



Reviews

ANANYA JAHANARA KABIR and DEANNE WILLIAMS, eds. *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp.xii, 298. ISBN: 978-0-521-8273-7. \$80.

The eleven essays collected in this volume cohere principally around an insight that might seem obvious in hindsight but which is no less profound for its obviousness: that postcolonial approaches to the European Middle Ages are not anachronistic, as some critics have complained, because the Middle Ages were, by virtue of the fact that they were inaugurated by the fall of the Roman Empire, in fact, already postcolonial. They come *after* empire; indeed the very word 'colonial,' as Seth Lerer points out, derives from the Latin *colonia*, for the sorts of military settlements that dotted the Roman empire (79). This audacious move takes back theory for the Middle Ages, demonstrating that medievalists need not be content merely to apologize meekly for applying theory 'anachronistically' to their subject but, as Bruce Holsinger argues in a 2002 *Speculum* article, can confront the presentist bias of contemporary theory, recognizing and building upon the literally groundbreaking work of medievalists who have always figured (often invisibly) in the development of literary theories, including postcolonialism. Suddenly everything old is new again; some very old-fashioned medieval scholarship begins to look quite novel. Contributors to this volume, stripping away the stereotypes that have clung, like so many barnacles, to medieval studies, uncover in everything from the *Trés riches heures* of the Duke de Berry, Anglo-Saxon poetry, maps, John Gower, Alexander romances, Romance philology, and Fernando de Roja readings that challenge 'western myths of origins, history, identity, and temporality' (2).

And yet, two questions must necessarily follow from this insight into medieval postcolonialism. The first concerns the ways in which this postcolonialism differs from that which followed the end of European empires after World War II. What balance ought we to strike between acknowledging their similarities and cataloguing their differences? Collectively, the essays tackle this question admirably, most explicitly in Ananya Jahanara Kabir's reading of British officials' use of medieval England as an analogy for Imperial British India, a means of 'translating' the colony's cultural strangeness, but it is a thread that appears in other essays as well. A second question asks how medievalists should go about uncovering the postcolonialism of the European Middle Ages and its continuing effects in modern Europe and its former colonies without appropriating and intellectualizing the language that postcolonial theory offers to make sense of genuine oppression. In this regard, Lerer's reading of

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Beowulf through Seamus Heaney's experience of British rule in Ireland serves as a salutary reminder of Europe's own internal colonization. Michelle Warren links the connections between Joseph Bédier's obsessions over philological origins to linguistic purity and anxieties about racial hybridity and *métissage* resulting from his experiences of 'republican colonialism' (218) on the island of Bourbon.

Noting that, within postcolonial theory, translation often figures the asymmetrical power relations of colonization, the editors draw upon the medieval trope of *translatio imperii et studii* as a means to connect the disparate essays in the volume. All are 'case studies of translation as the transfer of language, culture, and power' (7). Lerer's essay, for instance, moves from an investigation of a narrow linguistic problem of translation—how to render in modern English the Anglo-Saxon phrase 'on fagne flor' in *Beowulf*—to a meditation on what that poem's most recent translator, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, might 'carry over' to the poem from his own postcolonial Northern Ireland. The volume is full of such juxtapositions, leaps across geographical sites, temporal chasms, and disciplinary boundaries (although all but two of the contributors are affiliated with English departments): the translation of ancient Trojans into late medieval Turks in the visual arts (James G. Harper), for instance, or the Alexander romances' 'translation' of the static east-west binary into a more complex four part history mapped onto the four cardinal points of the earth (Suzanne Conklin Akbari). Material culture emerges as a significant carrier of cultural translation in everything from Anglo-Saxon *spolia* (materials plundered from Roman ruins and incorporated into medieval buildings), medieval maps, Roman mosaics, and French tapestries. In at least one essay (Deanne Williams) the activity of translation is itself translated through images of monstrosity.

To my mind, however, the defining feature of the volume is the editors' attempt to break out of the confines of academic specialization by inviting a non-medievalist, Ato Quayson, the director of African Studies at Pembroke College, Cambridge, who has written extensively on postcolonialism, to respond to the essays in an afterward. This strategy highlights the importance of bringing to a larger audience arguments for the relevance of medieval studies to current theoretical debates. As medievalists, if we hope to turn the tables on a literary theory that colonizes the medieval past, we cannot just talk to ourselves. I would like to see this kind of dialogue on an even larger scale.

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