. 147, 154-71). Salatin's invocation, unlike Tervagan's language, exhibits similarities with Hebrew. Some of the words pronounced by the sorcerer match letters of the Hebrew alphabet, such as *Samech* and *Lamed* (or *Lamech*). In addition, the text, or its headings, sometimes refer to this tirade as Hebrew or Chaldean (Zumthor 1975, 53). Although the reader or spectator is confronted, as in the case of the *Jeu*, with a private language, the setting in which it is pronounced in the *Miracle* is completely different. The tirade on this occasion is spoken by a human being, with conjurative intent. The scene effectively exploits several conventions of the practice of magic. Firstly, when the initial attempt in French fails, Salatin turns to another language to conjure the devil, a practice attested in other magic texts (Véronèse 2006; 2014). The form of the *tercet coué* reinforces the aspect of a magic formula. Secondly, mastery of the foreign language employed by Salatin is acquired through teaching, the transmission of insider knowledge (*Cil qui t'aprist riens n'oublïa*). Thirdly, the change of language is effective, but also consistent with the Jewish magical tradition, according to which one must speak to the demon in its own language in order to be heard (Alexander 1986). Finally, the similarities with letters of the Hebrew alphabet suggest a pseudo-cabalistic use.

16 Kirk (2021, 18) associates this process with Dario Fo's *grammelot*, which consists of a "method of producing the semblance of a given language without adopting real or identifiable words from that language".

In a play notable for its careful language and stylistic effects, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that Bodel would have expended an equal amount of effort on devising Tervagan's jargon. It stands out from other occurrences of linguistic fantasy intended to create nonsense and to mark the discourse of the Other. Elyse Dupras identified the different linguistic devices used by medieval dramatic authors to mark this type of discourse. They elaborate a "spectacle sonore qui prime sur le sens", based on various figures of speech and formal constraints designed to endow the replica with mechanical, hoarse, cacophonous sounds. However, as Elyse Dupras (2006, 100) highlights, these sounds are systematically constructed from the language of the "same". Conversely, Tervagan's discourse stands out by offering a "spectacle sonore" that definitively discards meaning, breaking all ties with the language of the "same". Considering the reaction of incomprehension or indifference on the part of the various characters, Tervagan's jargon appears to be deliberately designed in such a way that its meaning escapes the audience completely, and its status and narrative function stem from its fundamentally unintelligible nature.

A primary function of this linguistic enclave is to serve the construction of otherness – and its subsequent marginalisation. Elyse Dupras points out that this gibberish can be translated and thus understood in a universe dominated by the language of the Other. By means of a pseudo-foreign language, Jean Bodel gives "à l'altérité diabolique une existence linguistique autonome fictive" (Dupras 2006, 101). In turn, the status of this language is defined by that of its main speaker. It belongs to Tervagan, the embodiment of the religion opposed to Christianity. In this Saracen society, which is an inversion of Christian society, Yvonne Cazal has postulated that Tervagan's discourse could operate as an inverted and outrageous representation of Latin, God's language, that can be heard in churches (Cazal 1998, 295). At the time, Latin was indeed inaccessible to most laymen: this situation therefore required the intervention of a cleric to clarify the sermon delivered in Latin, a mysterious yet meaningful language that needed to be deciphered. The triangular relationship between the king, the *seneschal* and the idol echoes this situation. By requesting the intervention of the *seneschal* to translate any manifestation of the idol, the king raises him to the rank of the Saracen equivalent of the cleric who interprets the divine language. Then, when the Saracen king disowns his original belief, Tervagan is excluded from communication, deprived of the intermediary it needs in order to be understood (Schnapp 1991, 279). Its final manifestation becomes the last impenetrable remnant of a now abandoned religion.

Attributing a different language to Tervagan also brings the division between Christians and Saracens to a linguistic level. The world of the *Jeu* is dominated by the language shared by all the characters

except the idol. The idol's monologue is therefore unintelligible to the "Christian system" (Dupras 2006, 102), as neither the *preudom* nor the audience of the play can grasp its meaning. They are all outsiders at a hermeneutical level. Unlike the universal language of the *Jeu*, Tervagan's tongue appears to be private. Thus, delimited by the Christian system of communication, the language of the Other, argues Jeffrey T. Schnapp, becomes an anti-language (Schnapp 1990, 179). This tension between private and universal language is apparent when the two idols, Saint Nicolas and Tervagan, are compared. As Roger Dragonetti has shown, the relationship of specularity that governs the *Jeu* extends to both idols, as Tervagan presents various "signes inversés du dehors et du dedans de la statue chrétienne" (Dragonetti 1984, 375). When Saint Nicolas addresses the thieves, he draws on a truculent linguistic register that is consistent with the milieu he is addressing (*Fil a putain, tout estes mort*! v. 1281). Moreover, this intervention leads to the reparation of the crime and, ultimately, to the conversion, willing or otherwise, of the Saracens. The word of Saint Nicolas appears to be more effective and accessible than that of Tervagan, which is now inaccessible and utterly futile.

4 The *Livre de l'eschiele Mahomet*. Arabic as the Language of the Revelation

The *Livre de l'eschiele Mahomet* (*Book of Muḥammad's ladder*) is a thirteenth-century Old French translation of an Arabic text that has its roots in the Muslim tradition of the *isrā'* and the *mi'rāj*, which narrates Muḥammad's night journey and ascension to Heaven.[17] It has been established that the Arabic text at the origin of the Castilian, Latin and French versions is "a compilation of a body of Latinate traditions culled from the Qur'an and Hadith, together with other Arabic and perhaps Jewish materials, which are used to demonstrate the falseness of Muḥammad's prophetic mission" (Echevarría 2012, 426). Once compiled, the text was first translated from Arabic into Castilian by Abraham al-Faqīh.[18] The Castilian version was then translated into Latin by Bonaventure of Siena around 1264, and finally into Old French.[19] The elaboration of the source text, and the trans-

17 I use Peter Wunderli's critical edition (1968), in the digital version by Serena Modena (`https://www.rialfri.eu/texts/mahomet|001`). For the Latin version, I use Heullant-Donat, Polo de Beaulieu 1991. For an analysis of the various editions of the Latin version, see Roelli 2018.

18 The Castilian version has not been preserved. However, traces of it can potentially be found in other works (Gonzáles Muñoz 2011).

19 The question of the date of translation of the Old French version and the identity of the translator remains open. The text of the prologue is identical to that of the Latin.

lations, were shaped by a polemical context (Echevarría 2006; Wunderli 1968, 31). Several changes were therefore made to adapt this material to its new audience and to the polemical purpose for which it was prepared (Guillaume 1996). Different types of textual arrangement can be identified. For example, at the formal level, Abraham al-Faqīh divides the text into chapters to facilitate consultation.[20] As for the developments that support the new polemical focus imposed on the *miʿrāj* tradition, the most significant of these is the creation of a narrative centred on Muḥammad, who becomes not only the main character, but also its sole narrator. As Ana Echevarría (2012, 426) points out, "Christian authors […] were less interested in Islamic eschatological beliefs than in the figure of the Prophet". Hence, they do not hesitate to twist the original material to bring out the character at the centre of their polemical concerns. This manipulation can also be observed in the formulations used by Muḥammad, starting with the way in which he introduces himself:

> jeo, Mahomet, fiz de Abdillehe et néz d'Arabe, de la cité de Mecke, du noble lignage des Arabs qui se appelle Koraixis, alluméz de la grace de Diex. (I, 1)

This formulation has no equivalent in Arabic sources and is more reminiscent of a legal formula or an oath.

The various stages of the translation process retain traces of the Arabic original.[21] Both Latin and French versions contain transliterations that are remarkably accurate. They vary in length, from one word to quotations containing several propositions, and are systematically accompanied by glosses that provide either a paraphrase or a literal translation. The phenomenon of transliteration involves different categories of concept. Firstly, it is employed to describe Islamic rituals and their formulas. The reader can find an elaborate example of this use in the extract in which Muḥammad describes the ritual of prayers in Heaven:

> Et en ce qe nos ploriens issinc, atant se leva un ange entre elx qui estoit *halmohaden* du ciel, que volt tant dire en sarracinois com

It is difficult to know whether Bonaventure of Siena is responsible for the Old French version. Most recently, Philipp Roelli suggested that the Old French version is based on a Latin exemplar (Roelli 2018).

20 "Et [Habraym, juif et fisicien] departi ce livre par .LXXXV. chapitres, por ce qe hom poust plus legierement demostrer les choses que en lui se contienent ad celx qui en demandassent, et lor poust plus tost respondre des choses demandees" (Prolog, 4).

21 Peter Wunderli (1968, 177-9) catalogued them in an appendix to his critical edition. He isolates 22 instances, but it should be noted that the reader can find about thirty more in the glossary, as well as in the index of qur'anic quotations.

> ‘celi qui claime les Sarazins quant il doivent faire lor oreisons’; et tantost qu’il fu levéz en piés, il comença ad clamer as oreisons et dire: “*Hallahu akibar*”, que vuolt tant dire com ‘Diex est li granz’. Et aprés ce si dist: “*Le hille halla hilalla*”, c’est a dire: ‘n’est autre Diex [for Diex]’. Et puis dist avant : “*Haxedu le halla hilallu*”, et ce vost dire: ‘Tesmogniéz qu’il n’i a autre Diex for Diex.’ Et aprés ce, si dist: “*Haxeduna Muhagmet raçur halla*”, que vuolt dire: ‘Tesmoigniéz autresinc que Mahomet est messagier de Diex.’ Et unquor dist il: “*Haia laçala haya lalfala*”, que vuolt tant dire: ‘Venéz ad vos oreisons et ad vostre profit’. (XVIII, 11-15; emphasis added)

The Prophet begins his description with an explanation of the role of the celestial ‘muezzin’ (*halmohaden* < ar. *muʾaḏḏin*), “who summons the Muhammadans when they ought to say their prayers” (Hyatte 1997, 123). He goes on to explain some of the prescribed gestures and formulas for the prayer, starting with the *takbīr*, i.e. reciting ‘God is the greatest’ (*Hallahu akibar* < ar. ¢). The muezzin then pronounces the *šahāda* (*Le hille halla hilalla* < ar. *Lā ilāha illā Allāh*, ‘There is no god but God’) before encouraging Muslims to bear witness to the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muḥammad. He concludes with the last call ‘Come to your prayers and your salvation’ (*Haia laçala haya lalfala* < ar. *ḥayyā ilā aṣ-ṣalāt ḥayyā ilā al-falāḥ*). For each sequence in Arabic, the translator repeats the clause “vuolt [tant] a dire [com]” or “c’est a dire” which introduces two categories of glosses. On the one hand, in the case of the word *halmohaden*, the translator proposes a definition of the word, as it has no equivalent in French. On the other hand, the ritual formulas are followed by a correct literal translation.

The transliterated formulas also encompass qur’anic extracts. However, it should be noted that the process is not systematic when it comes to the Qurʾān, as most of the verses are simply rendered in Old French:

> Et en ce que je regardoie ces choses, je oi darrier celles cortines une voiz que dist paroles du livre de l’Alkoran dom le comencement fu itel: “*Hamina haraçul bime huncila ylai*”, que volt tant dire com ‘li messagier crei tot ce que fu dist en l’estoire du comencement jusqu’a la fin’. (XLIX, 5; emphasis added)

The transliteration concerns the *incipit* of the qur’anic verse 2: 285 (ar. *amina ar-rasūl bi-mā unzila ilayhi*, ‘the Messenger has believed in what was revealed to him’). However, the French translation goes beyond its Arabic source. This would lead us to believe that the verse was contained in full in the source text. A look at the full verse rules out this hypothesis, establishing the final section of the translation (“ce que fu dist en l’estoire du comencement jusqu’a la fin”) as the result of an extrapolation on the part of the compiler or translator.

Secondly, Arabic words are used for naming regions, *loci*, and components of the heavens:

> Et tant vuolt dire "*Gennet Hanaym*" com 'Jardin compliement habundant de tottes delices que cueor d'ome puisse penser'. (XXXVI, 2 ; emphasis added)
>
> Et quant il furent la, si i troverent '*alkazeres*', que vuolt tant dire en sarrazinois com 'maisons royaus'. (XLII, 11; emphasis added)

As noted in the first case, the translation or paraphrase of the Arabic words is introduced by the clause "vuolt tant dire". More than a translation, Muḥammad provides a complete explanation of the term *Gennet Hanaym* (*jannāt an-naʿīm*, 'gardens of delight'), giving it an additional interpretive value.

Thirdly, a few proper names (designating prophets, angels, or people), whether common to Christianity and Islam or not, are given in both languages. This phenomenon is exemplified by the names of John (the Baptist), son of Zechariah, and Jesus, son of Mary:

> Sachez Mahomet qe celi qui siet ou siege plus bas a nom *Yoanna ibm Sakaria*, que vuolt tant dire com Jehan, li fiz Zakarie. Et ci est un des profetes Nostre Seignour. Et celui qui siet plus ault a nom *Yça ibm Mariem*, que vuolt tant dire com Jhesu, li fiz Marie. (XII, 22-4; emphasis added)

From a translational perspective, Jean-Patrick Guillaume considers the use of transliteration to be a means of bringing out the otherness and exoticism of the content of the *Livre de l'eschiele*. He adds that the relative precision of the translations and glosses that accompany these transliterations underlines the embarrassment of the translators in the presence of a cultural universe that they do not fully understand (Guillaume 1996, 85). Therefore, opting for the combination of transliterations and explanations allows the translator to carefully preserve the integrity of the text. However, these observations require further elaboration. The use of Arabic transliteration in Latin and Romance translations is a common phenomenon that has been well studied. It occurs mainly when there is no equivalent or the term is unknown (Burnett 2001, 71; Ducos 2008), thus demonstrating the difficulty of a complete *translatio* of various Arabic words, relating in this instance to a religious lexicon. Nevertheless, a significant number of examples in the *Livre de l'eschiele* prove that the use of transliteration is not the result of any misunderstanding or hesitation about the meaning of a word or phrase. On the one hand, it can be accompanied by an exact literal translation (for example, *Haxedu le halla hilallu*); on the other hand, it can be associated with a correct paraphrastic interpretation of the Arabic term which has no equivalent in French (for example, *halmohaden*).

Through its various uses, Arabic is shown to be a liturgical and eschatological language, but also the language of the Qurʾān, defined earlier in the *Livre de l'eschiele* as directly given by God to Muḥammad,[22] and therefore of God.[23] Thus, the linguistic enclaves in the *Livre de l'eschiele* are clearly distinct from the enclave preserved in the *Jeu de saint Nicolas*. In the case of the *Livre*, their meaning is made accessible by the presence of translations and glosses, which therefore gives them an entirely different purpose. As highlighted by Paul Zumthor (1975, 48-9):

> [c]'est là une valorisation de la figure […] de 'barbarolexie', amplifiée jusqu'à la dignité de la glose : le texte emprunte sa vertu à des mots d'une autre langue, dont la signifiance, à cause de leur identité même, diffère de celle des nôtres.

The translational *modus operandi* gives Arabic a status of its own, defined on its own terms and no longer as an inverted image of the language of Christianity. It becomes, moreover, an idiom worthy of being subjected to exegesis. This confers on it an aura and a legitimacy similar to that of Latin, as defined by Yvonne Cazal (1998, 295): Arabic, as the language of God, is inaccessible from a semantic point of view and therefore needs to be explained by a competent person.

Moreover, these transliterations from Arabic play an additional role in the narrative, due to the modifications effected by the work of the translators and the polemical rewriting to which the original material has been subjected. The narrative of the *Livre de l'eschiele* has been reworked to present a unified, first-person narrative. The translator's interventions relating to lexicon and formulas are then absorbed by the diegesis and become fragments of the Prophet's speech. Muḥammad's voice is superimposed on that of the translator, endowing the former with a close knowledge of Arabic – or at least the impression thereof. The translational process, which initially contributes to the status of Arabic as a theological language, becomes an element of the aesthetics of prophetic discourse, emphasising the Prophet's capabilities and legitimacy. As Carlo Chiurco points out:

> those who could claim a perfect command of the language of theology might also claim to be the only ones to possess the key to the best doctrinal exposition of what 'true faith' consisted of. (Chiurco 2009, 220)

22 "Mahomet, pren ceste istoire, sicom est en li Alkoran, que je te doign et otroi. Et sachez que ce livre si est des miens tresors du paradis qui sunt sor toz les autres tresors du siecle" (XLIX, 7-8).

23 As stated in the Qurʾān itself. Cf. Q 2: 2; 13: 37; 46: 12.

The status of Arabic and its relationship with Muḥammad and God are made explicit in Chapter XLIX, which features a dialogue during which God asks Muḥammad to provide an explanation of *Haldaraiet vhalkaforat* (< ar. *ad-darajāt wa-l-kaffārāt*, 'the degrees and the acts of expiation'), erroneously identified as a verse of the Qur'ān:[24]

— Mahomet, que entendent les genz du siecle de l'affer et de la compagnie des ciels ?
Et je lui respondi et dis:
— Sire, il s'entendent ad celle parole que est escrite en l'Alkoran: *"Haldaraiet vhalkaforat"*. [Dixit quoque michi Dominus:
— Quid vult dicere *"vhalkaforat"*?]
Et je lui dis:
— *"Vhalkaforat" volt tant dire com 'les piés movoir por aler ad la Mohomerie ad faire oreisons ad Diex'*.
Et atant Nostre Sires me dist:
— Mahomet, tu as tochié a la pure verité.Et puis si me redist:
— Que volt dire *"haldaraiet"*? Et je lui respondi:
— "Haldaraiet" volt tant dire com 'saluer les genz et lor doner bien ad mangier et liément, et faire oreisons quant les autres genz en dormant se reposent'.
Et Nostre Segnour me dist:
— Ha Mahomet, or voi je que tu es reempli de ma grace et de tot le savoir, quar tu sas la verité totte. Et issinc com tu la sas, si va et la di ad ton pueple et demostre. (XLIX, 25-40; emphasis added)

The function of Muḥammad is defined both by the content and the scenography of the discourse. Arabic is confirmed as the language of divine revelation, despite an erroneous attribution. By responding fairly and accurately to God's questioning, Muḥammad establishes himself as a rightful intermediary between the Divinity and humankind, as confirmed by God's approval at the end of the dialogue ("Ha Mahomet, or voi je que tu es reempli de ma grace et de tot le savoir,

24 According to Peter Wunderli (1968, 172), the mistake can be traced back to the translator, and the explanation of the meaning of the sentence given afterwards is also the result of a misunderstanding. A potential source for this dialogue can be found in the *Jāmiʿ at-Tirmiḏī*, a major *aḥādīṯ* collection: "Wa-l-kaffārātu al-muḵṭu fī al-masājidi baʿda aṣ-ṣalawāti wa-l-mašyu ʿalā al-aqdāmi ilā-l-jamāʿāt ; […] qāla wa-d-darajātu ifšāʾu as-salāmi wa-iṭʿāmu aṭ-ṭaʿāmi wa-ṣ-ṣalātu bi-l-layli wa-n-nāsu niyāmun" (*Jāmiʿ at-Tirmiḏī*, Chapters on Tafsir, vol. 5, book 44, Hadith 3233; `https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:3233`). Translation: 'and the acts that atone are lingering in the Masjid after the prayer, walking on the feet to the congregation […]; And the acts that raise ranks are spreading the Salam, feeding others, and pray during the night, while the people are sleeping'. According to the interpretation given by at-Tirmiḏī, the word *ad-darajāt* means 'the acts that raise ranks' and *al-kaffārāt* 'the acts that atone'. These two terms do appear in the Qur'ān, but never in the form of a couplet as the text of the *Livre de l'eschiele* suggests.

quar tu sas la verité totte. Et issinc com tu la sas, si va et la di ad ton pueple et demostre").

The intervention of the translator then becomes – without it being possible to know whether this was a conscious intention on his part – a feature of the Prophet's posture, which in turn plays a part in defining the status of the Arabic language, explicitly conceived as a vehicle for divine revelation.

5 Jean de Mandeville's *Livre des merveilles du monde*. Arabic as an Ethnographic Feature

Composed between 1351 and 1371, the *Livre des merveilles* is one of the great successes of medieval travel literature, with several versions translated into Latin and an unusual number of vernacular languages. It is considered to be an *Imago Mundi* (Deluz 2000, 19-23), as it inventories the wonders of the world, and describes manners and customs classified according to regions which the narrator, the knight Jean de Mandeville, claims to have seen and visited, from the Holy Land to China, and including Prester John's kingdom.[25] One of the most distinctive qualities of the *Livre* is its openness and the strong curiosity it exhibits towards the diversity of humankind in all its aspects. Paradoxically, there is a tension between its declared intentions and its development (Khanmohamadi 2014, 113-14). This alterity-oriented discourse is indeed counterbalanced by the fact that it is not constructed on the personal experience of the narrator, but on authorised and, for the most part, European sources. In other words, this discourse draws on a "familiar textual culture" (Gaunt 2011, 129). The inauthenticity of the *Livre* has led modern critics to question its ethnographic value. Although it does not relate to actual travel, Mandeville's narrative develops, as Shirin A. Khanmohamadi has convincingly demonstrated, a rich and complex ethnographic poetics. She notes that Mandeville takes particular pains to present a viewpoint that differs from the self-centred Latin Christian optic, notably through changes in narrative perspectives, which often result in "troubling of self-other boundaries" (Khanmohamadi 2014, 114).

This poetics can be observed in the discourse on the Saracens. Of all the peoples and customs discussed by the Mandeville-narrator, the Muslims and Islam receive the most attention. They are present and intervene throughout the first half of the book, and the narrator devotes the entirety of chapter XV of the *Livre* to their customs, laws,

25 On debates about the authenticity of the *Livre des merveilles*, cf. Deluz 1989, 394-403; Higgins 2013, 147-64.

and language (*Des custumes des Sarazins et de lour loy*).[26] This chapter compiles a range of information from *De Statu Sarracenorum* attributed to William of Tripoli, Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus miraculorum*, Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum historiale*, and Brunetto Latini's *Livre dou Tresor*. Mandeville starts by describing the Saracen faith through an exposition of the doctrinal tenets common to Islam and Christianity. This is followed by a private conversation with the Sultan, who draws Mandeville's attention to the ills and moral failings of the Christian community. Mandeville then offers an account of the biography of the Prophet that blends historically accurate details with legendary episodes, such as the death of his preceptor leading to the prohibition on drinking alcohol in any form. Muḥammad is described as a wise governor and a great astronomer. The exposition closes with Mandeville's thoughts on the Arabic alphabet. This chapter lacks the polemical tone that characterizes texts dealing with Islam at the time, a fact that has led many scholars to read this chapter as a backhanded criticism of Christian society (Gaunt 2011; Uhlig 2013). In the light of Shirin A. Khanmohamadi's reading, chapter XV is built on several narrative strategies which, through the episode of the sultan and the discourse on doctrine, language, and customs, mark the flexibility of identity limits. This can be observed both in terms of form and content (Khanmohamadi 2014, 113-47; Akbari 2009, 57). In the construction of his exposition of Saracen laws and customs, the narrator emphasizes heteroglossia, regularly relaying the Muslim point of view, as shown by the frequent use of formulas that announce the discourse of the Other, for example "et [Sarazins] dient qe" (some twenty occurrences) and "ensy dit lour Alkaron" (five occurrences). The information drawn from the various sources of chapter XV underline similarities between Christianity and Islam. Moreover, the porosity of identity boundaries manifests itself in the ease of conversions from Islam to Christianity. Jean de Mandeville explains that this phenomenon is common, given the central doctrinal elements shared by both religions. Later in the chapter, he points to the existence of the reverse trend, although he considers it a weakness on the part of apostate Christians:

> Item il avient sovent qe ascun christien devient sarazins ou par simplece ou poverté, ou par malveisté. Et ly archiflamins ou flamines quant il les receut dit ensi: "*La illec ella sila Machomet Roses alla hec*". Ceo est a dire en romance: 'Il ne ad Dieu for qe un soul et Machomet soun messager'. (Ch. XV)

26 For this analysis, I use the Insular version, edited by Christiane C. Deluz (2000). Where necessary, I refer to the other versions of the *Livre*. For the Continental version, I consult the manuscript Paris, BNF, Nouv. Acq. 4515; for the Liege version, I use the Tyssens and Raelet's edition (2011).

Mandeville briefly outlines the ritual of conversion, giving a recognizable, albeit corrupted, transliteration, of the *šahāda*. He drew this information from pseudo-William of Tripoli's *De statu sarracenorum*,[27] the only known text to associate the *šahāda* with the baptismal formula in these terms. However, Jean de Mandeville exploits it for his own purposes, substantially modifying the original intention of his source:

> Unde sicut apud nos est forma verborum, qua baptizamur et efficimur Christiani In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti, ita hec forma verborum est apud illos, qua efficiuntur Sarraceni: La eleh ella Alla, Mahomad rosol Alla, hoc est : Non est Deus nisi Deus et Machometus est nuntius Deus. (8, ll. 14-19)

The comparative dimension disappears, as Mandeville removes the first term of comparison that relates to Christian baptism and the function of the trinitarian formula, but compensates for this deletion with the appearance of a new actor in the conversion ritual, the *archiflamin* – the archpriest of the Saracens. Mandeville transforms the *šahāda*, a personal profession of faith, into a consecration formula pronounced by a religious authority. Through these modifications, the comparison becomes assimilation, the *šahāda* becomes the equivalent of the trinitarian formula.

Unlike other occurrences of linguistic enclaves in Arabic observed so far, this example is embedded in the discourse of a narrator who presents himself as a Christian of English origin. This implies a surprising familiarity with the Arab language and customs, familiarity that becomes a feature of the carefully crafted persona of Mandeville. He himself embodies a character between two cultures.[28] The reasons for this acquaintance are set out in the various events and experiences recounted in the preceding chapters; Mandeville's linguistic skills then add a further degree of legitimacy to his claims, especially when he presents himself as a regular reader of the Qur'ān:

> Lequel livre Machometh lour bailla en lequel il est escrit entre autres choses, si qe j'ay soventz litz et regardé. (Ch. XV)

This unusual linguistic sensitivity is skilfully staged:

> si vous vouleiz savoir une partie de lour loy et de lour creaunce, jeo les vous deviseray solonc ceo qe lour livre qe ad noun *Alkaron*

27 For the *De statu sarracenorum*, I use Engels' edition (1992, 263-72).

28 In this respect, see chapter 6 of the *Livre des merveilles*, as well as the character analysis by Shirin A. Khanmohamadi 2014.

> le devise. Ascuns appellent ce livre *Meshaf*, et ascuns l'appellent *Harme* solonc les diverses langages du païs. (Ch. XV)

In addition to his claim to have read the Qur'ān, Jean de Mandeville uses different names for the Holy Book (*Meshaf* and *Harme*)[29] that he believes reflect the diversity of the country's languages ("solonc les diverses langages du païs"), borrowing a rhetorical formulation common in travelogues. This anecdotal detail is intended to provide his audience with proof of his competence.

Jean de Mandeville closes chapter XV with a reproduction of what he presents as the Arabic alphabet, which is the only occurrence of the written Arabic letter in our corpus. It is part of a set of nine alphabets, scattered throughout the *Livre des merveilles*.[30] The 'a.b.c. of the Saracens' immediately appears strange to the modern reader:

> Et puis qe jeo vous ay devisé partie de lour loy et le lour custumes, jeo vous devisery si vous plest quels lettres ils ount ovesqez les nouns si s'ils les appellent:
>
> *Almoy, Beth, Cachi, Deltoi, Estoi, Foithi, Gaiepi, Tothi, Heth, Iochi, Kachi, Lacm, Milai, Rabaloth, Orthi, Yrtho, Zormich*.
>
> Et ceste IIII lettres ount ils unqore plus pur la deverseté de lour langage pur ceo q'ils parlent ensy la gorge aussy come nous avoms en nostre parlour en Engleterre II lettres plus q'ils ne ount en lour a. b. c., c'est assavoir, p et z qe sont appellez thorn et zogh. (Ch. XV)

The Deluz edition provides the reader with the names of the various letters. It should be noted, however, that the alphabet can be described using between one and three parameters. The most complete presentation includes the foreign graphemes, their names, and Latin equivalents.

29 The word *Meshaf* (ar. *muṣḥaf*, 'book', 'volume'), when applied to the Qur'ān, refers to a physical copy of the Holy Book, while *Harme* would be a form of *haram* ('sacred', 'illicit'), a term not usually associated with the Qur'ān (Higgins 2011, 43 fn. 124). The form *Harme* is however absent from Engels' edition (25, 1-2).

30 Jean de Mandeville reproduces nine foreign alphabets: Greek, Egyptian, Hebrew, Tartar-Russian, Saracenic, Persian, Chaldean, Chinese, and the alphabet used in Prester John's realm. It is also important to note that not all manuscripts of the *Livre* in its various versions have the same number of alphabets. In some, they are absent, in others, the collection expands to 17 items. Furthermore, there are discrepancies within manuscripts that retain the same groups of alphabets, and some of them are not defined according to the same criteria (letter names, graphemes, and the Latin equivalents). Finally, some manuscripts offer, within the text itself, variants of the same alphabet. The presence of two competing writing systems can either be explained by the fact that the manuscript in question is a copy based on two witnesses (such as ms London, BL, Egerton 1982, cf. McShane 2018) or that an educated reader has made an amendment to an alphabet deemed to be incorrect. This is the case with the Hebrew alphabet in the manuscript Paris, BNF, Nouv. Acq. 4515 (see Kupfer 2008).

The Arabic alphabet of the *Livre*, however fanciful, is not a product of Mandeville's imagination and is also based on pre-existing sources. Many studies have been devoted to determining, with varying degrees of precision, its origin rather than its role. Early on, the alphabet Mandeville attributes to the Saracens was identified with a runic alphabet (Beck 2021, 226-7), in the tradition of Aethicus' *Cosmographia*.[31] The first scholar to consider the function of these alphabets was Malcolm Letts (Letts 1949, 151-60).[32] He devotes a chapter of his study of Mandeville to the alphabets which, he believes, contribute to the book's aura of mystery. He also adds that they were intended to serve as a tool for travellers. Other scholars have tended to see it as an 'effect of reality', a reworking of an element in the aesthetics of travelogues, or the beginnings of an interest in languages and their diversity (Bennett 1954, 66). More recently, studies by researchers such as Matthew Boyd Goldie (2012) and Kara L. McShane (2018) have focused on the correlation between language and identity. They confirm that Mandeville's interest in alphabets fits perfectly into the poetics of blurring boundaries, as the alphabet is held as both a distinctive trait and shared feature between cultures.

The alphabets presuppose shared literacy, as they "embody to the reader all the potential writings of the culture they represent" (McShane 2018, 28). The Arabic alphabet is employed in the various texts and sources mentioned, becoming the graphic vehicle for this language, used in the liturgy (an aspect illustrated by the *šahāda*) and in the Qur'ān. Furthermore, when the alphabet is presented in the most complete system (graphemes, names, and Latin equivalents), it establishes several phonetic correspondences with Latin. However, these elements are immediately counterbalanced by the lack of equivalence at the graphic level, as well as by the presence of the commentary which compares certain Arabic and English letters, unknown to the Latin alphabetical system. The Arabic alphabet appears as "transliterable but untranslatable" (Goldie 2012, 283). In addition, the positioning of the alphabets in the text precludes a more elaborate comparative approach. As pointed out by Matthew B. Goldie,

31 "Suos caracteres litteratum, quos adinuenit, ita distinxit: Alamou | Becah | Cathy | Delfou | Effothy | Fomethy | Garfou | Hethmu | Iofithy | Kaithy | Lethfy | Malathy | Nabelech | Ozechy | Chorizech | Phithyrin | Salathy | Intalach | Thothimos | Azathot pro r | Yrchoni | Zotychin" (Herren 2011, 216-17). However, some scholars have expressed reservations as there are several discrepancies; the alphabet copied from the *Cosmographia* appears to be heavily corrupted in Mandeville's texts. As noted by the editor, this alphabet "was transmitted in a number of medieval alphabet collections" (Herren 2011, 321 fn. 1081). There is also debate around the origin of the alphabet preserved in the *Cosmographia*, with scholars seeing it as a variant of Old Turkic script or Turkic runes (Derolez 1954, 279-83, 352; Löwe 1976; Letts 1949, 157; Seebold 1998, 441).

32 A brief overview of the subject is provided by Matthew Boyd Goldie (2012); see also Temperley (2001).

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> the texts repeatedly present [the alphabets] in a regular format or in a regular locus, namely at the conclusions of book sections. The format and the context thus end further analysis of the letter forms and the cultures in which they are embedded rather open them up for further comparison. (Goldie 2012, 283)

The alphabetical table of correspondences is followed by a remark about the manner of speaking of the Saracens.[33] The comparison with the English language, and particularly the reference to *thorn* and *yogh* (*þ* and *ȝ*), increases the tension between similarity and dissimilarity that characterizes languages. The comparison Mandeville makes is based on two languages foreign to the French-speaking readership. However, English is well-known and present on the Francophone linguistic horizon. Thus, Arabic does not appear any stranger, from a phonetic point of view, than the language of a close neighbour. Both languages are placed on the same level, without establishing any hierarchy between them. Frank Grady notes that,

> by citing a pair of unique English symbols without supplying the particular rationale for their use (i.e., to represent sounds not present in Latin and not adequately captured by the Roman alphabet), Mandeville avoids implying the existence of any hierarchy of tongues, and suggests, in keeping with his overall ethnographic approach, that the differences between languages are natural, almost trivial adaptations to local circumstances. (Grady 2009, 55)

The Arabic alphabet, however incorrect it may be, recalls the use of a fictionalized *sarrazinois*, as in the *Jeu de Saint Nicolas*. Indeed, the audience does not have to be able to understand or read this alphabet for it to fulfil its function within the *Livre des merveilles*. "Alphabets […] have meaning outside of their functional use and independent of a viewer's ability to attach meaning to them" (McShane 2018, 34). Despite its inaccuracy, this alphabet therefore manages to signify a linguistic system that is both similar to and different from the one used by the readers and hearers of the *Livre des merveilles*. Its effect relies on an iconographic and phonetic power, like the tirade of the *Jeu*, which relies on the connotative effect of the sounds it invokes. This observation can also be extended to the corrupted transliteration of the *šahāda*. Irrespective of accuracy, one can assume that it sounded convincing to a readership or audience unfamiliar with Arabic.

33 The remark is drawn in part from Brunetto Latini's *Livres dou Tresor*: "Et nos veons que por nature ciaus qui abitent en orient parolent en la gorge" (Baldwin, Barrette 2003, 3: 1).

6 Conclusion

The linguistic element does not escape the treatment given to the rest of the rhetoric of otherness. It appears that when authors resort to Arabic, it is alternately fictitious or exhibits varying degrees of corruption in the transliteration process ranging from the slight to the very extensive. In other words, the language of these enclaves is situated between imaginary and real language, although we might assume that this aspect was not as easily detectable to the medieval audience of the works studied here. The use of textual fragments in Arabic or pseudo-Arabic participates in the construction of an "imaginary of languages" since this language does not need to be accurate – or even real – to have the desired impact on the recipients of the text. Linguistic diversity originates in the ear of the spectator and in the eye of the reader.

Similarly, access to their significance is not necessary for these different enclaves to acquire status or fulfil their function within the narrative. The status of the Arabic language is defined primarily by the context in which it is used, as well as by its speakers. In the *Jeu de saint Nicolas*, it becomes a language of otherness that defines itself in contrast to Christian society. In other words, language is not defined by itself, but in terms of the language of the Christians and the value they represent. This status changes in the *Livre de l'eschiele*: Arabic is the language of the qur'anic law, of God and his Prophet. It acquires its own status. Lastly, the case of the *Livre des merveilles* broadens these perspectives. While Arabic certainly appears as the language of the Qur'ān and of the liturgy, it also becomes a common tool, a "concrete ethnographic singularity" (McShane 2018, 33), on a par with English and French. It then contributes to the elaboration of the ethnographic poetics that Jean de Mandeville developed in his *Livre des merveilles*.

Finally, in the three texts studied here, Arabic enclaves act, to differing degrees, as an identity marker. Saracen otherness is endowed with its own language, both similar and different to that of the Christians. The function of these enclaves is also determined by the presence or absence of an explanation of their contents. Thus, in the *Jeu de saint Nicolas*, the role of Tervagan's tirade lies in the fact that the audience is not able to comprehend it. Its unintelligibility serves to reinforce both the aesthetics of the play and the antagonisms between two opposing societal and religious systems. By contrast, in the *Livre de l'eschiele*, Arabic serves, through its status as the language of God and the Qur'ān, to render a reality peculiar to Islam in a more precise and unique way. What was initially an intervention on the part of the translator becomes a characteristic of religious discourse and the posture of the Prophet. Finally, Mandeville's *Livre* is the epitome of the use of Arabic as an ambivalent feature, as

language is embedded in a complex dialogical dynamic of identity. It symbolises the notion of shared literacy, but invariably highlights an irreducible differentiation between cultures.

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