Original Article

Alisaundre Becket: Thomas Becket's resilient, Muslim, Arab mother in the South English Legendary

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Abstract In the *South English Legendary*, Thomas Becket's mother, Alisaundre Becket, is a resilient, non-Christian woman who speaks Arabic. Although Alisaundre Becket eventually converts to Christianity, adopts a Christian name, and lives in England, she never learns English. Drawing on feminist theory by black feminists and women of color, I argue that the characteristic that racializes and marginalizes Alisaundre Becket – her voice, perceived as foreign and strange – also empowers her, and makes it possible for her to resist erasure as a raced woman in an oppressive space. In the process of asserting her will, we witness one of the earliest moments of racial identity perceived, translated, and portrayed as distinct from religious identity in the Middle Ages.

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> It is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.
>
> – Audre Lorde

Tucked away between the covers of the *South English Legendary*, framed as a short introduction to the life of Thomas Becket, rests the harrowing story of a nameless, fearless, and determined Muslim woman.[1] This daughter of an Amiral

1 I am referring to Bodleian Library MS Laud Miscellaneous 108 as the *South English Legendary*. All citations are from Carl Horstmann's 1887 EETS edition and are given by page number followed by line numbers.

in Jerusalem falls in love with a Christian, English man her father has imprisoned; visits him daily; proposes to him; when he rejects her, she travels to London alone, knowing and speaking only a few English words; wanders the streets calling for the man she loves while the citizens of London turn her distress into a spectacle; conditionally converts to Christianity; demands to have a translator rather than learn English; and then gives birth to and raises the boy who eventually becomes one of England's most canonical saints, Thomas Becket.

Alisaundre Becket is fictional. Thomas Becket's real mother was Matilda, an Anglo-Norman woman – not a nameless, Arab, Muslim whose life mirrors a character in a *chanson de geste*, as the late-thirteenth-century *South English Legendary* (Bodleian Library MS Laud Miscellaneous 108) wants its readers to believe. As the child of Alisaundre Becket, the Thomas Becket of the *SEL* is not only 'less Anglo-Norman than he would be otherwise' (Lankin, 2011, 48), but also less Christian than he would be otherwise.

To reconcile Alisaundre Becket's non-Christian, non-English heritage with Thomas Becket's sainthood, scholars have looked at the ways in which the *SEL* narrative 'eradicate[s]' the markers that set her apart as 'differen[t]' from other citizens of England (Mills, 2010, 220): bishops replace her 'heuþe[n]' faith with Christianity; her Muslim name (which we never learn) is replaced with a Christian one; and she restricts herself to a domestic life in England, never returning to Jerusalem. Most readings of Alisaundre Becket have been informed by an underlying assumption that medieval England was racially homogenous for the most part, and as a result, they've focused on the differences that the narrative erases rather than the ones it maintains. Readings have overlooked Alisaundre Becket's 'willfulness' (Ahmed, 2017, 66) and how intensely she negotiates and even resists erasure through the use of her voice. Like all other aspects of her identity, her 'language [was] susceptible to death, erasure' (Morrison, 1993); citizens and Christian power structures exert social pressure and power on her to forget Arabic and to speak English, marginalizing her because she speaks a language 'no Man ne couþe' (108.67), and yet no one is ever able to silence her successfully or force her to speak English. While that voice racializes and marginalizes, it also empowers her. She uses that voice, which Englishmen hear as foreign and incomprehensible, to carry herself from Jerusalem over land and sea to England. She uses her voice to withstand public ridicule and to negotiate her place in English society. She uses that voice to endure the helplessness that accompanies being a raced woman in an oppressive space.

Drawing on feminist theory by black feminists and women of color, I follow Alisaundre Becket's voice and argue that although Alisaundre converts to Christianity, adopts a Christian name, and moves to and lives in England, she does not 'mov[e] from a place of untranslatability to one of complete

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assimilation' (Mills, 2011, 384). Instead, she uses that voice 'to identify [her] marginality as much more than a site of deprivation' (hooks, 1990, 341). She 'salvage[s]' her language 'by an effort of the will' (Morrison, 1993), and transforms her domestic life, her 'marginality [.... into] a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance' (hooks, 1990, 341). In this essay, I put into practice the feminist methodologies I draw on and center Alisaundre Becket's voice and story. While academically unconventional, I've situated Thomas Becket and the *South English Legendary* on the margins, and I only consider how Alisaundre Becket's biography serves them near the end of the essay. I believe that we can best understand how patriarchal structures operate when we take the time and space to see and hear women, like Alisaundre Becket, for their own sake, and not in service of anyone or anything else.

We meet Alisaundre Becket for the first time in the 'holie lond' (106.7) as she is articulating her feminine desires to Gilbert Becket, a Christian Englishman from London held in her father's prison. After repeatedly visiting Gilbert Becket, she suggests that she will convert to Christianity if Gilbert marries her: 'Cristine-dom ichulle onder-fonge: for þe loue of þe, / And þou a-non aftur-ward: treweliche weddi me' (33.38–9). But these words stir up neither evangelical, Christian values in Gilbert, nor love. In fact, her direct proposal for marriage and conversion makes Gilbert so 'ful a-drad' (107.40) that Alisaundre will betray him, that he somehow figures out how to do something he hasn't been able to do for two and a half years – escape from prison 'riȝt þulke dai' (107.46). In other words, Gilbert does not just reject her agency as the subject of desire but reads her 'wilfulness [… as] imply[ing] a problem of character' (Ahmed, 2017, 66). Once she proposes, Gilbert no longer trusts her. And yet, this does not deter Alisaundre, who considers her own desires as more important than Gilbert's and does something few Muslim princesses in romances do: she ventures into her lover's homeland, travelling to London to find Gilbert.

It is as Alisaundre moves that we realize we only have access to her from the viewpoint of those who possess power in the community she is participating in at any given time. While in the 'holie lond,' we inhabit the gaze of Jerusalem's leadership, which includes Alisaundre, who is the Amiral's daughter, and we do not register her as foreign or her language as different. Even when Alisaundre repeatedly visits Gilbert Becket, the *SEL* does not labor over the language she speaks. Her Arabic and her voice are as equally accessible to us as the English the text is written in. In fact, the text not only passes over Alisaundre's language, it passes over Gilbert's as well. It isn't until much later in the narrative, when Alisaundre is in England, that we learn that in the opening scenes we glided over, the man who introduced himself as a 'cristine Man' 'of engelonde' (107.33) was speaking Arabic fluently.[2]

The further she moves away from her homeland's center and the closer she moves towards England, the more she loses power. She becomes increasingly more foreign the more language barriers arise. We realize that she had not been

2 I deliberately do not refer to Alisaundre as a 'Saracen,' since the text does not label her as such. While the specific language she speaks does not affect my argument, for the sake of clarity I've described it as Arabic, since this was the language the majority would have spoken in thirteenth-century Jerusalem.

speaking to Gilbert in English only when she's at the margins of her homeland, at the port where people, systems, and structures negotiate her foreign language. Because she finds other multilingual travelers, pilgrims, and 'men þat onderstoden hire langage' (108.54), she is able to travel into England. When in England, we see her from the viewpoint of Christian, English structures of power. She is no longer the woman who effortlessly moved in and out of prison, conversing with Gilbert. She is a foreigner. The text fixates on her inability to communicate effectively. Her sentences, which were long and full in Jerusalem, become broken, single words; her body, unfamiliar; her affect, strange.

> heo ne couþe no-þing conteini hire: ne speken no-þe-mo;
> Ake euere heo axede In hire langage: to londone for-to go.
> Mid pilegrimes and þoru grace of god: to londone heo cam.
> And þo heo was þudere i-come: þare ne knev heo no man,
> Ne heo ne couþe speke ne hire bi-seo: bote ase a best þat a-strayed were.
>
> Þare-fore on hire gapede alday: swyþe muche fol[c] þere,
> boþe Men and wommen: and children suyþe fale –
> for hire continaunce was wonderful: and hire speche no Man ne couþe þare.
> (108.60–7)

These stanzas, which are at the core of her biography, do not just capture the experience of any marginalized person, but of a marginalized woman of color in particular. They portray her confusion, alienation, estrangement, misplacement, and deep yearning for belonging as an embodied experience – gendered and raced. We can only see Alisaundre through the gaze of the citizens of London, and they notice her body as they hear her voice. It is as they hear her calling out for help and direction in a 'speche no Man ne couþe þare' that they notice that 'hire continaunce [is both] wonderful' and 'ase a best þat a-strayed were.' There is nothing about her that belongs to this community: her language is foreign; her beautiful face eroticizes her, and yet her beast-like body, presence, and affect render her femininity illegible.

'Feminism is understood as a problem of will: a way of going one's own way, a way of going the wrong way' (Ahmed, 2017, 65), and the repeated emphasis on what Alisaundre cannot do in this passage – speak, be understood, navigate – suggests errors in her subjectivity. She misused her agency. She does not belong here. No one will listen to her here. Her difference invites those around her to stare, to gawk, to experience, rather than to try to understand and help. This social pressure – of forcibly transforming her experience into a performance— isolates her. She becomes isolated spatially as she moves in the streets always far enough away from people so that she can continue being on display; she is isolated sexually and racially as she becomes a strange woman, comparable to a beast. Her gendered and raced body, her yearning for Gilbert, for familiarity, transforms her struggle of communication into an embodied struggle of

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placement. It is this isolation, this marginalization, and this yearning that demands Alisaundre to negotiate her sense of self with positions of power around her and it is the way she negotiates her place in Christian, English society in the rest of the biography that makes her such an admirable force.

Despite everything that is working against her – the language barrier, her foreignness, the lack of compassion in those surrounding her – as she moves in and out of English space, among English people, she manages it! It's crucial that we do not discount or undervalue this achievement. She uses the momentum that is operating against her to her advantage by participating in the uproar, calling out for Gilbert so loudly 'þat bi-fore gilbertes house: þe Noyse was onder-ȝite' (108.69). The page who accompanied Gilbert to the holy land 'to þe dore he orn swyþe: þe dune for-to i-seo' (108.71), recognizes Alisaundre, and informs Gilbert about her arrival. He is now forced to confront Alisaundre and respond to her marriage proposal.

But it isn't until Alisaundre Becket's conversion that we understand how she can exercise power from the margins without having any 'domination or control over others' (hooks, 1984, 87). Alisaundre arrives for baptism the day after six bishops and Gilbert have discussed her situation in her absence:

> Þat hit was al þoruȝ godes grace: þat heo was so fer i-come,
> Out of hire owene londe so fer: þat heo þoru miseise ne hadde i-be nome;
> For heo ne couþe language non: with men for-to speke. (109.110–2)

The only explanation the bishops have for how a woman without English could travel 'so fer […] out of hire owene londe' is that it is a miracle. They decide that 'god hathþ i-porueid so' (110.112) that she become Christian. Their repeated emphasis on the will of God suggests that Alisaundre is a passive agent of God's work. His divine control mutes Alisaundre's agency. She has no control. All of this is an effort on behalf of the bishops to tame Alisaundre's will, to domesticate her feminism by ascribing her 'obstina[ncy],' her 'unyielding nature' (Ahmed, 2017, 66), her willingness to 'b[e] out of tune with others' (Ahmed, 2017, 40) to a predetermined part of God's plan.

Although we expect this rhetoric in a Christian narrative, it becomes oppressive as the bishops use it to characterize Alisaundre as a helpless, nameless wanderer. They do not name her or her homeland. They only discuss her journey in her absence. By denying her the opportunity to speak, they silence her. As an authority on Christian matters, these bishops assume that Alisaundre has no knowledge of the role that God and fate have played in her journey. Alisaundre, they suggest, arrived in spite of who she was – a non-Christian woman speaking a foreign language – not because of it.

The day of her baptism, Alisaundre stands before the same six bishops and Gilbert. She is spatially isolated – the only non-Christian in the space; structures of Christian conversion surround her. When the bishops 'axeden hire wel sone / ȝif heo wolde i-cristned beo: ase lawe was for-to done' (110.128–9), she uses the

opportunity to contest their characterization of her and reclaim the will that the bishops and Gilbert have denied her:

> heo answerede In hire langage: wel sone heom a-ȝen:
> ȝif gilbert wolde hire weddi: i-cristned heo wolde ben
> And bote he hire weddi wolde: heo nolde cristinedom a-fongue,
> heo seide heo wolde raþer tuyrne aȝen: In-to hire owene londe. (110.130–3)

Her conversion is conditional, she reminds Gilbert and informs the bishops. Only 'ȝif gilbert wolde hire weddi' will she convert. She doesn't have the slightest reservations about returning to her land and forgoing Christian conversion if Gilbert will not marry her. In fact, she prefers it.

It is not common for a character in a romance or hagiographical text to present a rejected conversion as potentially positive. This brief speech is Alisaundre's resistance. Alisaundre reminds those in power and by extension those English citizens who treated her as a spectacle that she has a land she calls her 'owene,' and that she can return to it without permission, that she has nothing to be afraid of even though she's run away. She reminds them that she is an agent, and that she is here by choice. And she pronounces all of this 'in hire langage,' transforming this experience that the bishops have designed to be alienating for her into one that alienates the bishops who cannot understand her. As Alisaundre stands in a room in England, not yet converted, speaking Arabic, she reminds everyone that she still has power: the power to isolate, the power to be.

When Ailsaundre converts, we expect her to follow suit with other Muslim princesses or knights and fully assimilate upon conversion. While parts of her identity align with Christian, English identity more closely, she remains definitively foreign, because she does not learn English and continues to only know and speak Arabic. Her language weighs on her identity in ways that her faith, home, and name do not, because it is the only part of her identity that is neither changeable nor replaceable. Christianity erased her 'heathen' faith; one faith was swapped out for the other. Her Christian name erased her 'heathen,' non-English one; one was substituted for the other. And yet, unlike most romances, in this account, language is not substitutable. She continues to know only her heritage language. Gilbert and the knave's multilingualism prove that multiple languages can occupy one mind and one body. Alisaundre's language has been the defining characteristic of her difference. So, to suggest that it is not erasable is to suggest that her difference, her otherness, is permanent. Alisaundre Becket's language, her voice, racializes her.[3]

The only other identity marker that cannot be erased in this conversion is her gender. Alisaundre's racial identity intensifies the confinement to which a woman is subject. It is easy to visualize a woman who has always already been on the margins of English, Christian society in a home, isolated from society. And that is where she ends up. Up until this point in the narrative, Alisaundre has been shown outside of the confines of a gendered, feminine domestic space.

3 I am theorizing Alisaundre Becket's racialization with Geraldine Heng's new definition of race from her phenomenal book, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, in mind: 'a repeating tendency [...] to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups' (Heng, 2018, 3).

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She moves in and out of prison freely, wanders around Jerusalem, the sea, and the streets of London. But with her conversion and her marriage, she moves indoors, into a domestic space where she spends the rest of her biography. We never see her outside again. Her home is not just any domestic space, but becomes a racialized, isolated, domestic space.

So, the end of the narrative parallels its beginnings. This time, instead of Gilbert, Alisaundre Becket is isolated in a space. And instead of Alisaundre, Gilbert travels in and out of the space freely. However, unlike the beginning of the narrative, where Alisaundre was unburdened by language, language poses the primary obstacle to Gilbert's movement. When Gilbert Becket decides to travel to Alisaundre's homeland, the 'holie lond,' for pilgrimage he is overwhelmed with anxiety:

> ȝwat were of hire to done,
> laste heo wolde mourny swyþe: ȝwane he were a-gon,
> And gret deol to hire nime – : for langage ne couþe heo non
> Þat ani Man couþe onder-stonde: þat heo speke to,
> bote gilbert oþur [his] knaue. (111.149–53)

Although Gilbert expects Alisaundre to oppose his pilgrimage, Alisaundre doesn't express any concern or complaint. She supports his pilgrimage on one condition: 'Þat heo moste is knaue with hire habbe: þat hire langage couþe, / And for he scholde hire solas beo: and speke to hire with mouþe' (111.176–7).

Gilbert's anxiety and Alisaundre's request regarding her language suggest that she has not 'implicitly […] acquired the English that eluded her before she was baptized' (Mills, 2011, 390), that her native language has not been 'consigned to a hazy non-identity' (Mills, 2010, 211).[4] She can still only communicate and connect with others in 'hire langage.' Although Alisaundre Becket's language intensifies her confinement, it is also her language that makes it possible for her to resist the confinement and isolation that accompanies domestic life as a racialized woman of color on the margins. Rather than submit to English social norms, erase, and forget her language, she insists on maintaining a structure of translation in her domestic space that accommodates her difference. The knave, like Gilbert, not only provides her comfort in her domestic space, 'hire solas beo,' but he also makes it possible for her to maintain a connection with the English world beyond her home while maintaining part of her identity. Alisaundre's home, like other marginal spaces, becomes 'both [a] sit[e] of repression and […] resistance' (hooks, 1990, 342). She may be foreign and at a disadvantage, but if anything, she shows us over and over again that she is not a voiceless subaltern, resigned to being helpless, alone, and silent.

Unlike stories such as *The King of Tars* where conversion leads to assimilation and racial reorientation, Alisaundre's biography in the *South English Legendary* suggests that conversion to Christianity does not automatically erase, change, or reorient all of one's identity markers. The identity marker that racializes Alisaundre

4 Robert Mills has made significant contributions to our understanding of the way difference operates in the *SEL*. However, I disagree with Mills' arguments about Alisaundre Becket's assimilated, Christian identity. Mills concludes his analysis of Alisaundre's identity with her conversion and overlooks this crucial post-conversion moment that depicts how she has held onto her native language and how limited her contact with English society is.

remains consistent over the course of her biography, both before and after her conversion; as a result, the compounded 'race-religion' marker (Heng, 2003, 204) that is so common to Middle English narratives doesn't apply to Alisaundre Becket's life. In her biography we witness one of the earliest moments of racial identity perceived, translated, and portrayed as distinct from religious identity.

Because Alisaundre Becket remains raced even after her conversion, the effects of her conversion are not unilateral. Her conversion changes her faith, her name, and settles her into a new home, but she changes the Christian, English community in London, as well. The chaos she creates while crying for Gilbert disrupts the way the city moves and operates. Her home – raced and multilingual – diversifies the English landscape. With her presence, the citizens can no longer claim that English is a characteristic that Christians in London share.

Alisaundre Becket's biography in the *SEL* serves as an introduction to Thomas Becket; and as a result, who she is serves to characterize Thomas Becket. In the *SEL,* Thomas Becket is born and raised in Alisaundre's raced and multilingual home. While his Christian education exposes him to Latin and his life in England exposes him to English and French, his mother exposes him to Arabic. While Arabic, English, and Latin inhabit the same narrative and are present in relationships – between mother and son, husband and wife, wife and knave – they eventually find a voice in a single person – Thomas Becket. The Thomas Becket of the *South English Legendary* then is a mixed-raced child, part-Arab, part-English, whose heritage language is Arabic. He is the child of a world-traveling and multilingual father and a fiercely independent, determined, and resilient mother who was the daughter of an Amiral in the Holy Land, a native speaker of Arabic, and not originally Christian. He is also a great, Christian, English saint. In sum, he is a perfect colonizer.

Anne J. Duggan's research has shown us that Thomas Becket's sainthood transforms Canterbury, England into one of the busiest pilgrimage sites of Europe. In the decades that follow his martyrdom, pilgrims flock to England, sailing over sea and trekking over land to visit Thomas Becket's sites, relics, and shrines. His shrine even becomes a stopover on the crusaders' journey from England to Jerusalem during the Third Crusade. King Richard I, Archbishop Baldwin of Canterbury and his soldiers, Bishop Hubert Walter of Salisbury, among others either visited Thomas Becket themselves, took their crusading soldiers to his shrine, or took his banner into Jerusalem (Duggan, 2010, 76). These journeys from England to Jerusalem and from beyond England to England recall Alisaundre's own journey. She traveled from a central site of Christian pilgrimage to marry an Englishman and then give birth to and raise a child whose body and sainthood transforms England into a central site of Christian pilgrimage.

Situating Alisaundre Becket into Thomas Becket's narrative transforms him into an empowering saint to consult for the colonial project of the Third Crusade. The Thomas Becket of the *South English Legendary* is a strong ally for

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the crusaders, because his mother's story makes it possible to imagine the Holy Land as vulnerable for colonization. His ancestry, heritage, and language give him unique access to the holy land. In Thomas Becket, crusaders see the possible outcome of a successful crusade – a colonized Jerusalem where every 'heathen' converts to Christianity, where Englishmen move back and forth freely between London and Jerusalem, unburdened by language barriers.

Thomas Becket was already a great Christian saint by the time the *SEL* was written. As a result, readers would only interpret details in his biographies as validating his greatness and worthiness as a saint. Given that, taking a resolute and willful woman and situating her so intimately in his narrative is a genius strategy to further his strength and resilience. Patriarchal power translates what is inappropriate and even shameful in women as worthy and admirable in men by suggesting that men make better use of the same characteristics. The characteristics that Thomas Becket are recognized for as a leader and martyr, that lead to his canonization, are the ones we see in Thomas Becket's mother – his resistance, his 'constancy' that can be mistaken for 'obstinacy' (Staunton, 2001, 238), his resilience, his 'struggl[e] to adapt himself to his changing roles and the different challenges which he faced at every step' (Staunton, 2001, 2), and more than anything, the courage he displays before and during his death (Staunton, 2001, 202). In a patriarchal society, Alisaundre Becket's untamed willfulness, which is a defining characteristic at every turn in the narrative, translates into holy steadfastness and determination in Thomas Becket.

The *South English Legendary* suggests that what marginalizes women promotes men: the exceptionalism which causes Alisaundre's marginalization and isolation translates to an exceptionalism in Thomas Becket that leads to the formation of a widespread cult in his name (Webster and Gelin, 2016). Over the course of her life, Alisaundre Becket uses the voice that racializes her and marks her as different to change her relationship to the spaces and people around her. When her son is born, she uses that voice to 'al day rede: and wel ofte on him crie / Chaste lijf and clene for-to lede: and for-sake lecherie' (112.210–1). But as soon as Thomas Becket comes of age, her voice is silenced. Her marginalization is materialized as she fades out from the pages of the biography until we learn about her death (113.217). And even if many in the Middle Ages read her story and knew Thomas Becket as the child of this woman, most readers now forget her role in his life, dismiss or marginalize her story, and execute the act she adamantly resisted over the course of her life – they erase her in their research, their writing, and their pedagogy.[5]

To write, to teach, to think about the Middle Ages is to create it. What kind of Middle Ages do we create for our students when we introduce them to this world by way of Alisaundre Becket? In her movement, they understand England to be part of an interconnected world. In her body, they see a raced England. In her experience, they learn how power isolates, suppresses, and silences women

5 While modern scholars relegate Alisaundre Becket to the footnotes, she became a historical and literary sensation in the Victorian period. Charles Dickens discusses her in his *A Child's History of England* (Dickens, [1851–53] 1905). Sir Lewis Morris writes a poem titled 'Gilbert Beckett and the Fair Saracen' (Morris, n.d.).

of color and immigrants. In her voice, they hear a multilingual Christian community; they hear her desire for belonging, her strength to resist.

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