

Mapping a Global Narrative Cycle 'Marques de Rome', the First French Continuation of the Prose 'Roman des Sept Sages', and the Gendered Structure of Serial Writing

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Abstract The French tradition of the 'Sept Sages de Rome' is at the heart of the European dissemination of this collection of frame tales. As a result of its appeal to an aristocratic audience, no fewer than six French prose continuations were added to the core collection. The cycle might have been gathered over the last quarter of the 13th century. Nowadays, this huge narrative cycle is little known, but it presents a vivid narrative inventiveness, recycling many aspects of the tradition of the 'Sept Sages' and integrating new ones. This paper focuses on the first sequel, 'Marques de Rome'. My aim is to shed new light on the growth of the *matière* of the 'Seven Sages' by analysing how the main formal and ideological characteristics of the 'Roman des Sept Sages de Rome' reappear in the first sequel. The continuity with the source romance does not limit the continuation to a mere repetition of a well-worn plot. Quite the opposite: specific thematic and structural aspects renew the story matter. By investigating the gendered construction of the characters as well as the dynamics of the replacement of narrative patterns and the interplay of intertextuality, I will argue that 'Marques de Rome' is the very root of the cycle, as it creates a new model of wise rulers. By introducing a romance tradition into literature of sapiential obedience, 'Marques' enables the emergence of a serial plot based on a complex genealogical logic.

Keywords Mediaeval French Literature; Seven Sages; Gender Studies; Serial Writing; Mediaeval Masculinities

The French tradition of the ‘Seven Sages’ is at the heart of the European dissemination of this collection of frame tales. The success of the most distributed French prose version A was such that it generated translations in Dutch, Italian, English, and Swedish as well as other French reworkings. Furthermore, as a result of its attractiveness to an aristocratic audience, no fewer than six French prose continuations were added to the core collection: ‘Marques de Rome’, ‘Laurin’, ‘Cassidorus’, ‘Helcanus’, ‘Pelyarmenus’, and ‘Kanor’.

According to the current state of research, the cycle might have been gathered over the last quarter of the 13th century, within an aristocratic milieu close to the Flemish court of Gui de Dampierre. Later, most likely between the 1320s and the 1330s, three lavishly illustrated cyclic manuscripts were produced in Paris, this time probably in connection with the court of Guillaume I of Hainaut. The genesis of the cycle thus takes place in a cultural area that was crucial for the development of both French and Dutch literature.

Although little known today, this expansive cycle presents a vivid narrative inventiveness. It recycles many aspects of the Seven Sages tradition and integrates new ones, using numerous *exempla* belonging to a widespread narrative culture, versified texts such as love debates, excerpts from didactic treatises, and lyric poem and hagiographic material reworked with secular heroes. The plot of the cycle as a whole encompasses a large political sphere. It sets up a global romance universe, including the Roman Empire and that of Constantinople, the Holy Land, Spain, and Britain. The cycle’s characters descend from the wisest and most enlightened people, Cato the Wise and his son Marques, and still they struggle to consolidate a fair and enlightened government over this huge territory. This fictional universe is parallel to, but not hermetically separated from, that of the great Arthurian narratives.

This paper will show the ways in which the ‘Roman des Sept Sages’ cycle assimilates heterogeneous discursive and textual fragments. This will be done by investigating the gendered construction of the characters. The heroes, being savvy clerks as well as skilled warriors, are ambiguous characters submitted to a constant process of redefinition. Moreover, female characters are key to the narrative structure of the cycle. I would suggest that both the ambiguity of the male heroes and the prominent role of the female characters contributed to marginalising the cycle in modern criticism and that, therefore, both aspects must be seen in a new light.

In this article, I will focus on the ‘Roman de Marques de Rome’,¹ the first sequel of the cycle. My aim is to shed new light on the growth of the narrative

1 Marques 1993; cf. the outdated edition ‘Le Roman de Marques de Rome’ (1889). This article arises from the ‘Canonise the *Sept Sages*’ research project, funded by the Swiss and French-speaking Belgian Research Foundations (FNSRS and FNRS Belgique Wallonie) and

matière of the ‘Seven Sages’ by analysing how the main formal and ideological characteristics of the ‘Roman des Sept Sages de Rome’ reappear in the first sequel. The continuity with the source romance does not limit the continuation to mere repetition of a well-worn plot. Quite the opposite: the reinvestment of specific thematic and structural elements renews the subject matter as it is reshaped by new narrative connections, such as the necessity to establish a lineage or to widen the geopolitical sphere of the romance’s action.

In her enlightening article, Mary B. SPEER reminds us that “[t]he continuations [of the ‘Roman des Sept Sages de Rome’], which originated in France, have repeatedly been disparaged as pale imitation of their ancestors”.² She gives a new view on the first continuation by insisting that the ‘Roman de Marques’ reshapes the narrative framework significantly. The romance is based on a very precise temporal structure, discusses the role of the clergy in the governance of empires, and bases much of the action on the evils of noble arrogance and class prejudice. My commentary continues in this vein whilst highlighting the importance of gender issues in this “recycling”.³

‘Marques de Rome’ was a well-known text in the 13th and 14th centuries. No fewer than twenty-two manuscripts are still available today, and four fragments of lost copies have been identified.⁴ The transmission history shows that ‘Marques’ is at the heart of the cycle, both as an independent work and as the most important continuation of the ‘Sept Sages’. The romance appears alone or separate from the rest of the cycle in four manuscripts. The eighteen other codices show it bound with at least one other text from this cycle, with the sequence ‘Sept Sages de Rome’ followed by ‘Marques de Rome’ being the most common combination, present in ten manuscripts. Four of them are illustrated cyclic manuscripts from the beginning of the 14th or mid-15th centuries. The cycle’s success builds on that of the ‘Sept Sages de Rome’ but also on the fact that it gives new fictional opportunities to an originally quite static narrative matter.

The plot includes three main episodes.⁵ The first⁶ takes place in the city of Rome and focuses on the moral and political struggle between Marques, the son of

led by myself and Simone Ventura (UBL-Brussels). I would like to express my gratitude to my colleagues Simone Ventura, Bruce Fudge, and Geneviève Young for their help and wise advice.

2 Speer 1981–1982, p. 305.

3 See also Speer 1983.

4 For further information about the manuscript tradition, see Institut de Recherche; Devereaux 2012, pp. 155 f.

5 Devereaux 2012, pp. 132 f. divides the text into four parts. For convenience, I will analyse the central part of the narrative, focused on Marques’ adventures in Constantinople, as a whole.

6 Marques, § I–XXIII, pp. 42–90.

Cato the Wise, and the empress of Rome, the young wife of Marques' best friend, who is none other than the mute prince of the 'Roman des Sept Sages de Rome', the unnamed son of the Roman emperor Dioclesien. In a second phase,⁷ Marques leaves Rome and visits Lombardy and Constantinople. During this travel, the wise pupil and descendant of the Seven Sages has various chivalric and amorous adventures. His glorious victory against the enemy of the emperor of Constantinople allows him to marry his beloved, the beautiful Laurine, sister of the emperor of Constantinople and cousin to the Roman emperor. In the third episode,⁸ Marques comes back to Rome, where the plot returns to the narrative content of the 'Seven Sages': Marques is accused, on the instigation of the wicked empress, of being the father of her pregnant daughter's illegitimate child. This false accusation leads to the trial of Marques and is the impetus for the Seven Sages to resume the roles they played in the root romance of the cycle. Just as the empress tries to have Marques condemned, each of the Sages tells an embedded story in order to convince the emperor to acquit him.

1 Aristocracy and Meritocracy: Domestic, Economic, and Ethical Cases

One of the core elements of 'The Seven Sages' that is amplified and reworked in 'Marques' is the position of the emperor, torn between his male bonds to the educated sages and his dynastic marriage to the noble empress, and it is extended into two different models of leadership.⁹ At first glance, the figure of the empress seems to be a simple reworking of the emperor's second wife in the 'Sept Sages de Rome', but the fact that she struggles against her husband's strong homosocial bond with Marques provides a new layout for mutual relationships.

The empress stands for an aristocratic ethos: she values noble ancestry and scorns the low social background of Cato's son and of the other sages, calling them *basse gent* ("low folks").¹⁰ She calls Marques himself a *garçon* ("boy"), which here has undertones of a servile status but also refers to any young, unmarried, or unestablished masculine figure. The empress uses this epithet also for the emperor himself, emphasising the dignity marriage and paternity confers onto the prince and reminding him that it was due to her that the emperor has strengthened his position as a ruler:

⁷ Ibid., § XXIV–LXXXI, pp. 90–216.

⁸ Ibid., § LXXXII–CXII, pp. 216–278.

⁹ Speer 1981–1982, pp. 327f.

¹⁰ Marques, § III, 29, p. 46; § XX, 21f., p. 82; see also § XXIII, 7, p. 90.

*Sires, dist ele, de quoi vous empirai gie? Ainz vos fis valoir tant com vos valez, quar vous estiez garçons or estes sires.*¹¹

“Lord”, she said, “how can I harm you? On the contrary, I have given you all your worth, for you were a youth and now you are an established man.”

The double designation of the emperor and Marques as *garçons* reinforces the opposition between the empress and the two friends whose virtuous bond was forged through shared philosophical learning and expresses itself through a persistent intimacy. During the night when the empress mocks Marques’ low and powerless social position, the emperor and Marques sleep in the same room, as a sign of the *grant amor* (“great favour”) of the emperor toward his seneschal.¹²

The use of the term *garçon* also suggests that full noble masculinity is not achieved by the embodiment of a worthy gender role alone. The empress’ discourse underlines the strategic role of marriage, as the ruler’s lordship is reinforced by his commitment to reproductive power and ability to found an imperial lineage. It emphasises matrimonial alliance as an empowering relationship, even for an imperial ruler.¹³ Peggy McCracken argues that the resurgence of the biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife in the ‘Sept Sages de Rome’ and other mediaeval texts encapsulates the widespread fear of women’s political power linked to her sexuality: “When the literary motif features a queen, it permits an exploration of the implicit link between transgressive sexuality and women’s political authority”.¹⁴ The same hostility toward women’s power is central to ‘Marques’. In her struggle against the sages and Marques, the empress fights to maintain and increase her influence on the emperor by means of her fertility. Playing on her pregnancy and the birth of her first child, she wrests from the emperor decisions that he makes reluctantly.¹⁵ She uses her ability to provide an heir to the imperial lineage to play a part in public affairs. The empress’ litigious action brings to light an aspect of the logic of lineage imposed by the rules of succession to the throne, a fact that remains quite invisible in other contemporary fictions.

The two main episodes of this initial part of the plot show two crucial aspects of the empress’ political action: invoking status rather than education as a basis for political power, and monopolising wealth to maintain that power. Tensions

11 Ibid., § V, 13, p. 48.

12 Ibid., § XX, 5f., pp. 80–82.

13 Treatises of education and ‘mirrors of princes’ confirm this complete fulfillment of masculinity through the accession to fatherhood; see Dubois 2022, p. 274.

14 McCracken 1998, pp. 144–170, here p. 146.

15 Marques, § V, 9–27, pp. 48–50.

first arise on account of the place given to the seven sages in the social hierarchy of the empire. At her wedding feast, the young empress is amazed at seeing the sages sit at the best table and being served by the emperor himself:¹⁶

*Ele fu iree, si dist par eschar: Sire, qui sont ore cist haut home qui de ci se partent? Dame, dist il, veïstes les vous onques mes? Ce sont mi mestre. Sire, dist ele, vous dites voir; vostre mestre sont il voirement, et vos estes leur garçons; et bien i parut au lever encontre aus. Quel fie, ne queles rentes tenez vos d'euls par quoi vos le doiez fere?*¹⁷

She was angry, and said, in a mocking manner, "Sire, who are these noble men who are leaving here?" "Lady", he said, "have you never seen them? These are my masters." "Sire", said she, "you tell the truth. They are really your masters and you are their servant. It was evident when you stood up at their arrival. What feud, what rent do you hold from them that you should do so?"

The eminent position of the seven sages, performed by the means of the emperor's *coutume*, validates the consensus that is reached in Rome about the use of wisdom and reason as an enlightened means of government. The empress' fight to reduce the sages' prestige, far from being a simple domestic quarrel, makes visible the conflict between the nobility and men of science. By attacking the social and diplomatic ritual established by the emperor to affirm publicly the pre-eminence of the seven sages, the imperial spouse attempts to impose a political order opposed to that of intellectual meritocracy. Moreover, the fact that a female character shoulders the claims of the nobility obviously questions and delegitimises this aristocratic ethos.

Later on, the conflict between Marques and the emperor's wife focuses on the management of public funds, an economic issue that is based on legal and moral considerations, in line with the common orientation of mediaeval reflection on money and trade.¹⁸ This episode, which follows this first series of altercations, takes a less symbolic and more practical turn, as it stages Marques' establishment

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, § II, 18–21, p. 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, § VII, 19–23, pp. 52–54.

¹⁸ Le Goff and Piron provide useful clarification about the absence of any mediaeval mental category corresponding to our modern notion of 'economy'. They refer to the concept of 'embedded economy' elaborated by Karl Polanyi in order to describe systems of exchange embedded in institutions such as kinship, religion, and politics. See Le Goff 1996, p. 658; Piron 2012, p. 16; Valensi 1974.

of a form of fiscal policy modelled on the Christian duty of almsgiving,¹⁹ on the relief of the disadvantaged, and on social justice. Here, the empress' posture summons the traditional portrait of the tyrant: she monopolises wealth for her own sake and abandons her people to dereliction. The queen is the instigator of "bad customs":

Ele ne mist pas s'entente a bien fere ne a ausmosnes, ainz sema mauveses semances par la terre et aleva assez de mauveses coutumes tant que la perte et li couz s'en venoit par les povres genz.²⁰

She did not give all her care to do good. On the contrary, she sowed bad soil in the country and established many bad customs, so that the poor people suffered the damage and the expense.

A dream experienced by the emperor in which he had to choose between losing a beautiful gem or a delicious hen expresses the anxiety about the unjust state of the empire.²¹ Interpreting this vision gives Marques the opportunity to deliver the barons of Rome a lesson in charity:

Ore, seignor, dist Marques, or vous voil ge prier que chascuns de vous regart l'estat et le point ou il est et ne leissiez pas la pierre précieuse en peril por la covoitise de la geline, c'est a dire que vos ne perdoiz pas l'ame por le cors aaisier.²²

"Now, lords", said Marques, "I want to urge each of you to consider the state and point in which you are: do not leave the gem in jeopardy because of the lust of the hen, that is, do not lose your soul for the pleasures of the body."

Gem and hen symbolise soul and body, following a typology that hints at both the biblical parable of the pearl and the merchant (Mt 13:44–46) and the fable of the rooster and the gemstone that can be read at the beginning of several mediaeval collections of fables, for instance Marie de France's. Marques tries to abolish those *mauveses coutumes* by proposing a social policy to ensure the common welfare. The wealthy men of the city, moved to tears by Marques' eloquence, follow his

¹⁹ See Mark 10:42–44.

²⁰ Marques, § VII, 1 f., pp. 50–52.

²¹ Ibid., § X–XII, pp. 60–68.

²² Ibid., § XII, 16, p. 68.

recommendations and divide all their goods into two equal parts, one of which will be devoted to the management of the public good. Their generosity is thwarted by the initiative of their wives, who, on the advice of the empress, divert the funds collected in coffers in order to appropriate them.²³ Here, Marques' fight against the empress and the other ladies seems to refer to the centralising efforts of monarchic power opposed to the claims of the great barons for their independence:

*Sire, dist Marques [...] mienz vaut que li avoires soit du tout en vostre main que chascuns des barons eüst le suen.*²⁴

“Sire”, said Marques, “it is preferable that the money be in your complete possession rather than that each baron retain his own.”

It is noteworthy that Marques' action gives an example of good government that is placed under the authority of Christian law but implemented by a secular administration. Ancient Rome seems to obey Christian rules about charity, although the Church as an institution does not play any role. Marques preaches almsgiving and respect for the poor and establishes a kind of micro-credit procedure, proposing that these measures to alleviate social injustice should be implemented by the secular authority of the emperor.²⁵ The Church and the poor appear essentially as the beneficiaries of the secular administration's policy. The narrative does not mention any priest or ecclesiastic authority that would be responsible for this redistribution of wealth:²⁶

*Li empereres parla et dist : Marques, [...] Il vous convient ordener ces ausmones et deviser comment eles seront departies. Sire, dist Marques, volentiers. Li avoires demorra en vostre garde et vos entreroiz en la paine por els.*²⁷

The emperor spoke and said, “Marques [...] It is up to you to administer these alms and to tell how they shall be distributed.” “Sire”, said

²³ Ibid., § XIV, pp. 68–72.

²⁴ Ibid., § XVIII, 7, p. 78.

²⁵ Ibid., § XIX, 6, pp. 78–80; cf. *ibid.*, XVIII, 1–4, p. 78.

²⁶ Nevertheless, the two opposing parties of this struggle resort to the deposit of the wealth to the Hospital (§ XIV, 28, p. 72) or to the Temple (§ XV, 7, p. 72 and XVI, 1, p. 74). Those designations refer without doubt to the holy orders of the Templars and the Hospitallers. Since the 12th c., the French royal treasury had been entrusted to the Parisian house of the Templars Orders (Le Goff 2019, p. 93).

²⁷ Marques, § XVIII, 1–4, p. 78.

Marques, “gladly, the goods will remain in your custody and you will take care of them.”

Developed in the direction of a more pragmatic management of the city than the one the ‘Roman des Sept Sages’ suggests,²⁸ these two episodes grant Marques the stature of an irreproachable political and legal adviser at the service of the emperor. The person of the empress, in contrast, acquires all the characteristic traits of the evil ruler. In this way, they extend and clarify the vision of the original romance, since the empress’ actions are no longer focused on the sphere of sexuality. She becomes a practical (bad) player in the economic exchanges of the city.

2 The Making of a Knight: Women’s Masterpiece

Once Marques’ ability to distinguish himself as a good ruler is proven, a second narrative phase opens up and leads the hero to confront the world of chivalry, which implies, according to the codes of mediaeval romance, arms and love. Female characters, especially the empress and Marques’ future wife Laurine, play an important part in allowing him to assume the prestigious male role of a knight.

It is the empress who suggests the organisation of a big tournament and the *adoubement* (“dubbing”) of Marques and other young men.²⁹ This is consistent with a similar emphasis on chivalric masculinity as a feminine preoccupation in the octosyllabic verse version of the ‘Roman de Sept Sages’. In this text, the young empress criticises the education given to the imperial child: instead of being enclosed in a Roman house by the sages, the prince should be brought up in Constantinople, where he could enjoy *courtoisie* and *chevalerie*:

*Et la roïne li disoit
por coi ses fils ne s’en venoit.
Ja fust il miels en cest país
que a Romme, che m’est avis,
et si veïst chevaleries
et apreïst des cortoisies.³⁰*

²⁸ Foehr-Janssens 2022.

²⁹ Marques, § XXIV, 23–26, pp. 90–92.

³⁰ Le Roman des Sept Sages, v. 437–446.

And the queen used to ask him why his son did not return: “I think he would do better in this country than in Rome, he could see some chivalric deeds and learn courtesy.”

‘Marques de Rome’ reiterates this opposition between chivalric and clerical education, but in this case, the opposition is resolved by the combination of these two forms of high-level masculine identity. As soon as the empress suggests Marques should be initiated into the profession of arms, the portrait of the hero changes and assimilates to the canon of chivalric beauty. In the first lines of the text, the excellence of the hero is praised by means of his cleverness. He appears as a perfect companion for the emperor, who is himself depicted as a *granz damoisiaus et sages et letrez de toutes sciences et de toutes clergies* (“a handsome noble young man, and well-trained in science”).³¹ The unnamed emperor appoints his beloved master’s son as his seneschal:

*Le juenes empereres, por l’amor qu’il avoit au pere, en fist son seneschal et l’ama molt et le tint chier por le sens qu’estoit el vallet et por la norreture, quar il avoient auques esté noiri ensemble.*³²

The young emperor in the name of his affection toward the father made him his seneschal and cherished him for his intelligence and as a result of their education, as they had been brought up together.

Until this point, the main masculine and political virtue seems to be *atemprance* (“temperance”), a quality recognised on several occasions by the emperor.³³ This is, of course, perfectly consistent with the teaching of the *specula principis* (“mirrors of princes”, in turn inspired by stoicism, particularly by Seneca and the literature against tyranny).

Marques’ physical qualities are not mentioned before the moment of the tournament. Suddenly, the young man appears to be endowed with an eye-catching body:

*Molt fu cel jor Marques bien regardez, quar il fu granz et bien molez de cors et bien forniz de membres et ot grant enforcheüre et fu gros par les espauls et grailles parmi les flans et molt li sistrent bien les armes.*³⁴

31 Marques, § I, 3, p. 42.

32 Ibid., § I, 6, p. 42.

33 Ibid., § VII, 13, p. 52.

34 Ibid., § XXV, 24, p. 96.

That day Marques was much admired, for he was tall and his body was harmoniously designed; he had large hips and he was broad of shoulders and slender of flanks; the arms suited him well.

During the tournament, Marques' attack on horseback provides a valorisation of masculine energy, strength, and physical ability, cutting a figure *qui merueilleusement estoit montez* ("looking marvellous on his horse").³⁵

*Qui bien l'esgardast, il deist qu'il n'eüst onques fait autre chose. Il broiche le cheval des esperons et li chevaux s'en vait, que nus quarreaus d'arbalestes ne l'aconseüst mie, et fesoit entor soi terre trembler et feu voler des fers de ses piés.*³⁶

Anyone who had watched him closely would have sworn that he had never done anything else. He struck his horse with his spurs and the horse bolted, faster than a crossbow bolt, causing the earth to shake around him and the fire to fly from the iron of his hoofs.

Although the empress is and will remain Marques' enemy throughout the text, she is, on this occasion, an important agent of this embodiment of this new masculinity. She is the one who initiates the tournament and thus provides the opportunity for Marques' chivalric metamorphosis.

In the following passage, Marques gives his first example of prowess by delivering a group of ladies and damsels from cruel bandits, using not only force but also cunning. The cooperation of the women, who seem to be more capable than the usual *puelles desconfortees* ("helpless maidens") of chivalric and especially Arthurian romances, is notable. Marques' principal ally is the most eminent woman of the group, a *dame* taken by force as a spouse by the chief of the band of thieves. During this forced marriage, she has given birth to two sons, both of them slaughtered before her eyes by her criminal 'husband'. The children are murdered because of the fear that they will avenge their maternal uncles, who were killed by their father.³⁷ The denunciation of the bandit as an entirely asocial criminal, unable to form any alliance by other means than violence, implies that Marques' achievement is to be praised as an act of justice rather than as an example of masculine defence of female virginity (as would be the case in Arthurian romances).

³⁵ Ibid., § XXV, 29–32, p. 96.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., § XXXI, 30–32, p. 110.

After a long journey, Marques next reaches Constantinople, where a new plot twist awaits him. Contrary to what might be expected, the emperor has no need of a perfect counsellor nor of an accomplished warrior.

*Marques se porpensa qu'il n'i demoroit mie, quar l'en est tost enuiez de l'ome, qui de rien ne sert; et li païs estoit molt en pes et li empereres n'avoit mestier de soudoiers.*³⁸

Marques thought that he would not stay, for one soon tires of the man who is of no use; the country was at great peace, and the emperor had no need of fighters.

The role of the young hero in an unknown land, where he will have the opportunity to show his prowess and save the endangered realm, is denied to Marques. However, the presence of Constantinople in the narrative is meaningful. It echoes the contemporary political state of affairs, namely, the conquest of this strategically crucial city and the establishment of a Latin empire during the fourth crusade.³⁹ The fact that the son of Cato the Wise will be the father of the future ruler of this empire allows the narrative cycle of the 'Seven Sages' to be born. Thus, this political conquest will not be entirely rooted in an armed conflict: there anew, it is a woman who will give some consistency to the heroic itinerary. Laurine, the sister of the emperor, falls in love with Marques and manages to create an emotional bond with the handsome foreigner, even though he is disdained by the emperor's court. Significantly, the beloved heiress is not the emperor's daughter but his sister.⁴⁰ Through this marriage, Marques and the Byzantine emperor will become brothers-in-law, a relationship of relative equality and one that mirrors the relationship between Marques and the emperor of Rome. Furthermore, as Laurine is the cousin of the latter, the wedding reinforces the bond between Marques and his imperial and Roman fellow.

Marques' long stay in Laurine's magnificent *palais*, called Beau Manoir, is the first occasion in the cycle to present the difficult initiation of the clerical hero to heterosexual love. Laurine represents a positive counterpart to the empress. In spite of their differences, both these feminine characters embody the structural and social requirement of a ruler in a mediaeval romance to engage in a love

³⁸ *Ibid.*, § XLVI, 4, p. 138.

³⁹ The title of Emperor of Constantinople was bestowed on Baldwin IX of Flanders, the grandfather of Gui de Dampierre, to whom, according to some manuscripts (Ms. Turin B.N. 1650), the cycle was dedicated; see Palermo 1959.

⁴⁰ Devereaux 2012, p. 154 also emphasises the fact that Laurine is the emperor's sister and not his daughter. This constitutes crucial variation with the narrative motive of the 'Byzantine princess' offering the opportunity of an East-West marriage alliance in several Old French romances and *chansons de geste* from the 12th and 13th c. (Devereaux 2012, pp. 75–128).

affair leading to marriage. To win over a man deeply rooted in a misogynistic clerical education is a difficult task. The romantic encounters between Laurine and Marques form a crucial node in the development of the cycle. A reluctance to commit to a love relationship characterises the successive heroes of the ‘Seven Sages’ cycle. At the beginning of the ‘Roman d’Helcanus’, an old woman refers back to Marques’ reluctance to engage with Laurine when the heir of Cassidorus happens to be unwilling to give in to the attractions of his future wife.⁴¹ Although Marques is not indifferent to the charms of the imperial princess, he systematically undermines Laurine’s expectations. He deflects her rhetoric of sentimental love using a discourse on the moral and spiritual virtues of universal friendship – quite unusual from a courtly knight – such that Laurine denies him the status of a nobleman:

*Par foi, dist ele, vos ne savez riens d’amors, ne ge ne croi mie que vos soiez gentilz hom, quant vos de tel chose ne savez riens.*⁴²

“By my faith”, said she, “you know nothing about love, and I do not think you are a gentleman, if you do not know anything about such a matter.”

Finally, the marriage of Laurine and Marques will be approved by the two emperors of Rome and Constantinople, as the lovers’ wishes serve the political interests of the ruling powers. The influence of Chrétien de Troyes’ ‘Roman de Cligès’, which appears in summarised form as an embedded story in the third and last episode, is felt here.⁴³ In Chrétien de Troyes’ work, the attraction exerted by the emergence of Constantinople as a narrative pole challenges the supremacy of the Breton ‘Roman de Tristan’. The love story of Cligès and Fenice clearly reshapes that of Tristan and Iseut by avoiding the double commitment of an adulterous spouse toward her husband and her lover. Here, Marques’ chivalric and amorous path has a disruptive effect on the main scheme of the ‘Roman de Sept Sages de Rome’, which is characterised by strong misogyny and a static and centralised narrative frame. Constantinople offers a new space, open to both amorous and territorial conquest. The continuations will exploit this narrative vein, without, however, ever ceasing to advocate the moral superiority of wisdom over chivalric ethics.

41 Le Roman de Helcanus, § 11 f., pp. 31–33.

42 Marques, § XLVII, 13–17, p. 144.

43 Ibid., § CVI, pp. 264–266.

3 Queering Masculinities: Marques, or the Clerical and Chivalric Masquerade

The third and final section of the narrative returns to the patterns of embedded stories familiar from the ‘Sept Sages’ and introduces characters who do not conform to binary gender roles. Marques’ chivalrous career, which allows him to marry a noble princess, ends after a victory over the assailants of Constantinople. After only two years of marital happiness and the birth of a male heir called Laurin, Marques’ beloved wife Laurine dies, which recalls the early loss of the hero’s mother in the ‘Roman de Sept Sages’. Like the emperor’s son in the ‘Sept Sages’, Marques returns to Rome. He renews his privileged bond with the Roman emperor, which is once again called into question by the empress. The seneschal is accused of being the illegitimate father of the child that the emperor’s daughter carries. But the youthful princess has instead had sexual relations with a young companion living in her company in the *chambre des dames* dedicated to the empress and her ladies. Under these circumstances, the third part of the text returns to the original narrative form of embedding stories that is characteristic of the ‘Roman des Sept Sages’. The rhythm imposed on the narration of the stories is no longer that of seven days of silence enforced by the vow of the prince but, rather, that of the pregnancy in progress. Every month until the child is born, the empress makes a new attempt to persuade the emperor of Marques’ guilt. This indictment is followed by the intervention of the sages, who are trying to save Marques. Once again, the empress places procreation in direct relation to the structure of the plot. The collection of embedded tales in the ‘Roman de Marques’ does not show the same diversity or complexity seen in the ‘Roman des Sept Sages’.⁴⁴ Consequently, the comparison with the ‘Roman’ may have caused a lack of critical interest in ‘Marques’. However, it does offer stories closely related to the main plot, specifically to the figure of the young pregnant princess and to questions of inheritance.⁴⁵

Particularly noteworthy in this context is the embedded tale of the ‘Vie de Sainte Marine’. This famous life of a transgender saint tells how a young girl introduced into a male convent by her father perfectly assumes the identity of a monk and receives unanimous approval from the monastic community until a pregnant girl accuses him of being the father of her child.⁴⁶ Through the interplay of narrative embedding, the similarity of the charges brought against the two figures creates a link between Saint Marine and Marques. Obviously, it would

44 Foehr-Janssens 1994, Foehr-Janssens 2016. See Appendix: Embedded Stories in ‘Marques de Rome’ (Tab. 1).

45 See Devereaux 2012, pp. 135–138.

46 Patlagean 1976, Vuillemur 1999, Maillet 2020, Albert 2021.

be incautious to conclude that gender fluidity affects the identity of the hero in the same way that it does for the saint. However, the presence of this narrative pattern does point to concerns about transgressions of gender and social identities in the romance. The true father of the unborn child, called Otebon, is hidden in the ladies' room, dressed in "women's clothes" (*robe de feme*).⁴⁷ This boy living sinfully as a girl represents the reversed figure of the virtuous character of Saint Marine, a woman become man and unjustly suspected of an illegitimate paternity. This concealment hinders the regulation of gender and is to be attributed to the responsibility of the empress who protects the *vallez* ("young man") who had *ne barbe ne gernon* ("neither beard nor moustache") as her *noiri*, a child she has provided an education for, after his mother's death.⁴⁸ The identification of the culprit at the end of the episode proves to be particularly arduous, so perfect is the performance of femaleness by the *norriz*: *ainz resembla mielz feme, que damoisele nule qui i fust* ("he looked more like a woman than any of the damsels there")⁴⁹ and *il sembloit feme sor toutes les autres* ("he appears more feminine than all the others").⁵⁰ The seven sages and Marques have the greatest difficulty distinguishing the young man from all the damsels. Neither his appearance nor even his voice and manner (*contenance*) of speaking betray him.⁵¹ Only Marques will end up spotting the young man *si le quenut au grant pas et a la jambe, qu'il gitoit plus loing que nule des autres, et a la contenance del marchier* ("by his walk and the length of his step, which he threw farther than any of the others, and by his pace").⁵²

Not only does the empress introduce gender disorder by educating her favourite boy like a girl, but she herself threatens the correct distinction between men's and women's duties, especially by claiming to encroach on the reserved territories of the dominant masculinity as her envy of power brings her to *porte[r] les braies son seigneur* ("wear the trousers of her lord").⁵³ Marques, being her cleverest adversary, appears as the guarantor of the political stability of the empire, which implies a strict respect of the gender hierarchy.

However, this observation does not exhaust the possible interpretations of the presence of the 'Vie de Sainte Marine' in the romance. Marques himself, like Marine, excels in the practice of disguise. Forced to remain *incognito* by the threat of the empress of Rome's hostility, Marques presents himself in Constantinople

47 Marques, § CX, 8f., p. 272.

48 Ibid., § LXXXIII, 4, p. 220; § CX, 9, p. 272.

49 Ibid., § CX, 8f., p. 272.

50 Ibid., § CXI, 1, p. 274.

51 Ibid., § CXI, 2, p. 274.

52 Ibid., § CXI, 4f., p. 276.

53 Ibid., § LVII, 26, p. 164.

as a foreign knight. Furthermore, during a short stay in Rome, between the confession of his love for Laurine and his marriage to the beautiful heiress, Marques the knight assumes his original social function by disguising himself as a cleric, so convincingly that even the bourgeois who provides his outfit is convinced by his transformation, commenting *Se vostre mere vos veoit, si ne vos connoistroit ele mie* (“If your mother saw you, she would not recognise you”).⁵⁴ Marques, the ennobled cleric, the learned knight, the imperial consort of low extraction, is never quite himself nor quite another. He is a character in perpetual masquerade. The positive side of the reference to Saint Marine, a woman capable of fulfilling, better than a man would have done, the monastic vocation of obedience and chastity, thus also reflects the polymorphic identity of the humble son of Cato called to sit between the emperors of Rome and Constantinople, as an equal to them.⁵⁵ Marques manages, for the good of the empire, the whole range of upper-class identities. He embodies the characteristic heroic model from which his descendants will draw inspiration in the entire ‘Cycle des Sept Sages’: wise emperors perfectly gifted in chivalric prowess, but full of philosophical cautiousness; true and faithful lovers, but not without being affected by a clerical fear or reticence before the excesses of heterosexual passion.

Moreover, in the continuations that follow, the accession of Cato’s descendants to the throne of Constantinople will lead to the appearance of a new model for female characters, inspired by Laurine’s sagacity. While they are wise spouses, Diogenes (‘Laurin’), Helcana (‘Cassidorus’), and finally Nera (‘Helcanus’, ‘Pelyarmenus’, and ‘Kanor’) will nevertheless have to endure calumny and persecution. For the purposes of the cycle’s dynamics, a sort of gender reversal happens: the future empresses will have to suffer great hardships, experiencing a fate similar to that of Marques. Some of them, notably Helcana, will even experience transgender lives, on the model of Saint Marine.⁵⁶ By altering the implications of the episode with embedded fables, in comparison with the ‘Roman des Sept Sages’, ‘Marques’ creates the conditions for a new narrative impulse that will prove to be extremely productive for the development of the serial plot in the future cycle. The storytelling episode of the first sequel focuses on the enigma of the pregnancy of the emperor’s daughter. In this context, the figure of Saint Marine creates a parallel between men and women falsely accused of having an illegitimate child, a scenario that will determine the narrative of numerous episodes in the subsequent continuations.

Thus, the presence of the ‘Vie de Sainte Marine’ in ‘Marques de Rome’ certainly has a regulating effect, warning of the necessity to maintain rigid gender

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, § LVIII, 1, p. 166; § LVII, 13–18, p. 164.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, § LXIX, 1f., p. 194.

⁵⁶ *Le Roman de Cassidorus*, vol. 2, ch. XLIII–LV, pp. 334–520.

distinctions for the sake of the legacy of lineage. The fact remains that it also indicates that narrative figures affected by social flexibility, gender fluidity, and class transformation are necessary to ensure the fulfilment, from the closed form of the collection of tales, of a great romance ensemble with quasi-universal ambitions.

4 Conclusion

Far from being a pale rewriting prompted by the opportunistic desire to capitalise on the success of the ‘Roman des Sept Sages’, ‘Marques de Rome’ appears as the very root of the cycle, characterised by the ambition to create a new model of wise rulers and to open the narrative space by means of marriage alliances with Byzantine and other foreign princesses. The first continuation creates an enduring serial plot based on a complex genealogical logic. By introducing a romantic tradition into literature of sapiential obedience, ‘Marques’ gives rise to a typology of characters who combine aristocratic and clerical features. This synthesis between the figure of the sage and that of the knight is reminiscent of the contemporary ‘mirrors of princes’ that promote the figure of a wise king. The fictional descendants of Cato the Wise demonstrate a secular and aristocratic appropriation of the complex ideals of clerical masculinity. On the other hand, the misogynistic pattern of the ‘Sept Sages’ tradition, based on the representation of wicked feminine characters, has to be remodelled to support the genealogical structure of the cycle. It makes way for clever and attractive foreign princesses who are able to become valorous queens and faithful mothers to the next generation. The construction of characters and their assignment to social gender roles can, in this way, only be grasped through the dynamics of the replacement of narrative patterns, the interplay of intertextuality, and the rhetorical and discursive transfers from one fictional universe to another.

5 Appendix

Table 1 | Embedded stories in ‘Marques de Rome’

	Empress	Seven Sages
Month 1	LXXXV. The son of the emperor of Constantinople serves the sultan of Babylon. Betrothal to the Sultan’s daughter. His companion takes the ring and marries the girl instead of him.	LXXXVII. Sage Baucillas. A bourgeois couple and their daughter. The latter is pregnant and accuses an hermit. The hermit is put to death.

Table 1 | (continued)

	Empress	Seven Sages
	LXXXVI. The empress reveals her daughter's pregnancy to the emperor and accuses Marques	
Month 2	LXXXIX. Emperor loves the daughter of a knight living on his hunting ground in the forest. Wants to sleep with her before the wedding. She gives him a key to the orchard. The seneschal seizes the key and takes the emperor's place. The seneschal is put to death.	XCI. Sage Anxilles. Saint Marine
Month 3	XCIII. Hippocrates and his nephew. The king's daughter is pregnant by the nephew. Hippocrates makes his nephew's genitals disappear by 'herbs'. [This story is based on, and modified from, a tale from the 'Roman des Sept Sages', Medicus.]	XCV. Sage Tullus. Herod and the daughter of Herodias, a New Testament episode present in the Gospel of Mark 6:14-29 and Matthew 14:1-12.
Month 4	XCVII. Story of the daughter of king Daire and the son of the seneschal, Zoroas. The seneschal saves his son.	C. Sage Mauquidarz. Story told by means of a letter. The son of a knight is accused of trying to kill his father. The severed head of the son accuses his father of injustice. The truth is established and the father commits suicide by hanging.
Month 5	CII. Emperor Joires. His seneschal marries his daughter. The seneschal has the emperor's son killed and is crowned. The emperor dies of grief.	CIV. Sage Jessé. Letter. The King of Hungary and son of the seneschal. Rewriting of the 'Sept Sages' frame story. The king marries a new woman who tries to seduce the young seneschal. She accuses the young man of rape with a piece of his shirt as evidence. The young seneschal is put to death.
Month 6	CVI. Cligès	CVIII. Sage Merons. Letter. Adulteress watched by her brother-in-law. He is accused of stealing his brother's pears. The woman kills her daughter and flees, the knight throws himself into a pool of water and drowns.
	CIX. Birth of the child.	

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