

Cambridge University Press

0521827310 - Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures

Edited by Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

Introduction: a return to wonder

Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams

Wonder is the first of all the passions.

René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*

Any list of “wonderful” medieval European artifacts would have, somewhere near the top, the *Très riches heures* of Jean, duc de Berry, illuminated by the Limbourg brothers. One of the most famous examples of medieval manuscript illumination, the *Très riches heures* languished in obscurity until it was purchased by the Musée Condé at Chantilly in 1856. Initially received as an exotic curiosity and celebrated as one of the *primitifs françaises*, the manuscript was regarded in terms typically applied to artifacts of Africa or the Far Pacific. Now it is celebrated as a rare and precious art object: so rare that the Musée Condé has decided to remove it entirely from public exhibition and even private scholarly viewing.¹ The history of the manuscript’s reception highlights the extent to which modernity casts the medieval past as a “foreign country,” aligning it with the binaries of East and West, Europe and abroad. Nevertheless, even as the Middle Ages came to occupy the position of the “dark continent” for post-Enlightenment Europe, its alterity is capable of generating an aura that emanates especially from its material culture. We call this aura “wonder.”

By juxtaposing East and West, and past and present, readers of the *Très riches heures* imposed the preoccupations of modernity on a hapless past, its object. Their response exemplifies how the medieval past can be colonized, like a distant continent, to further the interests of modernity, and anticipates the common ground that medieval and postcolonial scholars have found in recent years. As postcolonial scholars have sought to dismantle the notions of modernity upon which colonialism was

Cambridge University Press

0521827310 - Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures

Edited by Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams*

predicated, medievalists have, in turn, challenged the binaries of medieval and modern (or early modern) that bracket off the Middle Ages, and keep it as exotic and foreign – and also as domitable – as any orientalist fantasy. As critiques of colonialism work in tandem with critiques of modernity, medieval studies and postcolonial studies have sought to undermine a series of western myths of origin, history, identity, and temporality. Our collection joins this evolving trajectory.

At the same time, by characterizing the manuscript as one of the great medieval “wonders,” we participate in a resurgence of scholarly interest in the marvels, the prodigies, and the wonders of the Middle Ages, as well as the Renaissance. As Caroline Walker Bynum puts it, wonder takes place “when the specificity, the novelty, the awe-fulness, of what our sources render up bowls us over with its complexity and its significance.”² Wonder has become a catchphrase for a scholarly response to medieval alterity that seeks neither to accommodate it to the priorities of the present, nor to bracket it off as irredeemably alien and different. Stephen Greenblatt distinguishes wonder from historical and scholarly resonance by defining it as “the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention.”³ However, this sense of an arresting encounter, and of the shock of the new and different, is often lost when the sister processes of orientalism and medievalization are demystified and deracinated. As Greenblatt asks, “How is it possible, in a time of disorientation, hatred of the other and possessiveness, to keep the capacity for wonder from being poisoned?”⁴

To answer this question, we turn to the *Très riches heures* (Fig. 1). The manuscript generates wonder by participating in a conflation of time and space that seems, at first glance, to share much with its nineteenth-century classification as *primitif*. This conflation of cultures, and of past and present, is also the manuscript’s theme. Described by Erich Auerbach as “providential time” (in contrast to the linearity of modern conceptions of time), the temporalities of medieval Christianity produce similar juxtapositions through a triadic fascination with the past (the Old Testament), the present (the birth of Christ), and the hopeful future (the New Jerusalem).⁵ Thus, the Limbourg brothers’ depictions of the life and surroundings of early fifteenth-century inhabitants of the French countryside share space with spectacular renderings of the most sacred

Cambridge University Press

0521827310 - Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures

Edited by Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: a return to wonder



1 The Meeting of the Magi, *Les très riches heures de Jean, duc de Berry*, fol. 51, v.

Cambridge University Press

0521827310 - Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures

Edited by Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams*

moments, such as the Annunciation, or St. John on Patmos. The artists, a trio of brothers displaced from Germany, take pains to emphasize the messianic qualities of Christ by depicting his acceptance by a variety of cultures. This cross-cultural, even ecumenical aspect of Christianity is present in the depiction of the Exaltation of the Cross, which presents the Byzantine emperor Heraclius with a multiracial set of companions, and in the Nativity scene, where Jesus' visitors possess a variety of skin tones. Yet such charming anachronisms and apparent inclusiveness cannot be detached from stereotypes that highlight difference. The Revealing of the True Cross uses the pointed hat typically used to designate a Jew, which functioned as a kind of visual shorthand for medieval anti-Semitism.

The illumination of the Meeting of the Magi that appears on our cover illustrates our concept of "wonder" even as it highlights its problems.⁶ On their way to visit the baby Jesus at Bethlehem, the three Magi meet at a crossroads, on which is erected an elaborately Gothic Montjoie: one of the sites, marked by crusaders, from which Jerusalem could be seen. In the background, Jerusalem is figured as medieval Paris, complete with Sainte-Chapelle and Notre Dame. In the foreground, the gorgeously embellished Magi and their entourages flow like three rivers from three different directions, coming to a conclusive stop at the Montjoie. Just to the left of its spires nestles the Star of David. As the Magi, of Zoroastrian faith and Eastern origins, witness the unfolding of a new religion, this focal conjunction of star and spire subsumes a variety of human times and places within the eternal and the providential. As a vantage point for crusaders seeking out Jerusalem, the Montjoie conflates the Magi's pilgrimage to seek out the Christ Child in Bethlehem, with the battlecry "Montjoie!" used by medieval knights in the *Chanson de Roland* during their manifold encounters with the demonized "pagans." Architecture and performative speech acts thus draw the ostensible timelessness of biblical typology into the world of the crusades: a conflict whose repercussions continue to be felt today. The Parisian edifices of Sainte-Chapelle and Notre Dame mask the extent to which the site of revelation segues into contested territory: a battleground between "Europe" and "Orient," East and West, Christian and Jew and Muslim. As the Star of David beckons to the Magi, we are reminded of the centrality of encounters with difference to

Cambridge University Press

0521827310 - Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures

Edited by Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: a return to wonder*

Christian mythology. Simultaneously, the appropriation of Jerusalem for Paris recalls the more recent invocations, by both George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden, of the “clash of civilizations” and the medieval crusades.

Nevertheless, the star itself radiates alternative interpretative strategies. It is a signifier that King Herod, who throws down the prophetic books in denial, reads very differently from the Magi, for whom it provides direction and meaning. Likewise, the illumination’s depiction of cross-cultural contact can be read in a diametrically opposite way. With their crowns and turbaned followers, in embroidered silks and satins, and accessorized with damascene scimitars, the Magi reflect the movement and appropriation of culture from the Byzantine East to the Latin West. The fifteenth-century vision of luxury that they embody visually echoes the increasing characterization, in the commentaries of the Church Fathers, of the Magi as mysterious Others. The Magi, figures of Zoroastrian learning, are thus layered with contemporary Oriental significations of Saracens and Ottomans. This shift at the level of exegesis took place in the context of Western Europe’s increasingly frequent encounters with “the Orient,” through the crusades, trade and pilgrimage routes, and in the contact zones of the Outremer, Sicily, and Spain.

The work of Edward Said provides us with a ready framework for theorizing the reconceptualization of the Magi in accordance with emerging Western systems of knowledge that sought to define, and to control, “the East.”⁷ Yet the historical context in which it took place is very different from the post-Enlightenment world of European imperialism that produced Orientalism. Prior to the age of European expansion, the balance of power between Western Europe and “the Orient,” and the European admiration for – and appropriation of – the non-European, makes the Magi of the *Très riches heures* bearers of what Lisa Jardine dubs “worldly goods.”⁸ As an artifact, the *Très riches heures* is itself crowded with sumptuous objects – luxury textiles, gemstones, damascene swords, hunting dogs, thoroughbred horses. By attending to the “social life” of these things, we complicate both the Magi’s Othering and their role as proto-crusaders, even as that role, in turn, is blurred by the coexistence of Jerusalem as a site of crusade and pilgrimage.⁹

The multivalent Magi, who signal both spiritual rebirth *and* commodity culture, invite us to read Jerusalem, too, as a site that

Cambridge University Press

0521827310 - Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures
Edited by Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams*

accommodates conquest, appropriation, and bloodshed with travel, pilgrimage, and cross-cultural encounter. Returning to Greenblatt's question of recuperation, we propose a return to wonder, and an effort to keep it from being poisoned, by reading the Meeting of the Magi as a translated artifact. The Limbourgs translate luxurious commodities from East to West, and from physicality to representation, and from the fifteenth century back to the time of the birth of Christ, illustrating ostensible geographic and temporal oppositions while, at the same time, enacting the inextricable embeddedness of cultural contact. As animal hide is translated into illuminated book, the artistic process of illumination likewise brings together European parchment with gold, lapis lazuli, and vermilion imported from the East. If the experience of viewing this illumination produces wonder and rapture (in its literal sense of being borne away, upwards), then translation itself may be viewed as a kind of transcendence. And transcendence, itself, speaks with two tongues: on the one hand, it moves toward the erasure of difference, and on the other, it moves away from pernicious distinctions and toward incorporation as well as variegation.

Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures develops this variegated, seemingly contradictory, understanding of translation as a mechanism of and metaphor for cultures in contact, confrontation, and competition, but also as a means of rehabilitating wonder. Translation is often seen as a metaphor for postcolonial writing itself, with the literal act of translation embodying the asymmetrical power relations and violence of different colonialisms.¹⁰ The father of Orientalism, William Jones, has been accused of sanitizing "odorous" native realities within his translation of the Sanskrit classic *Abhijnanasakuntalam*; yet the same Jones, while voyaging out to India, eagerly sniffed the sea air and marveled "that India lay before us, and Persia on our left, whilst a breeze from Arabia blew nearly on our stern."¹¹ Taking a cue from the affective and symbiotic relationship between Jones and his own physical, temporal and linguistic translations, we reengage what many perceive to be "the shameful history of translation" by examining different aspects of medieval European culture through the lens of postcolonial studies.¹² Our multiple uses of translation foreground

Cambridge University Press

0521827310 - Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures

Edited by Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: a return to wonder*

the intersections between medieval and postcolonial studies while at the same time suggesting some recuperative measures that we consider useful for both disciplines.

Highlighting the interactions between colonial representation and postcolonial resistance, Maria Tymoczko points out: “translation is paradoxically the means by which difference is perceived, preserved, projected and proscribed.”¹³ The essays in this volume illustrate these paradoxes by drawing upon the widespread medieval trope of *translatio imperii et studii*. They thereby engage the concept of translation from its most narrow, lexicographic sense, to the wider applications of its literal meaning, “to carry across.” Translating between postcolonial and medieval studies, as well as between disciplinary boundaries, including classical and vernacular literatures, historiography and biography, they carry across the multilingual, multicultural realities of medieval studies to postcolonial analyses of the coercive and subversive powers of cultural translation.

By offering case studies of translation as the transfer of language, culture, and power, we make available to postcolonial scholars a rigorous historicization of their own insights. At the same time, our essays actively acknowledge and respond to a sense of wonder. Even though it is evoked by material artifacts such as maps, monuments, and paintings, rather than natural or geographical phenomena, this experience is in many ways comparable to the Romantic sublime. As David Hume observes, in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*:

The imagination of man is naturally sublime, delighted with whatever is remote and extraordinary, and running, without control, into the most distant parts of space and time in order to avoid the objects, which custom has rendered familiar to it.¹⁴

In Immanuel Kant’s theory of the sublime, which moves more closely to the awesome and the unrepresentable, this uncontrolled “running” toward the remote – whether spatial or temporal – emerges even more clearly as the active desire for and engagement with Otherness.¹⁵ However, we differentiate wonder from the sublime by foregrounding the acts of decentering the ego that can occur at precisely the moment of experiencing wonder. Joseph Bédier encountering the *Chanson de Roland* for the first time under a mango tree in his tropical island

Cambridge University Press

0521827310 - Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures

Edited by Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams*

home of Réunion, medieval cartographers inventively and imaginatively reorienting Roman maps, a twenty-first-century scholar marveling at an Anglo-Saxon church built from a Roman ruin and nestled in the post-modern urban sprawl of contemporary provincial Britain: our essays reveal these and other responses to the past not as cynical acts of appropriation or suppression, but as cultural encounters signaling immersion, even negation of the self, engagement, and wonder.

The chapters in this volume thus engage forms of translation that accommodate and express wonder at the newness that enters the world through the act of cultural dialogue. Like many others, we draw our inspiration from Walter Benjamin's sense of translation, which he defines as "a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of language."¹⁶ Yet the awkwardness and alienation that define Benjamin's "The task of the translator" also contain glimpses of nostalgia for the premodern. Referring to the interlinear glosses that appear in medieval religious manuscripts, he declares, "The interlinear version of the scripture is the prototype or ideal of all translation."¹⁷ Images of medieval icons and early modern portraits also seem to underscore his statement that "the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds."¹⁸ For all its high-modernist longing for the purity and essence that exists "between the lines," Benjamin's account of translation mines the Middle Ages for images that convey a sense of the coexistence of difference. The temporal distance between medieval and modern, and the inaccuracies in appraisals of the past that occur as a result, thus accompany and illuminate the linguistic problematics of "translation" and "original." Interestingly, this nostalgia for the Middle Ages reappears in current discussions of postcolonial translation: Tymoczko invokes the physical translation of medieval saints' relics in her discussion of the utility of translation as a metaphor for postcoloniality, while Harish Trivedi and Susan Bassnett declare that "medieval writers and/or translators were not too troubled by [the] phantasm" of the high-status original text.¹⁹ In this way, the Middle Ages contributes to, and even enables, a process of centering and displacement that complicates the equation of translation and wonder: its role in these discussions of translation invites a reconsideration of the role of historical nostalgia as a force that generates empathy and recognition, as well as wonder.

Cambridge University Press

0521827310 - Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures

Edited by Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: a return to wonder*

Trivedi and Bassnett's turn to the Middle Ages supplements their argument about the mutual implication of authorship, copyright, and the emergence of print culture: an argument that relies on Benedict Anderson's account of nationalism.²⁰ Medievalists have repeatedly intervened into this supposed rupture between the medieval and the modern in Anderson's construction of modernity exposing the reproduction of these paradigms in the work of Homi Bhabha and others. These interventions have produced a series of critiques of the constructs of nationhood and national identity, as well as of the ideologies of colonialism itself.²¹ Yet in deconstructing the binary between medieval and modern, it is not enough, as Ruth Evans points out, to rest on analogy: "while the situation of medieval vernacular writers was analogous to that of modern postcolonial writers confronting the cultural hegemony of English (and other colonial languages), this confrontation cannot be represented straightforwardly as English playing the David to Latin's Goliath."²² Rather than lamenting the "abiding historical trauma" of medievalism, the essays in this volume advocate not only the problematics of engaging with history, but also its potential.²³

This collection works alongside and expands upon recent scholarship dedicated to the intersections between medieval and postcolonial studies. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, the first collection on the subject, uses medieval, and mostly English, culture to present a variety of engagements with and critiques of Said's *Orientalism*, justifying its Anglophone remit with reference to the Anglophone domination of postcolonial theory.²⁴ A more recent volume on the subject, *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval to Modern*, presents a wider geographical field of vision, and focuses specifically upon the task of dismantling the ultimately teleological periodization of European history from the standpoint of medieval studies.²⁵ The dual critiques of colonialism and modernity are fruitfully reflected in essays that present a series of juxtapositions of medieval and modern texts, revealing a modernity that is persistently haunted by the medieval past. Attentiveness to historical difference characterizes the work of medievalists who have convincingly intervened into those new master-narratives of difference and rupture, while avoiding the danger of conflating intellectual and historiographical paradigms with the lived experience of oppression that lurks in the call to "decolonize" the Middle Ages.²⁶

Cambridge University Press

0521827310 - Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures

Edited by Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams*

While our collection draws inspiration from these parallel enterprises, its emphasis on translation calls attention to material and linguistic as well as theoretical details, and to the texts and artifacts in themselves. The requisite scholarly training of medievalists, which notoriously saddles us with linguistic training as well as paleography and codicology, leaves us particularly eager and willing to engage with the demands of the archive and the manuscript. However, the particular consideration these essays give to buildings and maps, paintings and statues, philology and biography, moves the discussion of medieval postcolonialism, or postcolonial medieval studies, into different arenas of translation. As Bruce Holsinger warns, “in a number of ways the presumptive belatedness of medieval studies in relation to postcolonialism threatens to be counted among what Louise Fradenburg calls ‘those modes of self-marginalization’ that medieval studies enjoys perpetrating against itself.”²⁷ This collection does not merely inflict the postcolonial on the medieval (or vice versa). Rather, it highlights the connections between the two by exploring a theme common to both medieval and postcolonial studies: translation as a mechanism of and metaphor for cultures in contact, confrontation, and competition. It reconsiders the role of historical nostalgia as a force that generates empathy and recognition, as well as wonder. It reveals how cultural relationships in the Middle Ages can be viewed through the filter of translation-as-wonder, and shows how the idea of the Middle Ages itself is the product of ceaseless decenterings, displacements, and translations.

Many themes resonate throughout the collection: the legacy of Rome, the “idea” of the Middle Ages, the politics of cultural identity, the prehistory of Orientalism, the impulse toward genealogy, and the power of memory. However, we have grouped the essays in this volume in order to reflect a past, a present, and a future. The first group, “The afterlife of Rome,” calls attention to ancient Rome as an antecedent to imperialism in modernity, and charts a series of “postcolonial” responses to it in the Middle Ages. The second section, “Orientalism before 1600,” examines medieval representations of cultural difference, and reveals the fluidity of identifications of self and Other that proliferate in a period that precedes European domination. The third, entitled “Memory and nostalgia,” reveals how the medieval past signified and was deliberately