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Can the Middle Ages
Be Postcolonial?

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed. *The Postcolonial Middle Ages.* New York: Palgrave, 2000.

Geraldine Heng. *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy.* New York: Columbia UP, 2003.

Sylvia Huot. *Postcolonial Fictions in the* Roman de Perceforest: *Cultural Identities and Hybridities.* Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007.

Patricia Clare Ingham and Michelle R. Warren, eds. *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval through Modern.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams, eds. *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005.

Sharon Kinoshita. *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature.* Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 2006.

Karla Malette. *The Kingdom of Sicily: A Literary History.* Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 2005.

Michael Uebel. *Ecstatic Transformation: On the Uses of Alterity in the Middle Ages.* New York: Palgrave, 2005.

David Wallace. *Premodern Places: Calais to Surinam, Chaucer to Aphra Benn.* Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.

If in the 1990s some theoretically oriented medievalists appear to have been preoccupied with medievalism (see Nichols and Bloch; Biddick), the year 2000 ushered in a period of sustained reflection on intersections between medieval studies and postcolonial theory, the books reviewed here being just a sample of the scholarship now available. The two trends are not, of course, unconnected, in that the imperial and nationalist climate in which nineteenth-century medi-

evalists worked was formative of the discipline, but already in 2000 postcolonial approaches to the Middle Ages were controversial. On the one hand, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes in the introduction to *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, which has come to be regarded as foundational in the field, "just as there was never a time before colony, there has never yet been a time when the colonial has been outgrown," thereby boldly asserting the validity of the apparently oxymoronic term "the postcolonial Middle Ages" (3). On the other hand, Gabrielle Speigel writes in her trenchant and intelligent review of Kathleen Biddick's provocative *The Shock of Medievalism* that "A postcolonial society has a historical specificity and density that is not easily translated into premodern worlds" (250), suggesting thereby that the use of postcolonial theory to analyze medieval texts verges on crude anachronism. According to this view, the Middle Ages cannot be "postcolonial," since the term by definition refers to historical circumstances and to cultures that emerged only after the disintegration of the global empires that were formed in the postmedieval period by European powers such as England, France, and Spain.

Since it is clear that postcolonial theorists do make claims about the historical specificity of modern postcolonial times and places, the intellectual challenges for "postcolonial medievalists" are not negligible, particularly when considering that the model of periodization that is widely (but usually tacitly and uncritically) accepted in postcolonial studies casts the Middle Ages as "clearly dead" (to cite Carolyn Dinshaw's eloquent critique of Homi Bhabha, 19) and unproblematically located in Europe, an "old times" that are treated as but a foil to the "new [postcolonial] times" and "new [postcolonial] locations" that promise to be redolent with hybridity, ambivalent signs, and complex postmodern subjects (Dinshaw 16). The Middle Ages are thus often treated by some modern theorists as an undifferentiated, homogenous "Other," sometimes simple, innocent, and tolerant, as opposed to complex, knowing, and intolerant; sometimes unremittingly brutal and violent, as opposed to having the potential at least for enlightenment and liberation. For these theorists the Middle Ages are implicitly the marker of a degree zero of alterity, but, as Dinshaw argues, this is more a reflection of an intellectual move on their part than it is an accurate description of a long and heterogeneous period in a wide variety of places. Interestingly, though Dinshaw's position could hardly be described as "anti-theoretical," her mistrust of the unremitting "othering" of the Middle Ages resonates in some respects with more traditional pleas to look at the Middle Ages "on their own terms" (for example, Freedman 22–23). However, while I am inclined to agree with Spiegel that "the indiscriminate melding of otherwise often incompatible theories drawn from a wide variety of available fields—whether Freudian or Foucaldian, psychoanalytic or postcolonial—simply will not do" (249), I find it harder to follow her unreservedly when she concludes that "it tends to evacuate the power of such theories by superimposing them on periods and persons for which they were never designed and to which they simply do not apply" (249–50). *Superimposition* is a loaded term, but the lack of fit between a modern theoretical framework and a premodern text may in fact be highly productive for thinking about the historical specificity of both the framework and the text. Just as medievalists have something to learn from postcolonial theory, so postcolonial theorists might have something to learn about the history and

specificity of their own field of inquiry from a better-informed view of the past. Furthermore, there is no need to oppose history and theory; on the contrary, theory—including postcolonial theory—can be used productively in historically informed reflections on medieval culture.

In this essay I shall offer an appreciative account of, and response to, some recent scholarship in the field of postcolonial medieval studies, as well as suggest some future directions that postcolonial medieval scholarship might productively take, particularly in its intersections with comparative literature and as these might impact the question of how we train future generations of medievalists.

Orientalism, Nationhood, Insularity

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* opened up new areas of inquiry when it was published almost a decade ago. To my mind the most important contribution in the collection is Susan Conklin Akbari's "From Due East to True North: Orientalism and Orientation" (19–34), an essay that persuasively questions the historical narrative that underpins Said's influential notion of "Orientalism." For Said, a particular technology of knowledge about the "Orient" was constitutive of European identities from the late eighteenth century onwards, while also being an important discursive instrument in the imposition of European hegemony in the colonial and postcolonial periods. Akbari suggests, however, that had Said engaged more with the Middle Ages he might have revised or at least nuanced his account of Orientalism's origins.

For Said, "the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it a reality and presence in and for the West" (5). Thus places such as North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia were "orientalized" by the West in a "system of ideas" that started to congeal, quite specifically, in "the late 1840s" (Said 6). This is not to say that Said never mentions earlier attitudes towards "the Orient," but, apart from his detailed examination of some specific elements of the immediate prehistory of Orientalism (for example, Napoleon in Egypt), references to earlier material, including medieval material, are fleeting. For Said, "modern Orientalism . . . embodies a systematic discipline of *accumulation*," whereas what came before was merely "precolonial awareness" (123). Although it is of course pointless to make impossible demands of theorists and cultural historians such as Said, who cannot possibly know everything, this is nonetheless a rather blatant instance of the Middle Ages being used implicitly as a foil to modernity (unsurprisingly, given Said's debt to Foucault), and a medievalist has to ask how much these inspiring, brilliant theorists actually knew about the 900 years they imply were but an ellipsis of history. For there was a vast tradition of accumulated and systematized knowledge about the Orient throughout the European Middle Ages, in Latin and every vernacular language (articulated in immensely popular, ubiquitous texts such as the many Alexander romances, Marco Polo's *Divisement du Monde*, John Mandeville's *Livre des merveilles du monde*, and numerous encyclopedias). Furthermore, as Akbari succinctly puts it, the failure on Said's part to engage in any detail with the Crusades and their legacy is to say the least a "peculiar omission" (19).

The main interest of Akbari's essay, however, is her examination of the history of the notion of the "Orient" in the Middle Ages. Whereas medieval *mappaemundi* show four cardinal directions, opposing *oriens* to *occidens*, but always with *oriens* on top, the world is more importantly divided into three parts: Europe, Africa, and Asia. This tripartite division of the world invariably gives precedence to Asia: thus the well-known T/O maps represent the world as a circle divided into three unequal parts by a "T" (a semi-circle over two quarters); the arms and intersection of the "T" represent the Mediterranean (situated, as its etymology suggests, at the center of the world, with Jerusalem at its center); above the Mediterranean, occupying fully half the world, is Asia, and below it Europe and Africa. For Akbari, this tripartite conception of the world on the one hand privileged "Oriens" (the direction of Jerusalem and the Holy Land), and on the other was not only more sophisticated than the binary structure imposed by "Orientalism" but also more complex than mere "precolonial awareness." She argues that a pivotal moment comes in the fourteenth century, when the notion of "the Occident" begins to be privileged, both conceptually and topographically, while maps start to be oriented along a north/south rather than east/west axis, thereby privileging the perspective of the subject of knowledge over a sacred object. Thus the idea of the West is a retroactive formation from the idea of the Orient. For Akbari, if "the Orient is continually in the process of being re-formed," the Occident "was born just yesterday" (31).

Akbari effectively identifies a blind-spot in Said's thinking about "Orientalism" by approaching his work with medieval culture in mind, but she also illuminates medieval culture by showing that medieval discourses about the Orient are neither unchanging nor innocent of what she calls "the imperative of conquest" (21): Jerusalem, the beginning of the "Oriens," was after all significant throughout the period primarily because it had been won "back" or, alternatively, "lost."

If I have dwelt on Akbari's essay in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, this is not because I think hers is the only chapter worth reading, nor is she the only contributor to engage interestingly with postcolonial theory. For instance, Kathleen Biddick's "Coming out of Exile: Dante on the Orient Express" (35–52) and Kathleen Davis's fine "Time Behind the Veil: the Media, the Middle Ages, and Orientalism Now" (105–22) also work creatively with Said's blind-spots. Furthermore, several other essays are thought-provoking and elegant: I think particularly of those by Glen Burger, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, and Steven Kruger. But I nonetheless find *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* a frustrating read, largely for reasons that Cohen himself obliquely acknowledges in his introduction when he writes, "Although England looms disproportionately large in the shared critical imaginary of this volume, this imbalance was a deliberate choice, accomplished because England has such a tight grip on the critical imaginary of North American medievalists (and postcolonial theorists)" (8).

It is hardly novel to lament the Anglophone and North American bias of postcolonial scholarship, and in any case, as Cohen no doubt realized, the Anglocentrism of *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* was something of a self-fulfilling prophesy given that thirteen of the fourteen contributors are professors of English in North American universities. But it is nonetheless striking that eight chapters focus on English nation-building. This gives the unfortunate impression that the main

thing a medievalist can learn about by adopting a postcolonial perspective is Englishness. It also leads to some looseness in the use of the vocabulary of colonialism and postcolonial theory. For instance, I am tempted to side with Spiegel's scepticism when John Bowers discusses the relationship between French and English in post-1066 Britain in terms of colonialism, asserting thereby that Chaucer is a postcolonial writer, whose "decolonizing project" is "English itself" (54); or when Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Patricia Clare Ingham cast England's incursions into Wales and Ireland in colonial terms; or when the "virtual Jew" is taken by Sylvia Tomasch to be a marker, after the expulsion of Jews in 1290, of "England's colonial past" (244). Some extremely interesting insights are offered in all these essays, but as Robert Bartlett makes clear in his seminal *The Making of Europe* (167–96) certain "cultural symptoms of colonialism" need to be present for it to be useful to discuss medieval phenomena in such terms (185). Whereas the expansion of the Normans into England after 1066 and the subsequent moves of the Anglo-Norman aristocracy on Wales and Ireland are part of the same general expansion of the Frankish "aristocratic diaspora" that Bartlett describes (24–59), seeking to take over a neighboring territory with a shared Latinity, a shared religion, and shared borders (even if maritime) is not analogous to implanting "small immigrant élites with close ties to the metropolis" in distant lands, amid "large discontented populations of a different language and religious affiliation" (Bartlett 185), as was the case with German settlements in the Eastern Baltic, the Crusading states, and Italian trading posts in the Middle East or the Black Sea. Similarly, French culture so imbues insular culture from the twelfth century to the end of the fifteenth, and insular texts in French are so central to the "French" literary tradition, that even if Chaucer is clearly crucial in the emergence of a certain type of English as a literary language, this does not necessarily mean that he "struck at the heart of francophone culture," as Bowers puts it (54). Indeed, one could equally argue that he became an agent of its dissemination to a wider (Anglophone) audience. Finally, if the "virtual Jew" clearly plays a constitutive role in the formation of national identity, as Tomasch suggests, this is hardly unique to England. The topic, it seems to me, cries out for a more comparative approach.

The two other edited volumes under review here, *Postcolonial Moves* and *Postcolonial Approaches*, attenuate but do not entirely eradicate this apparent preoccupation with English nationhood. Contributions on non-insular texts and on non-Anglophone scholarly traditions certainly suggest a more comparative approach, while the editors' theoretical reflections usefully stress (in the case of *Postcolonial Moves*) the important contribution medievalists can make to unpacking modern ideas about periodization, or (in the case of *Postcolonial Approaches*) the importance of translation/*translatio* in the Middle Ages "as a mechanism of and metaphor for cultures in contact, confrontation, and competition" (10). However, despite the many excellent contributions to these volumes (for instance from Michelle R. Warren in both volumes, Seth Lerer, Sharon Kinoshita, Alfred Hiatt, Suzanne Conklin Akbari, and Roland Greene), it is the reader who must infer a comparative approach. Curiously, given the insistence on "cultures in contact" or the "history of relations between Europe's dominant cultures and its linguistic minorities" (*Postcolonial Moves* 7), almost all the contributions on literary texts

work within the framework of a single linguistic/literary tradition, some describing the representation of one culture by another, but rarely the phenomenon of contact per se.

If postcolonial theory and scholarship has a commitment to "destabilize hegemonic identities" and to "decenter Europe" (*The Postcolonial Middle Ages* 7), the danger here is that postcolonial scholarship on the Middle Ages ends up reifying one of the very categories it should seek to question or, at the very least, to historicize more rigorously: namely, nationhood. Indeed, this is crucial in the medieval literary context, given that most texts were produced in a multilingual, necessarily multicultural, environment, that most authors read and some wrote in "foreign" languages, and that texts in some languages (Latin, French, and Italian for example) circulated in ways that transcend the boundaries of modern nation states and modern national literary traditions, precisely because these had yet to come into being as we know them. To understand medieval European culture (even without addressing the question of Europe's relation to Asia and Africa), a *comparative* perspective is vital, but the training of most medievalists within disciplinary structures that are largely determined by modern national languages and literatures means that little scholarship ranges beyond the confines of one literary tradition.

It is perhaps invidious for a modern linguist to single out Anglophone Anglocentric Middle English scholarship for its insularity, since this problem undoubtedly also affects other scholarly traditions. But the risk here is not only of misrepresenting medieval culture but also of performing a quite specific political sleight of hand in that the hegemony of English and of an Anglo-centric point of view in the North American and British academy and/or in its postcolonial criticism may be acknowledged (as with Cohen), but without its implications really being addressed. Geraldine Heng's sometimes brilliant *Empire of Magic* is perhaps a case in point.

One of the central arguments of *Empire of Magic* concerns cannibalism (though the topic seems less central to the last two chapters). To quote the cover blurb, "Drawing on feminist and gender theory and cultural analyses of race, class, religion, and colonialism, Geraldine Heng argues that romance arose in the twelfth century as a response to the trauma and horror of taboo acts—in particular the cannibalism committed by crusaders on the bodies of Muslim enemies in Syria during the first crusade." Heng's analysis of one record of this cannibalism—in the Middle English romance *Richard Coer de Lyon*—is fascinating, thought-provoking, and highly suggestive. She shows, with a good deal of nuance and insight, how the crusaders, fearful of a menacing other they do not understand, "gleefully gobble up the Islamic Levantine enemy" (9) and how this becomes constitutive in the formation of a communal identity. More contentiously, she argues that this traumatic act, fleetingly remembered only to be repressed, is constitutive of romance as a genre, which in turn is repeatedly identified as oriented towards English nationhood: "Even as the genre conveys the changing impulses of empire, the romances considered by *Empire of Magic* also offer romance, simultaneously and in tandem as a genre of *the nation*. . . . Cumulatively, the Latin, French, and Middle English romances examined offer the resources of romance, in sum, as a genre of the English nation in the Middle Ages" (6–7).

Although these claims emerge from a discussion of only a handful of "English" texts (Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae, Richard Coer de Lyon*, the alliterative *Morte Arthure, The Man of Law's Tale*, Mandeville's *Travels*), they are repeatedly expanded so as to pertain to romance as a genre, which was of course a vast pan-European phenomenon that cannot possibly be characterized so sweepingly. Moreover, two of these texts—the *Historia* and the *Travels*—are not really romances, unless one adopts such a catch-all definition of romance as to empty the term of any generic specificity, and their manuscript traditions certainly suggest they were not necessarily read as romances in the Middle Ages (see Crick 218–26; Deluz 36–58). Heng is surely right that "there is a fringe of indecision" regarding the generic boundaries of romance, but musing that it is "as if we intuitively know what romances are, and are not" in order to ask rhetorically whether "*geography* and *place* [can] be a subject of romance" (1) is hardly convincing when the proposition implied by this rhetorical question seamlessly becomes the basis on which the argument then proceeds. Later she refers enigmatically to an "evolving definition of romance" as "fantastical narrative," which will "complicate as [her] argument develops" (310 n. 2), but, because the chapters of *Empire of Magic* are largely discrete and the book has no conclusion, this reader at least was left none the wiser as to the precise nature of the definition.

Another crucial question is how "English" are the texts examined by Heng? Although reference to some non-English material is made in notes (on p. 7 Heng states that she has examined several "French romances," but without identifying them), it is surprising that there is no discussion of the European context in which some of the material belongs. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, for example, survives in several hundred manuscripts and had a significant continental dissemination (see Crick, particularly 196–217), a fact which suggests it can hardly be viewed simply as "English." Bracketing off a supposed lost French source for *Richard Coer de Lyon* may well be a legitimate critical strategy (333–34 n. 1), since (as Heng notes) the text explicitly vindicates its use of English as a populist move (105) and evinces a certain amount of Francophobia (109). However, similarly relegating to a note a brief allusion to the *Morte*'s relation to its French sources in order to acknowledge its own propensity for "linguistic imports" seems too rapid a move, particularly since it helps Heng to represent the *Morte* itself as "a blatant and shameless cannibal" (116 and 360 n. 2). Cannibalism, it would seem, no longer simply figures a neocolonial act of racial, political, and religious aggression *in the text*; it has become in addition a *critical* metaphor for multilingual intertextuality. But the two are hardly commensurate. Finally, Mandeville's *Travels* was, as Heng admits, "first written in French" (423 n. 2), and one might add that the text itself claims to have been written by someone who had not lived in England for many years. Yet Heng tellingly chooses to examine a Middle English translation (the so-called Egerton version) that survives in just one manuscript, despite the fact that fourteen of the twenty-five manuscripts of what may be the earliest redaction (the "insular" version in French) are inflected by Anglo-Norman French and copied either in England or by English hands (see Deluz 36–58). In the case of longer quotations from Egerton, Heng does cite corresponding passages from both an Anglo-Norman and a French redaction in the notes, but this procedure in itself effectively removes the multilingualism of "multilingual late-medieval England" (356 n. 73) from the main text of her own analysis.

Meanwhile, Heng's Anglo-centric outlook means that the ideological bogeyman of English nationhood at which she repeatedly tilts is endlessly placed center stage. The circularity of this procedure leaves many questions unanswered. Nowhere, for instance, does she consider why continental French authors and readers might have been so interested in what she takes to be questions of *English* nationhood or explore how the admittedly fascinating but in fact quite marginal references to cannibalism in some romances might relate to other accounts of cannibalism in medieval culture (accounts which are largely relegated to notes) or to more widely disseminated models of romance. And why, if English readers were so committed to English as a marker of national identity and conversely so hostile to French (105–06), did so many of them go on enjoying texts in French throughout the Middle Ages? There may well be a specific English articulation to the questions Heng examines in some of the texts she discusses, but identifying this securely without considering the broader context is hardly possible.

The insularity that troubles me is not confined to the object of study. Although the vast and intimidating scholarly apparatus of *Empire of Magic* (159 pages of tightly packed, frequently discursive notes and 31 pages of bibliography in a 500-page book) leaves me not completely confident about the accuracy of the following observations, it nonetheless seems that Heng (like many in the Anglophone academy) works almost exclusively within an Anglophone scholarly environment. Non-Anglophone theorists and historians are cited in translation; non-Anglophone medieval texts are almost always cited either in translation or from Anglophone editions with parallel translations. Aside from critical editions, I find only four items in the bibliography not in English, and two of these are in fact by Anglophone scholars and one (by Erich Köhler) is (I think) only cited in a long list of scholars representative of "the ongoing discussion of romance" (310 n. 2). Heng thus neglects completely the vast body of scholarship on romance in languages other than English. Furthermore, this scholarly tunnel vision seems to extend in one instance at least even to the Anglophone tradition, since Heng overlooks two important articles in English (Tattersall and Guzman) on cannibalism in medieval texts contemporary with those she discusses, perhaps because they are not concerned directly with insular Latin or Middle English texts.

A postcolonial perspective surely highlights the imperative to look outwards, to see the relation of the object of study to the broader context, to resist cultural and scholarly insularity. Work on the construction of English or British nationhood is undoubtedly important, but it is nonetheless curious (and worthy of critical reflection) that it should apparently have become such a "postcolonial" obsession for medievalists. For the Middle Ages of all periods, we need to move outside the Anglophone world if our own intellectual moves are to avoid uncannily replicating the very colonial gestures we seek to critique.

Nationhood, Hybridity, Broader Perspectives

Anglophone scholars working on non-Anglophone cultures are perhaps likelier to take a broader perspective, if only for disciplinary reasons. So do recent publications in French studies—such as Sharon Kinoshita's *Medieval Boundaries* and Sylvia Huot's *Postcolonial Fictions*—in fact redress the problems that arise with some Anglo-centric criticism?

Readers of Huot's books can only admire her ability to reinvent herself intellectually every few years so persuasively and elegantly. After relaunching manuscript studies, engaging with musicology, and mastering psychoanalytic criticism, with *Postcolonial Fictions* she becomes, at a stroke, a leading figure in postcolonial medievalism. The book is devoted to one vast, but largely unknown, text: the Middle French prose romance *Perceforest.* Originally completed c.1340–44, but apparently begun under the patronage of William I, Count of Hainaut, Holland, and Zeeland (d.1337), *Perceforest* is strongly influenced by earlier prose cycles such as the *Lancelot-Grail* and *Tristan*, as well as by the Alexander romance tradition, medieval historiography, and travel writing. It offers a very substantial supplement to the traditional history of a British nation that owes its origins to *translatio studii et imperii*, in particular to the arrival of Trojans and then Romans, who prepare the way for Arthur, the rest being, as it were, history. *Perceforest* narrates a previously unknown (fictitious) episode of British history in which, following a successful invasion by Alexander the Great, Britain was ruled by Greek kings—notably the eponymous hero—whose implantation of chivalry in the realm determined its destiny even more decisively than the efforts of other arrivals, particularly since the Trojans have, by the time the new Greek regime is established, gone native. This also represents a significant departure in relation to the Alexander tradition, which does not narrate his conquest of Europe, even though it alludes to his hegemony over it, concentrating rather exclusively on his domination of Africa and Asia. Bringing Britain explicitly into Alexander's orbit thus also brings the West into contact with the exotic Orient, and *Perceforest* is awash with exotica such as giants, dragons, and hybrid creatures, all of which are a staple feature of both Arthurian and Alexander romances.

It is hard to do justice here to Huot's subtle analysis of a text that is largely virgin territory for modern criticism. Indeed, if one ambition of postcolonial literary criticism is the broadening of traditional canons and the introduction of new texts into critical debates, on these grounds alone *Postcolonial Fictions* is a triumph of the genre. Central to Huot's argument is Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity: she shows how in *Perceforest* the greatness of Britain is mythologized as the result of a cross-cultural, neocolonial encounter that is eroticized as the Greek conquerors regenerate the political order of the degenerate, gone-native Trojans by seducing their women. Love thus becomes a mystification of interracial conquest. For Huot, part of the interest of *Perceforest* lies then in the way the indigenous Britons (or degenerate Trojans), as the Greeks find them, are at once wholly foreign and uncannily familiar—in Bhabha's terms, "a difference that is almost total but not quite" (qtd. in Huot 40). The Greeks are thus simultaneously imposing culture on Britain and restoring it (39), while miscegenation is both a destructive force and the "only hope for salvation" (214). Not only are the parallels with modern colonial situations clear, but also, as Huot suggests, "The British kingdoms established by Alexander correspond to the model of medieval colonialism identified by Robert Bartlett" (7). Part of the import of this, especially when one considers early modern (fantasmic) descriptions of the indigenous peoples of the New World welcoming their conquerors as a civilizing force, is that "European expectations about 'first encounters' with 'savages' were shaped by a long tradition of literary depictions" (43).

This detailed and persuasive close-reading of *Perceforest* unquestionably demonstrates "continuity between medieval and early modern discourses of cultural difference, conquest and empire" (5). In so doing, it challenges modern postcolonial historical narratives, which see hybridity as "a problematic of colonial representation" (Bhahba 114), which is to say of the modern colonial and postcolonial era, since "postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority with the modern world order" (171). There is undeniably a historical specificity to modern colonialism and its aftermath, but it perhaps needs to be defined more carefully and its continuities with the past better understood. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen says in his *Medieval Identity Machines,* "there is nothing especially recent about the 'differential,' often disadvantaged histories of nations, races, social antagonism, and irreducible difference [Bhabha] describes" (19), and *Postcolonial Fictions* implicitly offers an important response to Cohen's call for a broader historical understanding of hybridity and other colonial and/or postcolonial phenomena.

Although Huot's focus throughout *Postcolonial Fictions* is on reading the text, precisely because her arguments also engage so interestingly with the historical claims of postcolonial theory I felt cheated of a more thorough-going historical engagement with the context of the composition, reception, and transmission of *Perceforest* itself. These are briefly sketched in the first few pages (1–5), but returned to thereafter only sporadically (for instance 178–81). *Perceforest,* Huot tells us, "plays most immediately to medieval English dreams of presiding over a pan-British kingdom" (5), a kingdom which would include *all* the British Isles and which "no doubt sat comfortably with the text's Anglo-Norman audience" (5). But if, as Huot suggests, the text "supported the imperial ambitions of the Plantagenets" (5), the reasons for its enduring popularity several hundred years later are less clear. Indeed, all four manuscripts date from the mid- or late-fifteenth century, and one of its modern editors is convinced that the entire surviving text should be viewed as a fairly thorough-going Burgundian fifteenth-century *remaniement* of a lost fourteenth-century original (Roussineau, *quatrième partie* xix–xx and *première partie* ix–xlvi, the second of which of course postdates *Postcolonial Fictions*); subsequently, *Perceforest* went into print in French, was the source of an Elizabethan play, and was translated in the sixteenth century into Italian and Spanish. Thus, as Huot suggests, "the text had a cultural currency as the great Western European powers entered the era of global exploration and exploitation, though to what extent it would have been read as relevant to these activities is difficult to say" (5).

If, as scholarship suggests, the text was indeed begun under the patronage of William I of Hainaut and completed c. 1340–44, this situates it originally on an interesting frontier—geographically, politically, and linguistically—between England, France, and the Holy Roman Emperor: as Huot notes, William married his daughter to Edward III of England and also intervened decisively in English politics, but it is surely also significant that he himself was married to the king of France's sister and that he married another of his daughters to the Holy Roman Emperor. The possible ideological appeal of *Perceforest* to the Plantagenets and in England generally is easy enough to see, but what then was its appeal in Flanders,

an area in expansive mode at the time of its composition and not so much aligned with England as poised between three larger powers? Huot suggests that "the evidence points to a strong *local* interest in the Alexander legend during the first half of the fourteenth century" (2; my emphasis) but does not really explain what the *local* interest of *Perceforest* might have been. Indeed, if the text is aligned with English interests in the early fourteenth century because it mythologizes the origins of a pan-British identity, how are we to explain its popularity in Flanders, North Eastern France, and Burgundy from the mid-fifteenth century onwards (see Taylor, 11–14 and 45–50), since its transmission and its language offer scant evidence of contemporary dissemination in England (even though Edward IV is thought to have owned a copy [Huot 180])? And what are we to make of the text's rather imprecise notions of English geography (see Taylor 23)? Furthermore, if the use of French by the author or authors of *Perceforest* is in some respects unexceptionable, since French was widely used as a literary language outside "France," and since both Flanders and Burgundy were francophone, this is not to say that the French language did not bear political and cultural freight that exceeds the vague notion of "literary prestige" often pedalled in histories of French literature. In short, I would like to have been told more about the text's ideological valence in specific instances and locations of transmission, as well as the possible dissonance between the text's provenance and its subject matter.

The provenance of *Perceforest* from Flanders (or Burgundy) resonates interestingly with Sharon Kinoshita's opening observation in *Medieval Boundaries* about her project's inception, which "began with the curious realization that many of the best-known works of medieval French literature take place on or beyond the borders of 'France' or even the French-speaking world" (1). Kinoshita thus reads a series of important texts set on these borders, which in some instances are also the borders of Europe itself: the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Prise d'Orange, Floire et Blancheflor,* the *Lais* of Marie de France, Robert de Clari's *Conquête de Constantinople, La Fille du Comte de Pontieu*, and finally the Occitan *Chanson de la Croisade Albigeoise.* She demonstrates conclusively that if you take some of the foundational texts of Old French literature out of the nationalistic literary histories into which they were written in the nineteenth century, they do not so much define France, French culture, and a French national identity (as, for instance, is often suggested in traditional readings of the *Roland*) as they show how fluid, malleable, and porous cultural borders in fact were. Some parts of *Medieval Boundaries* were already well known through previously published articles, but the ensemble makes for a genuinely revisionary argument.

Several of Kinoshita's chapters are particularly strong at demonstrating how texts that had previously been read as inscribing confrontation between Christians and Muslims on the southern and south-eastern fringes of Europe (the *Roland*, the *Prise, Floire*, the *Conquête*, and *La Fille du Comte de Pontieu*) may be reread as inscribing the constant cultural, material, and sexual commerce that took place between them. The Iberian peninsula of several of these texts is a case in point, since even the *Roland* suggests that Christians and Muslims were just as likely to negotiate and coexist with each other as they were to go into battle.

In order to demonstrate the ubiquitous material presence of the Orient in Western Europe (on which, see also Burns), Kinoshita opens with a discussion

of the famous "Eleanor vase," a crystal vessel of Persian origin brought to France by Eleanor of Aquitaine as a wedding gift for Louis VII in 1137. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries in fact saw a massive increase in contact between Christendom and the Muslim world, in part because of the Crusades, but also as a result of the greatly improved and highly sophisticated trade networks criss-crossing the Mediterranean. Indeed, for the relatively short duration of the so-called *pax mongolica* (from c.1250 to the 1340s), these networks extended as far East as China and Indochina. The literary texts examined by Kinoshita show the immediacy and extent of the presence in Europe's cultural imaginary of North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. And if their representation of otherness is inflected by the legendary North Africa and Asia of Alexander romances, they also bear the traces of real cross-cultural encounters, witnessing their import even in the heart of Europe. A different picture emerges here from the one drawn by Heng, in which the aggressive yet defensive and xenophobic European's only real option is to "gobble up" the cultural other.

A further important difference between Kinoshita's and Heng's approaches comes with their treatment of nationalism and national mythology. In my view, one of *Medieval Boundaries*' strengths is that while not neglecting proto-nationalistic tendencies in the texts she discusses, Kinoshita shows how they are also committed to (and sometimes perhaps constitutive of) a trans-national, pan-European identity. For it is not the French (or at least not just the French) who attack the other in the *Roland*, the *Prise*, or the *Conquête*, but rather the Franks, a term connoting *within* Western Europe a broader community of peoples (those formerly subject to the Carolingian empire) and *outside* Europe Europeans generally. Indeed, as already noted, the expansion and redefinition of Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was essentially achieved through the creation of a *Frankish* aristocratic diaspora (Bartlett 24–59). What is at issue in these texts, then, is the emergence of a Christian identity, implicitly European, defined in relation to a cultural other with whom contact is essential, yet troubling, given that the divisions in the supposedly unified Frankish world were hard to ignore, as were the other's cultural sophistication and superior material or technological wealth. It is no accident that set-backs in conflicts with Muslims in literary texts are more likely to be attributed to betrayal by one of one's own than to the enemy's military superiority or that in some texts vulnerable heroes and heroines are rescued or harbored by Saracens. It is as if encounters with others do not simply project an idealized image of the united "Franks"; they also hold up an unflattering mirror that focuses on the blemishes and potential fault lines in this image.

This is not to say that I have no reservations about Kinoshita's argument. For instance, if her teasing out of traces of Welsh-Norman tensions in Marie de France's *Lais* is compelling, as already noted, I do not think that the cultural contact produced by the expansion of the Anglo-Norman aristocracy into the contiguous Celtic world is commensurate with that produced in places such as Spain or the Eastern Mediterranean, where knights come from far afield to fight in a land and on a frontier that are essentially foreign. For similar reasons, I am not persuaded by the inclusion of the *Chanson de la Croisade Albigeoise* in this study, since the conflicts between the Northern French and the Occitanians are of a different order from the hostilities between Christians and Muslims, whatever the analogies

suggested by the use of the term "Crusade." Finally, as with Huot's *Postcolonial Fictions*, I am left with some unanswered questions about manuscripts, transmission, readership, and language.

It is disappointing, for instance, that Kinoshita, like almost all critics before her, limits her reading of the *Roland* to the so-called Oxford version. Clearly the Oxford *Roland* warrants close attention in the context of her argument, precisely because it has been so foundational in the dominant post-nineteenth-century nationalist articulation of French literary history and because the manuscript is of Anglo-Norman provenance and therefore hardly "French" at all. Yet the *remaniements* the text undergoes not just for transmission in France itself, but more importantly in Italy, would surely also have provided her with a mass of material worthy of consideration. Traditional literary history has largely occluded the significant body of Franco-Italian literature, since it is neither "French" nor "Italian" and thus disrupts traditional alignments between what are thought to be national languages and literatures, while its hybridized language remains relatively unexplored by philologists. But surely the fact that three of the *Roland*'s seven manuscripts belong to this tradition is worthy of comment and reflection, given the tradition's connections with the Francophone diaspora in the Eastern Mediterranean and its penchant for narratives that focus on cultural contact between Christian and Saracens or what Juliann Vitullo calls "cultural cross-dressing" (52). Despite its many outstanding qualities, there is thus in *Medieval Boundaries* perhaps a residual attachment to an alignment of "French literature" with the canon as traditionally construed by national literary histories (as opposed to its Italian and Eastern Mediterranean inflections). A return to manuscripts and specific questions about the dissemination of texts in particular locations might unpick further the "taxonomies of late-nineteenth-century official culture" and the "conventional orientalizing tropes deployed by an unreflective strain of late-twentieth-century postcolonial medievalism" (236) against which Kinoshita so rightly reacts.

Postcolonial Futures for the Middle Ages?

I have implicitly been sketching here a blueprint for postcolonial medieval studies: they need to work outside the framework of a single literary tradition, since few texts in the Middle Ages were produced solely within the context of a single literary tradition; they need therefore to work across different languages and to understand the dissemination and use of different languages in the Middle Ages; they thus need also to return to manuscripts and/or to revise the canon, rather than rely on critical editions produced in a tradition of modern national literary histories that is bound to occlude important evidence of cultural contact and hybridities. But postcolonial medieval studies also need theoretical sophistication in that the insights afforded by postcolonial theory give us a better understanding of how "Europe" came into being, how it related to the rest of the world, and how the medieval history of contact between Europe and Asia or Africa is in fact an important element of the longer history of which colonialism and postcolonialism are part. With few young people in the Anglo-Saxon world now graduating with the background in Latin and several modern languages that might

have been expected several generations ago, training as a medievalist today is not for the faint-hearted, particularly given the training in critical theory we now also expect of our graduate students. But however much my blueprint for post-colonial medieval studies sounds like a rather traditional and retrograde model of medieval studies, I would like nonetheless to make a pitch for giving higher priority to the traditional skills in which medievalists were trained (in languages, philology, codicology, and paleography), since without them we remain hide-bound by our own, largely monolingual, culture, as well as by the scholarship of past generations, rather than being able to build creatively but securely upon that scholarship.

There are some parts of the world where these skills have not been forgotten, and where scholarly attention to material that is of great interest to postcolonial critics is vibrant. But what is then striking when one peruses the plethora of recent publications in French, German, and Italian on Marco Polo and Mande-ville (both of whose texts were translated into almost every European language as well as Latin and proved highly influential for Columbus and therefore for the beginnings of modern colonialism), medieval multilingualism, French and other romance languages in the Levant, Franco-Italian, and medieval travel writing (to run through only the topics where I am familiar with recent bibliography) is the almost total lack of any reference to postcolonial theory. To take but one striking example: the volume *Medioevo Romanzo e Orientale: il viaggio nelle letterature romanze e orientali*, a 789-page book published in 2006, with more than 40 papers from a conference held in 2003, almost all concerning Oriental travel on the part of Europeans, indexes just three references to Said (two in the same paper) and no references to Bhabha, Robert Young, Gayatri Spivak, and so on. One might con-clude either that postcolonial theory is an exclusively Anglophone concern and largely anachronistic for medievalists, or that the Italian scholarship recorded in this volume (largely devoted to philology in the broadest sense of the term) is so seriously retrograde and blinkered as to be of no interest to Anglophone schol-ars working with postcolonial theory. But surely there is a cultural gap here that is crying out for exploration. Likewise, might not both parties have something to learn from enacting a few cultural encounters of their own, rather than simply studying those of the past?

The final three books I discuss briefly here—David Wallace's *Premodern Places*, Karla Mallette's *The Kingdom of Sicily*, and Michael Uebel's *Ecstatic Transformations*— seem to me to indicate productive ways forward for medieval postcolonial schol-arship, precisely because of the comparative approach each adopts, as well as the attention, in Wallace and Mallette at least, to specific places and instances of cul-tural encounter.

Indeed, reading some parts of each of these very different books left me with a real sense of excitement. The chapters on Genoa and the Canary Islands in *Premodern Places*, for instance, demonstrate direct (but not seamless) continuity between "certain discursive and material practices of slaving" (189) in the medi-eval, early modern, and modern periods, while also suggesting that to understand Columbus and the outlook of many sixteenth-century colonizers in the Carib-bean one needs to understand the culture of medieval Mediterranean merchants, since this is essentially what they were. Whereas Wallace studies five different

sites of cultural encounter in the later Middle Ages, Mallette offers a more detailed study of just one, Sicily, which in the Middle Ages produced and/or transmitted simultaneously texts in Arabic, Latin, Greek, and various Romance languages. Often vaunted as a cultural melting pot, Sicily was colonized first by Arabs, then by French-speaking Normans. Because literary texts from Sicily are usually strictly segregated by language and discussed in relation to the literary traditions associated with the language in question, rather than studied comparatively in relation to each other, Mallette's is the first literary history in English of medieval Sicily. Her account of how different cultures co-existed in the same colonial space is quite simply fascinating, though she makes light of the daunting linguistic demands a project such as hers makes on a single scholar. How many people really have the language skills to follow in her footsteps? Finally, Uebel's approach is implicitly pan-European in that his book offers an analysis of a single text that had a pan-European dissemination over a period of several hundred years, the twelfth-century *Letter of Prester John*, which purports to be a missive to a beleaguered Christendom from a mythical Christian potentate in the Far East. Uebel shows how the *Letter* organizes knowledge of the East, offering a model of the Other (which he couches in Lacanian terms) that leaves the European subject poised between desire and anxiety.

However, each of these books also leaves me with the sense that we are only just beginning to scratch the surface of what we can know and think about the "Postcolonial Middle Ages." For instance, the slave trade in Genoa and the Canaries and the sugar plantations of the Canaries that Wallace discusses were part of much larger trade networks that remain comparatively under-researched historically, and there has been little or no consideration of their implications for literary texts thus far. Some of Wallace's sources (for example, see Origo) tantalizingly refer to medieval European slave-markets other than those in Italy (for instance in the ports of Southern France and Spain), but how much do we literary scholars know about them and their resonance in literary texts? *Premodern Places* thus in some respects feels like the beginning rather than the end of an investigation.

Mallette's work likewise raises questions about hybridity she does not really address. Conceding that there is no "*inductive* argument" for creolization in Sicily (which is to say no evidence), she goes on to reflect on the advantages of proposing a "*deductive* argument in favor of creolization, citing the analogical evidence of parallel regions with a compound linguistic and literary tradition" (107–08). But working with the evidence (rather than deducing arguments *ex silentio*) one might more constructively ask why a culture that produced such distinct, rich (and surviving) hybrid idioms in art and architecture should have kept its literary languages so resolutely separate, particularly since, as Mallette puts it, "the colonial situation freights languages with ideological significance" (102). Mallette implicitly (and rightly) critiques the notion of hybridity by suggesting that "It is appropriate to talk about cross-cultural borrowings and cross-cultural competitions only when there is a clearly defined distinction between two cultures" (123), yet it would appear (according to her own account) that one thing medieval Sicily's hybridized society did was to maintain clear distinctions between different languages. Rather than working with analogies to comparable situations, one might perhaps more usefully ask: what makes Sicily different? Hybridity, after all, as

Mallette herself acknowledges, may instantiate and harden distinctions, as well as dissolve them.

Finally, Uebel takes a text with a pan-European dissemination, but then effectively limits his analysis to one Latin version of it. Despite scattered remarks made in passing (e.g. 96–97, 143, 215 n. 64) and the marking of interpolations in his own translation of what he calls the "original," he neglects to consider in any detail the way the text is reworked through time, though interpolations, through the numerous vernacular translations (many of which are readily available; see, for example, Gosman), through adaptations, or constantly resituated through its inclusion in diverse manuscript compilations. His readings of the "original" letter are sometimes stunningly incisive, but his "one-size-fits-all" approach is nonetheless a missed opportunity.

There are a variety of ways in which the Middle Ages can be "postcolonial": situations, discourses, and phenomena we now identify as "colonial" or indeed "postcolonial" certainly arise in the medieval period and ought to be viewed as an important part of a longer postcolonial history of colonialism, however alert we need to remain to historical differences between the modern and premodern worlds. We can also benefit simply from looking at the Middle Ages from a postcolonial perspective, since it enables us to see more clearly things that were less visible or less in focus using other critical approaches. Postcolonial medieval studies are thus opening up for us fields of inquiry into which we have yet fully to venture, territories populated by unfamiliar medieval peoples, languages, and cultures of many different stripes.

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