

Gallica

Postcolonial  
Fictions  
in the  
*Roman*  
*de Perceforest*

CULTURAL IDENTITIES  
AND HYBRIDITIES

SYLVIA HUOT





*Gallica*  
*Volume 1*

POSTCOLONIAL FICTIONS IN THE  
*ROMAN DE PERCEFOREST*  
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The *Roman de Perceforest* was composed about 1340 for William I, Count of Hainaut.

This vast romance, building on the prose romance cycles of the thirteenth century, chronicles an imaginary era of pre-Arthurian British history when Britain was ruled by a dynasty established by Alexander the Great. Its story of cultural rise, decline, and regeneration offers a fascinating exploration of medieval ideas about ethnic and cultural conflict and fusion, identity and hybridity. Drawing on the insights of contemporary postcolonial theory, Sylvia Huot examines the author's treatment of basic concepts such as 'nature' and 'culture', 'savagery' and 'civilisation'. Particular attention is given to the text's treatment of gender and sexuality as focal points of cultural identity, to its construction of the ethnic categories of 'Greek' and 'Trojan', and to its exposition of the ideological biases inherent in any historical narrative.

Written in the fourteenth century, revived at the fifteenth-century Burgundian court, and twice printed in sixteenth-century Paris, *Perceforest* is both a masterpiece of medieval literature, and a vehicle for the transmission of medieval thought into the early modern era of global exploration and colonisation.

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*ROMAN DE PERCEFOREST*  
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Sylvia Huot

D. S. BREWER

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## INTRODUCTION

The vast prose composition known as *Perceforest*, at this time only partially edited, is the work of an anonymous monastic or clerical author, and was apparently begun under the patronage of William I, Count of Hainaut, Holland, and Zeeland, and father of Queen Philippa, wife of Edward III.<sup>1</sup> The principal modern editor of the work, Gilles Roussineau, has dated its completion, on the basis of internal evidence, to c. 1340–44. The text was reworked in the mid fifteenth century by David Aubert for Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy.<sup>2</sup> *Perceforest* draws on the Old French romance tradition – in particular the prose *Tristan*, the prose *Lancelot-Grail*, and the Alexander romances – as well as medieval historiography as developed by Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and others, and travel writing by such authors as Gerald of Wales and Marco Polo. Far from merely reworking the material of its sources, however, it presents an original story line: the ‘chronicle’ of a hitherto unknown period of history when Great Britain was ruled by Greek kings established by Alexander the Great, who was blown off course on his way to Babylon and washed up on English shores. Alexander established two of his followers – characters from the early fourteenth-century *Voeux du paon* – as kings: Gadifer is king of Scotland, while the new king of England is his brother Betis, soon to be renamed Perceforest. After a difficult start, Perceforest establishes a glittering chivalric society in England, centred on the Franc Palais, a forerunner of the Round Table. A Roman invasion in the next generation devastates the realm, but it is eventually rebuilt and, under the joint rule of Gadifer’s grandson and Perceforest’s granddaughter, the society flourishes once more. A second invasion from the Continent finally brings the dynasty to an end, but by then chivalric institutions are well established. The Grail arrives in Britain soon thereafter, and the spread of Christianity has begun. This long historical

<sup>1</sup> I cite the first half of Book I (I.i) in the edition by Taylor; Books II (II.i and II.ii), III (III.i, III.ii, and III.iii) and IV (IV.i and IV.ii) in the editions by Roussineau; and the second half of Book I (I.ii) and Books V and VI from the edition of 1528, noting significant variants in the manuscripts. For a summary of the narrative and discussion of its central themes and characters, see Lods, *Roman de Perceforest*, and the series of articles by Flûtre.

<sup>2</sup> The only surviving manuscripts date from the mid- or late fifteenth century. The manuscript tradition presents a long and a short redaction; the latter was also printed in 1528 and again in 1531–32. Roussineau has argued that neither one is based on the other, but that one is an amplification of a lost version, of which the other is an abridgment. See his Introduction in IV.i, pp. IX–XXXIV. Van Hemelryck speculated recently that the text might have originated in the fifteenth century; see ‘Soumettre le *Perceforest*’.

fantasy is inserted into a summary of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and is presented as laying the groundwork for the Arthurian era. *Perceforest* shares with romance the pervasive presence of magic, the importance of love, and the focus on the personal development, exploits, and marriages of numerous individual knights and ladies. It frames these stories in a long-range vision of history, exploring such issues as the formation of ethnic and cultural identities and the cyclical rise and fall of civilisation.

Alexander's expansionist policies and his reluctance to respect even the gates of Paradise were portrayed in many medieval texts as excessive, and his untimely death was often seen as just deserts. The corpus of Alexander texts that existed by the time *Perceforest* was written told of his conquest of Asia, his quest for the most remote lands on earth, his journeys under the sea and into the sky. The *Paon* cycle that provides the immediate background to *Perceforest*, however, highlights his responsibilities as emperor rather than the sheer pleasure of conquest and adventuring. In keeping with this image of an emperor who protects the rights of his subjects and regulates matters of inheritance and marriage, Alexander's imperial project takes on a decidedly ethical colour in *Perceforest*. It is explained that the gods use him as 'leur sergent et leur verge pour chastier les felons princes' [their sergeant and their rod for punishing wicked princes] (I.i, p. 147); to the extent that Alexander imposes his will on conquered lands, he does so in a benevolent manner. Endowed with 'sens, largesse, et proesse' [wisdom, generosity, and prowess] (I.i, p. 125), he is a medieval version of the enlightened despot, using his power to foster a society in which love, honour, and chivalry flourish.

William I of Hainaut seems to have had a particular interest in the Alexander legend. Watriquet de Couvin, in his *Dit des .iiii. sieges* (1319) identifies the Count as the living embodiment of Alexander, and this may well reflect an image cultivated by William.<sup>3</sup> The three *Paon* poems, in which the characters of Gadifer and Betis first appear as associates of Alexander, are products of the region; the *Parfait du paon*, in particular, was written by Jean de le Mote two years after he composed the elegant *Regret Guillaume comte de Hainaut*, apparently at the request of Queen Philippa, when her father died in 1338. In the *Regret*, William is compared to a series of illustrious figures, including Alexander, with particular reference to the *Voeux du paon*.<sup>4</sup> In all, the evidence points to a strong local interest in the Alexander legend during the first half of the fourteenth century, particularly in its increasingly courtly manifestations, and to an attribution of Alexandran qualities to Count William.<sup>5</sup> In that case the story of Alexander as

<sup>3</sup> Watriquet de Couvin, *Dits*, ed. Scheler, pp. 163–85. Watriquet asserts that 'Tant con li contes vivera, / Alixandres fin ne fera' (vv. 293–4).

<sup>4</sup> Jehan de le Mote, *Regret*, ed. Scheler, vv. 3104–56.

<sup>5</sup> Further evidence of interest in the Alexander legend at the time of *Perceforest*'s composition lies in the flurry of Alexander manuscripts produced in the decades just prior to the appearance of our romance. As Busby notes, 'the manuscript evidence points, roughly speaking, to two more waves of dissemination, namely the last quarter of the thirteenth century, and the

saviour of an England suffering from incompetent royal rule might well have been understood by its original audience as a flattering commentary on William's role in the removal of Edward II. Hainaut, after all, was instrumental in the events of 1326 that led to the downfall of Edward and his favourite, Hugh Despenser. It was William who funded the expedition to remove Edward from the throne, and his brother Jean d'Avesnes who led it; and this assistance was certainly a factor in his daughter Philippa's betrothal to the future Edward III.

*Perceforest*, like other medieval chronicles and romances treating the ancient world, produces a historical vision grounded in the notion of *translatio studii et imperii*. This concept of political and cultural 'translation' implies a long-term global movement from an Asia-centred world to one that is Euro-centred.<sup>6</sup> The historical model generally used by medieval writers posited an ancient world in which powerful cultural centres were located near or in Asia – Troy, Greece, Babylon, Persia, and the marvellous East. The fall of Troy caused a westward movement that brought Trojan refugees to Europe and led to the foundation of new cultural centres: Rome, France, Britain. The Trojans are portrayed in the twelfth-century *Partonopeu de Blois*, for example, as the bringers of civilisation to France, where they taught the indigenous Gauls to construct fortified cities.<sup>7</sup> The kings of France considered themselves to be the direct descendants of the Trojan king Priam. Another legend, less widely circulated, held that other descendants of Priam settled in Macedonia, where they regrouped to provide the armies of Philip and Alexander the Great; it was supposedly from this group of Trojan refugees that the Saxons were descended.<sup>8</sup>

Trojans also settled in Britain, so that this island at the edge of the world's inhabitable land mass, once a wilderness populated only by giants, became civilised. The account of Brutus' arrival and the alacrity with which he and his men dispatched the giants to mountainous exile or death, adapted from Geoffrey of Monmouth, appears in the opening pages of *Perceforest*. But partly because of the ineptitude of its latest king, and perhaps partly just because of its status as a

third and fourth decades of the fourteenth' (*Codex and Context*, vol. 1, p. 315). As Busby further notes, the surviving manuscripts of the various Alexander romances derive from a wide geographical area, but one that does include both Tournai and England (*ibid.*, pp. 321–2).

<sup>6</sup> On the uses of ancient history in medieval French historiography, see Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*. For a discussion of the integration of medieval Europe into the trade networks stretching from the Levant to China, and speculation about the economic and political factors that might have contributed to the subsequent rise of European hegemony, see Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*. Szkilnik notes that in *Perceforest*, 'the center of gravity of the Macedonian Empire has shifted' from East to West, and that in this way 'Alexander redeems his earlier flawed preference for Asia over Europe', in 'Conquering Alexander', pp. 213, 214. Akbari addresses the concepts of 'Orient' and 'Occident', and Alexander's movement between these poles, in 'Alexander'; while I differ from Akbari in the interpretation of certain passages in the *Roman de toute chevalerie*, her study is a useful survey of that text.

<sup>7</sup> See Simons and Eley, 'Prologue'. Beaune notes that the Trojans were traditionally credited with 'the founding and fortifying of towns, the superiority of legislation, and the language they brought with them', in *Birth*, pp. 241–2.

<sup>8</sup> See Southern, 'Aspects', pp. 190–1.

recently settled wilderness far from centres of civilisation, Britain is portrayed as poor and backward, a kind of Third World of antiquity. We learn that after a promising start under Brutus, 'le pays vint . . . a si grant neanté que les princes voisins n'avoient convoitise du pays acquerre, ains estoit adonques ainsi que mis en oubly' [the land sank to such utter nothingness that neighbouring princes had no desire to acquire it, and thus it was forgotten] (I.i, p. 120). Hence the need for Alexander, with his Aristotelian education, his cosmopolitan sophistication, his foreign blood. In the *Voeux du paon*, the father of Betis and Gadifer is identified as a descendant of Priam, part of the post-war Trojan diaspora, while their mother is the sister of the 'seignor de Turquie' [lord of Turkey] (ed. Ritchie, vv. 471–84). They are also repeatedly termed 'Chaldean' (Caldain, Caldÿen); their city, 'Ephezon', is of indeterminate Near Eastern location. In *Perceforest*, however, their association with Alexander takes precedence over all else and they are consistently identified as Greek – whether politically or ethnically is unspecified. In any case, they bring with them the refined chivalric culture of an empire stretching from the Mediterranean to India. This era, in which Greek and Trojan blood is mingled in the royal and noble lineages of pre-Christian Britain, lays the foundations, however distant and however lost to living memory, for the greatness of the Arthurian world and, by extension, that of medieval Britain.

This model, despite casting Britain in the role of a 'developing country' in need of foreign imperial guidance, rests upon fundamental assumptions that were already operative in English colonial activity in Wales and Ireland, and that would subsequently help shape British and European colonialism in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. As he arrives in Britain, Alexander ponders its past greatness, its current torpor, and the need for intervention:

Lors prist a considerer la renommee en chevalerie dont le pays avoit jadis esté, dont eut il grant merveille comment le pays pouoit sy estre desnüé de gentilz hommes en prouesse. . . . Sy dist a soy mesmes que le bon sang en gentillesse et en prouesse estoit tout corrompu et aliené, et de necessité seroit qu'ilz eussent prince souverain estrange et de gentil sang qui les gentilz hommes du pays renouvellast en toute gentillesse par bons exemples et par chevalereuse vie. (I.i, p. 144)

[Then he began to consider the renown the land had had long ago for its chivalry, and he marvelled greatly that it could have become so bereft of noble men of prowess. . . . And he said to himself that the good blood, once noble and valiant, had been completely corrupted and alienated, and that they needed a sovereign ruler who was foreign and of noble blood, who would renew the noblemen of the land in all nobility, through good examples and a chivalric life.]

The attitude here attributed to Alexander is reminiscent of that expressed by Gerald of Wales with regard to the Irish, whom he scorned as 'solum . . . otio dediti' [given only to leisure] and 'gens barbara, et vere barbara' [a barbarous people, literally barbarous] because of the 'laziness' that prevented them from



mining or cultivating what would otherwise have been a rich and fertile land.<sup>9</sup> Edward Said's comment about Zionism and European colonialism would be readily applicable to Gerald's comments or to Alexander's musings:

Imperialism was the theory, colonialism the practice of changing the uselessly unoccupied territories of the world into useful new versions of the European metropolitan society'.<sup>10</sup>

*Perceforest* plays most immediately to medieval English dreams of presiding over a pan-British kingdom.<sup>11</sup> It is an unexplained feature of the text that while Gadifer is king of 'Albany' or 'Escosse', *Perceforest* is both the 'roy d'Angleterre' and the 'roy de Bretagne'. Aside from the obvious anachronism of an 'England' many hundreds of years before the arrival of the Angles and Saxons, this slip-page promotes an identification of the English king as overlord to all other British monarchs – be they Scottish, Cornish, Welsh, or other – that no doubt sat comfortably with the text's Anglo-Norman audience. The projection of 'Angleterre' into the age of Alexander implies the antiquity and inviolable sovereignty of the English kingdom, which somehow pre-exists the people who would later give it its name. And it further suggests that whatever the ethnicity of the monarch occupying this southern throne, his rule extends to the whole of Great Britain.

If *Perceforest* supported the imperial ambitions of the Plantagenets, its message evidently struck a chord with later readers as well, for it remained popular throughout the sixteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Not only was it printed twice, but also an Italian translation was printed in 1558; a Spanish translation of Books I and II survives in a manuscript of the 1570s; and *Perceforest* is the undisputed source for the Elizabethan play *Clyomon and Clamydes*, composed about 1576–77 and printed in 1599.<sup>13</sup> 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. Still it is evidence of continuity between medieval and early modern discourses of cultural difference, conquest, and empire.

Renaissance culture, with its fascination for the exotic lands and peoples of the New World and its rapid move towards commercial exploitation of these newly discovered lands, is indebted to the formative models of medieval romance and historiography. Whether or not sixteenth-century readers of *Perceforest* explicitly

<sup>9</sup> Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographia*, III.10, p. 152; *History and Topography*, tr. O'Meara, p. 102. On the negative stereotyping of the Irish in Anglo-Norman Britain, see also Bloch, *Anonymous Marie*, pp. 271–2; Gillingham, *English*, pp. 145–50.

<sup>10</sup> Said, *Question*, p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> See Davies, *First English Empire*, especially pp. 31–53, 202; Gillingham, *English*, pp. 43, 118.

<sup>12</sup> See Lods, *Roman*, pp. 9–11.

<sup>13</sup> See Taylor's Introduction in I.i, p. 31; Roussineau's Introduction in IV.i, pp. XXXIII–XXXVIII; Barchilon and Zago, 'Renaissance'; Littleton's Introduction to *Clyomon and Clamydes*, pp. 30–3, 38–49.

associated its vision of history with the events unfolding around them, it was an integral, if minor, part of the cultural fabric that fostered what would ultimately become an imperial enterprise of unprecedented scale. As Said has noted, imperialism and colonialism can only exist within an ideological framework including 'notions that certain territories and peoples *require* and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination'.<sup>14</sup> In Said's words, 'the enterprise of empire depends upon the *idea of having an empire* . . . and all kinds of preparations are made for it within a culture' (ibid., p. 10, emphasis his). Nor were these 'preparations' a new development of the post-Columbian era. Joshua Praver, for example, has described medieval Crusader kingdoms as a 'colonial situation' in which one can see many of the practices and ideological constructs that would characterise later European colonial enterprises.<sup>15</sup> Andrea Rossi-Reder, with reference to an even earlier period, has stressed that such texts as the Anglo-Saxon *Wonders of the East* 'employ what might be termed an incipient colonial or even a proto-colonial discourse to assert Western superiority'.<sup>16</sup> In tracing the early history of European colonialism and imperialism, *Perceforest* too has its part to play.

It could be argued that Alexander's visit to Britain is not precisely a 'colonial' adventure since he does not set up traffic of people or goods between it and a Macedonian metropole. The text readily acknowledges his practice of demanding tribute from other conquered lands, however, and the lofty claims made by his representative in negotiations with the British are classic in their portrayal of colonial subjugation as a veritable privilege:

car ne tenés pas que ce soit servaige se ceulx qu'il a conquis tiennent leurs terres de luy, et s'ilz lui rendent chacun an aucune subvention courtoise et non grevant ou pays, car ce leur est honneur et franchise.

(I.i, p. 139)

[Do not consider it serfdom if those whom he has conquered hold their lands from him, and if every year they pay him a tribute that is courtly and not grievous for the land, for this is an honour to them, and a freedom.]

If Alexander does not demand tribute from the new British kingdoms, they are not for all that free of his authority. In the coronation ceremony, he stipulates that *Perceforest* holds the land from him, and no sooner is the crown on his head than the new king kneels before his emperor to do fealty for his kingdom. Subsequently, in official proclamations *Perceforest* identifies himself as 'roy d'Angleterre, par la grace du Dieu Souverain, et du Roy Alexandre, roy des roys

<sup>14</sup> Said, *Culture*, p. 8, emphasis his.

<sup>15</sup> Praver, 'Roots'.

<sup>16</sup> Rossi-Reder, 'Wonders', p. 66. For a slightly different view, arguing that the *Wonders of the East* attributes humanity to monstrous races, see Austin, 'Marvelous People'. For a discussion of medieval books known to Columbus, and their influence on his concepts of geography and cultural diversity, see Flint, *Imaginative Landscape*.

terriens' [king of England, by the grace of the Sovereign God, and of King Alexander, king of earthly kings] (I.ii, ch. 108, fol. 97r). And, aside from his period of mental collapse in the wake of Alexander's death, Perceforest takes seriously his mission to 'civilise' the kingdom. The British kingdoms established by Alexander correspond to the model of medieval colonialism identified by Robert Bartlett: 'not the creation of "colonies", in the sense of dependencies, but the spread, by a kind of cellular multiplication, of the cultural and social forms found in the Latin Christian core'.<sup>17</sup>

It is also in keeping with an imperial agenda of global proportions that Britain is now ruled by Greek kings who maintain a strong sense of personal loyalty to Alexander. Alexander insists that the only benefit accruing to himself is the satisfaction of bestowing newly conquered lands on his deserving vassals, claiming that with every conquest, 'je ne puis dormir ne faire somme si l'auray donné et enrichi ung gentil homme preux et hardy' [I cannot sleep or even nap until I have given it away and enriched a bold and valiant nobleman] (I.i, p. 145). One could, however, question just how unselfish such imperial pleasures might really be. His diversion to Britain allows Alexander to reward two of his followers with lucrative land grants at no cost to himself. And because of the marriages arranged by Alexander at the beginning of the story (borrowed from the *Voeux du paon*), the installation of these particular kings results in a close-knit web of pro-Greek, anti-Roman alliances reaching from one end of the empire to the other. Fezonas, sister of Gadifer and Perceforest, is queen of India; the sister of Perceforest's wife Ydorus is married to the sultan of Badres, while her cousin is the queen of Persia. When the villainous Roman Antipater later assassinates Alexander and his Asian allies and attempts to take over the eastern empire, Perceforest is able to shelter the two queens and their infant sons until they can return to their kingdoms. The British knighthood, revived under Alexander's tutelage, ultimately defeat Antipater's army, thereby not only blocking the westward expansion of the Roman Empire, but also avenging Alexander's death. Alexander's sojourn in Britain is colonialism in a sanitised form. It is nonviolent – at least in its inception – because the grateful British knights make no resistance; non-exploitative because the Greek emperor is the very soul of generosity.

*Perceforest* inscribes itself as the link joining up the great locations of European culture, allowing for a grand historical narrative that takes in Priam, Brutus, Alexander, Joseph of Arimathea, and Arthur. In so doing, its author creates a picture of ethnic and cultural conflict, fusion, and exchange that is remarkably sensitive and detailed. Thomas Hahn has noted that Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose *Historia* is paraphrased in the opening section of *Perceforest*, 'renders racial antagonism a crucial component of any larger vision of national history'.<sup>18</sup> Both 'race' and 'ethnicity' are slippery and highly charged terms, whose meaning

<sup>17</sup> Bartlett, *Making of Europe*, p. 306. On the terms 'colonial' and 'imperial' in a medieval context, see also West, 'Colonial History'.

<sup>18</sup> Hahn, 'Difference', p. 8.

in a medieval context is still being debated. For purposes of this study, I have chosen to follow Bartlett's emphasis on the importance in medieval writings of 'the cultural component of ethnic identity', itself constructed out of the four basic categories of 'descent, language, law, and custom'.<sup>19</sup> Eley, in a survey of twelfth-century *romans antiques*, similarly concludes that in these texts, the Trojans – and to some extent Greeks, Carthaginians, and Italians as well – are depicted as 'a distinct people, united by a common history, descent, and culture, and linked to a specific territory'.<sup>20</sup> Medieval notions of what we call ethnic identity include a component of genealogy, and of geographic localisation, that brings them into contact with modern concepts of race. But the ethical dimension is also of great importance – sexual norms, religious values, modes of government, uses of violence – as is, for that matter, the aesthetic: personal beauty, fine clothing, the arts, landscaping.<sup>21</sup> These categories are explicitly invoked in the vision of history elaborated in *Perceforest*, with its complex narrative of competing cultures and peoples, of civilisation and that which resists or lies outside it.

It is in this spirit that I apply the terms 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' to *Perceforest*.<sup>22</sup> Ato Quayson, in a discussion of postcolonial theory and its relevance for medieval studies, has characterised postcolonialism as being 'inherently about relations of hegemony and resistance in the encounter between different cultures and peoples'.<sup>23</sup> As he notes, postcolonialism concerns 'the quest for models of cultural practice that have been produced by the conjuncture between the imperial and the colonized, and the native and the foreign' (p. 256). It would not be overstating the case to assert that 'the encounter between different cultures and people', as well as the ever-shifting relations 'between the imperial and the colonized, and the native and the foreign' are the very substance of *Perceforest*. A peculiarity of the unique historical context that it imagines – a kingdom established in Britain by Alexander the Great – is that Alexander and his Greek vassals are at once a foreign presence in Britain, and also fundamental to the history that produced the *matière de Bretagne*. By the text's account of its own origins (I.i, pp. 120–4), the source of *Perceforest* is a recently discovered chronicle maintained at court by Perceforest and his successors, and the exotic foreignness of this text can hardly be overstated.<sup>24</sup> It is in a language (Greek) that its discoverers cannot even recognise, and languishes unread for a further ten years before a translator

<sup>19</sup> Bartlett, 'Medieval and Modern', p. 47. Bartlett considers the terms 'racial' and 'ethnic' as synonyms in medieval writing (p. 42). See also Lomperis, 'Medieval Travel Writing'.

<sup>20</sup> Eley, 'Myth', p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> Ingham stresses the discourse of virtue and vice in medieval categories of race and ethnicity, in *Sovereign Fantasies*, pp. 110–14. Eley identifies a concern in the *romans antiques* to 'emphasise the achievements in art, architecture and entertainment which set the Trojans apart from other groupings' ('Myth', pp. 36–8).

<sup>22</sup> For a survey of the complex relationships that have obtained between medieval and postcolonial studies, and some of the attendant critical controversies, see Holsinger, 'Medieval Studies'.

<sup>23</sup> Quayson, 'Translations', p. 253.

<sup>24</sup> See Taylor, 'Fourteenth Century', and my 'Chronicle'.

is found. It tells of a period of history utterly unknown. The twelfth-century Alexander romances by Thomas de Kent and Alexandre de Paris do mention, in passing, that Alexander had extended his rule over parts of western Europe. Thomas de Kent, for example, alludes to Alexander's exaction of tribute from such places as Lombardy, France, Burgundy, Germany, Flanders, and Normandy (*Roman de toute chevalerie*, ed. Gaullier-Bougassas and Harf-Lancner, vv. 2368–71). Still, nowhere outside of *Perceforest* do we read of an extended stay in Britain or other Western locations.<sup>25</sup>

The person who translates this mysterious book into a Western language (Latin) is himself exotic. A Greek scholar who has been studying in France, he is doubly foreign. And as a fugitive who left France for England because 'plus demourer n'y pouoit pour ung homicide' [he couldn't stay any longer because of a murder] (p. 122), he is even more thoroughly marginalised. Even his Latin translation is still inaccessible to the lay audience for whom such a book is really intended, so that the Count of Hainaut has to commission a French translation by a monk at the abbey of St Landelain in Crespin (Petit-Crépin). This translator – the persona adopted by the *Perceforest* narrator – claims to have introduced stylistic improvements in order to make the story more entertaining. The *Roman de Perceforest*, in other words, is presented as an embellished French translation of a Latin translation of a Greek chronicle that had been hidden away for over a thousand years.

On the one hand, then, the story told in *Perceforest* emerges from beneath layers of exotic otherness and obscurity; but it also sits at the very heart of Britishness, purporting to explain how the most famous era in medieval vernacular romance came to be. The text is populated by the ancestors of the Arthurian world, as is made abundantly clear every time a marriage takes place and the narrator announces the illustrious progeny that will result. This improbable Greek kingdom of Great Britain is responsible for both cultural institutions and material props that are essential to the Arthurian world. It is thanks to Alexander and the kings he appoints that the tournament is invented and becomes a favourite British pastime; thanks to them that Britain becomes a place in which ladies are honoured, and love is a cultural ideal; thanks to them that two dragons – one red, one white – are buried where Vortigern will later build a tower, that a sword is

<sup>25</sup> See Gaullier-Bougassas, 'Alexandre le Grand'. The Saxon chronicler Widukind, writing c. 970, cited the legendary descent of the Saxons from Alexander's army; contrary to other sources, which identified this army as being of Trojan descent, Widukind portrayed them as Greek. However, the identification of the Saxons as Greek was not widely disseminated and there is no evidence that the *Perceforest* author would have been aware of it. See Southern, 'Aspects', pp. 190–1, n. 3. Writing c. 1370–72, Guillaume de Machaut cites 'li bons rois Alixandres / qui conquist angleterre et flandres / et tant quist terre et mer parfonde / qu'il fu seigneur de tout le monde' [the good king Alexander who conquered England and Flanders and explored the earth and the deep sea so much that he was the lord of the entire world] (*Prise d'Alexandrie*, ed. Palmer, vv. 47–50). The prominence here given to England and Flanders in Alexander's career is unusual and may reflect a knowledge of *Perceforest*.



embedded in a stone for Arthur to withdraw, that the ground is prepared for the advent of Christianity and the arrival of the Grail.

It is this infusion of a foreign element that enabled the most famous of British kings to be what he was. Among Arthur's ancestors, we now learn, are the brothers-in-law of the king of India and the sultan of Badres – that is, Perceforest and Gadifer – as well as Alexander himself. It is because of an eventual reconquest of Britain by the descendants of those whom Alexander displaced, that this Greek heritage is suppressed, abolished by royal decree from all public discourse. Only the chronicle, walled up in an abbey, survives to be discovered centuries later. The Byzantine and Asian East, seemingly far removed from British cultural history, are nonetheless at its heart. British culture is grounded in a hybridity that is hidden and disavowed, yet utterly essential.

As Elleke Boehmer has pointed out, 'imperialism was a thing of mind and representation, as well as a matter of military and political power and the extraction of profit'.<sup>26</sup> In her study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and Commonwealth literatures, Boehmer identifies an intertextual network that played a unifying role in the vast and diverse British Empire, providing 'conventions of seeing and reading' that migrated not only between works of literary and visual art, but also between regions (p. 52). In her words:

Itinerant and adaptive, focusing colonial myths, activating imperialist energies, what we shall call the *travelling metaphor* formed an essential constitutive element of an intensely imagined colonial system.

(ibid., emphasis hers)

These colonial imaginings, though obviously diverse and shaped in large part by contemporary circumstances, also have their roots in the imaginings and cultural mythologies of the past. The present study does not pretend to offer a comprehensive survey of these 'mythologies', nor to establish a definitive relationship between specific literary and ideological expressions of the modern era and those of the medieval period. Still less would I wish to argue for an essentialist leveling of all forms of imperialism and colonialism throughout European history. Nonetheless it is useful to consider the literary and theoretical works of post-medieval colonialism as a kind of backdrop or counterpoint to *Perceforest*. As a prelude to my detailed reading of this very rich text, I wish briefly to identify certain concepts that link *Perceforest* with the (post)colonial literature of later centuries.

<sup>26</sup> Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial*, p. 23.

## Godlike Conquerors

It is a cherished fantasy of European colonialism that the conquering rulers seem to their new subjects superhuman, supernatural beings, and this notion appears in *Perceforest*. In Scotland Gadifer and his men are perceived first as demons, and then as vastly superior humans. In England, the women who establish beautiful manors in response to *Perceforest*'s rule are thought to be fairies: 'Et d'elles vindrent les damoiselles que le commun peuple clamoit faees. Car il cuydoit qu'elles fussent faees et qu'elles ne morussent pas' [And from them came the damsels whom the common folk called fairies. For they believed that they were fairies and that they did not die] (I.ii, fol. 97r). Gadifer's wife Lydoire, the Greek queen of Scotland, is known far and wide as 'The Fairy Queen' [La Royne Fee].<sup>27</sup> It is true that this title reflects her very real skill in the magic arts, but nonetheless she is neither immortal nor a fairy – just an aristocratic lady in the entourage of Alexander the Great. Lydoire is able to develop such a high level of expertise in magic and astrology because, as a girl, she received a thorough philosophical training from none other than Aristotle. What the terrified Scottish 'savages' think are demons are actually a band of knights outfitted by the newly crowned Greek king; and what the impressionable Britons later perceive as a fairy is really a Greek aristocrat with an Aristotelian education.

The idea of Europeans being perceived as gods has a long history, and is already active at the very beginnings of New World exploration. Columbus reported that the Caribbean people he encountered thought the Spaniards were heavenly beings; and the legends are still alive today of Moctezuma taking Cortés for Quetzalcóatl, the Miwok Indians of what is now California perceiving Sir Francis Drake and his crew as gods, and the Hawa'iiian Islanders taking Captain Cook for the god Lono. As Gananath Obeyesekere notes, 'the very beginnings of the voyages of discovery carried with them the tradition of the apotheosis of the redoubtable European navigators who were also the harbingers of civilization'.<sup>28</sup> We will probably never know exactly what the Caribbean islanders, the Hawa'iiians, the Aztecs, or the Miwok really thought of their strange visitors. But one thing is certain: westerners venturing into hitherto uncharted territory have long harboured expectations of being perceived as gods, and *Perceforest* is one more piece of evidence that these beliefs predated European contact with New World peoples.

## The Civilising Mission

Even when they did not see themselves worshipped as gods, European explorers and colonisers have tended to view themselves as a benevolent force, graciously accepting the task of bestowing civilisation on those who either never had it or

<sup>27</sup> See Taylor, 'Reine Fée'.

<sup>28</sup> Obeyesekere, *Apotheosis*, p. 124. See also Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, pp. 77 and 173–4, n. 64; Wilson, *World Encompassed*.

unfortunately lost it. This too is a controlling idea in *Perceforest*, where Alexander magnanimously delays his expedition to Babylon in order to assist in the cultural regeneration of Britain. Perhaps the starkest articulation of this notion in modern history is that of Jules Ferry, who stated in his 'Discours' of 28 July 1885: 'Les races supérieures . . . ont le devoir de civiliser les races inférieures' [The superior races have the duty of civilising the inferior races].<sup>29</sup> Ferry's idea was hardly original, however. Of countless analogous examples, we might consider the account of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign in the twenty-three-volume *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–28). Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Fourier's Introduction is a classic enunciation of the colonial *mission civilisatrice* or 'white man's burden'.<sup>30</sup> Stressing Egypt's tragic fall from ancient greatness to modern barbarity, and the benefits for the Egyptians and indeed the world that will flow from a restoration of their civilisation, Fourier portrays Napoleon's army more as a missionary expedition than a military one. Said has characterised this view of Napoleon's mission as follows:

To restore a region from its present barbarism to its former classical greatness; to instruct (for its own benefit) the Orient in the ways of the modern West; to subordinate or underplay military power in order to aggrandize the project of glorious knowledge acquired in the process of political domination of the Orient; to formulate the Orient, to give it shape, identity, definition with full recognition of its place in memory, its importance to imperial strategy, and its 'natural' role as an appendage to Europe . . .<sup>31</sup>

If we but substitute 'Britain' for 'the Orient', and 'Macedonian empire' for 'the West' and 'Europe', we have a remarkably accurate description of the portrayal of Alexander's British campaigns in *Perceforest*. With its account of Britain's recovery of past greatness, coupled with that of the ongoing resistance to Greek rule that is maintained by those whom *Perceforest* drives from power, the text sets forth both the glorified view of colonialism as cultural development, and the discourses of opposition that we now term 'postcolonial'.

### Women's Liberation

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her famous discussion of the silenced subaltern woman, considers at length the many overt and covert implications of the sentence: 'White men are saving brown women from brown men.'<sup>32</sup> Spivak's analysis addresses nineteenth-century British legislation banning the Hindu tradition

<sup>29</sup> Quoted by Todorov, *Nous et les autres*, p. 349.

<sup>30</sup> See Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 80–8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>32</sup> Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', pp. 296–308.

of *suttee*, but many other examples of this self-styled colonial gallantry could be found. Perhaps the most recent example, while not strictly speaking colonial, is the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001: though clearly and explicitly launched in response to the al-Qaeda attacks of 11 September 2001, it has often been portrayed in the popular media as a mission on behalf of Afghan women. An uninformed observer of the American news coverage during that period might almost be forgiven for thinking that Washington was more concerned with the abolition of the burka than with the capture of Osama bin Laden.<sup>33</sup> I do not of course mean to deny the very real oppression of women under the Taliban, any more than Spivak intended to advocate 'some violent Hindu sisterhood of self-destruction' (p. 307). But in both instances, the military, political, and economic interests of an expansionist power are obscured beneath the rhetoric of a civilising mission that appropriates woman as an object to be saved.

The salvation of women is equally a theme of Perceforest's rule. The trope of saving women from their own kind is most obvious in episodes in which girls are rescued from the incestuous designs of their fathers – the princess Flamme of the Roide Montaigne, and the young giantess Galotine – but its importance goes well beyond these stories of domestic sexual violence. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, Perceforest's first task is the suppression of the wicked *lignage Darnant*, whose salient feature is their practice of indiscriminate rape; and his founding act is a law making rape a capital offence. Though Perceforest initially embarked on his war against the *lignage Darnant* in an effort to break their monopoly on the natural resources of the forests, these economic and material concerns faded rapidly under a narrative emphasis on Perceforest as the saviour of British women.

Robert Young has noted that Spivak's formulation 'prompts the question who the brown women are being saved *for* in this act of delicious gallantry by the white men'.<sup>34</sup> Whatever the complex realities of Western colonialism, the fictional scenario of *Perceforest* corresponds to Young's contention that the answer is 'for the white men themselves' (ibid.). Flamme and Galotine are saved from incestuous rape in order to marry their rescuers; Sebille, a lady of the forest who is rescued from would-be rapists, has a love affair with Alexander and bears his son. The British girl Lyriope, who is saved from being raped by her cousin when Gadifer and Le Tor kill her brother and capture the family castle, becomes a royal ward and is given in marriage to Le Tor. And beyond this literal appropriation of native women by the incomers, the text overall implies an identification of the grateful female beneficiaries of Perceforest's rule with the land itself, or perhaps with the goodness that it contains; while those women uninterested in being saved are clearly beneath contempt.

Commenting on nineteenth-century accounts of colonial encounters in both North America and Australia, Terry Goldie notes the recurring juxtaposition of

<sup>33</sup> See Davis, 'Time'.

<sup>34</sup> Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 152, emphasis his.

‘temptation by the dusky maiden and fear of the demonic violence of the fiendish warrior’.<sup>35</sup> Goldie focuses on the gendered language used to express the ambivalence of European incomers towards these strange new worlds: the enticing aspects of the land eroticised as feminine, the forbidding aspects coded as hyper-masculine. This formulation could equally be applied to the scenarios imagined in *Perceforest*. The split between the beautiful ladies of the forest, hospitable and at times openly erotic, and the frightening knights of the *lignaige Darnant*, with their magic spells and their brutal violence, is mirrored in Goldie’s evocation of ‘the alien’s fear of the “redskin” as hostile wilderness, the new, threatening land, and the arrivant’s attraction to the maiden as restorative pastoral, this new, available land’ (ibid., p. 236).

The recasting of class violence or military conquest in the form of erotic or amorous intrigue is a well established feature of medieval vernacular literature, familiar in the *pastourelle* encounters between a shepherdess and a knight as well as in the tales of amorous Saracen princesses in Crusade epic. This common ground between otherwise disparate genres points to a more pervasive discursive strategy within medieval culture. Sharon Kinoshita has noted that just as sexual violence in the *pastourelle* ‘is deployed especially to do the symbolic work of internal colonization’, similarly the violent conquest of ‘the religious and cultural Other’ is effaced in ‘the Saracen woman’s willing embrace of the conqueror and all he represents’.<sup>36</sup> The motif of the Saracen woman who converts to Christianity to marry the Crusader knight, as in the *Prise d’Orange*, allows the tropes of ‘courtly love’ to be ‘mobilized in the service of an ideology of expansion and conquest’ (ibid.).

### Colonial Insecurities

The image of the powerful Saracen princess is, however, one that can cut in different directions; as Sarah Kay states, she ‘does not merely ventriloquize a controlling masculine fantasy: she helps to shape it, and thereby disrupts assumed hierarchies’.<sup>37</sup> The male fantasy that produces these narratives of sexually aggressive, self-possessed Saracen women is, in Kay’s words, ‘as much one of anxiety as of wish fulfillment’ (ibid., p. 47). One could say much the same thing about certain ladies in *Perceforest*, some of whom display an aggressive sexuality that threatens to rob men of their autonomy. Seville, for example, initiates her liaison with Alexander by enchanting him so that he stays at her castle for two weeks, despite his intention to depart after just one night. The sexual potency of foreign women can figure not just the ‘restorative’ aspects of the land, but also

<sup>35</sup> Goldie, ‘Representation’, p. 235.

<sup>36</sup> Kinoshita, ‘Politics’, p. 286; see also Kinoshita, ‘“Pagans are wrong”’.

<sup>37</sup> Kay, *Chanson de geste*, p. 46.



its disorienting capabilities.<sup>38</sup> The same is true in modern colonial literature; one might think, for example, of Diderot's *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*, with its amusing portrayal of the French chaplain in Tahiti, distractedly invoking his *religion*, his *état*, his *bonnes moeurs* while his host's naked daughters present themselves for his delectation.

Bougainville's own comments on the sexual enticements of Tahiti are revealing in this regard. In some respects, his account portrays Tahiti as a utopia of erotic delights. As he tells it, the inhabitants freely invited the Frenchmen into their homes, 'ils leur offraient des jeunes filles' [they offered them young girls] in a sensuous idyll in which 'la terre se jonchait de feuillage et de fleurs, et des musiciens chantaient aux accords de la flûte un hymne de jouissance' [the earth was strewn with leaves and flowers, and musicians sang a hymn to orgasm, accompanied by flutes].<sup>39</sup> But the public nature of these exchanges, in which 'la case se remplissait à l'instant d'une foule curieuse d'hommes et de femmes' [the hut would fill instantly with a curious crowd of men and women] disconcerts the French, since, as Bougainville says, 'nos moeurs ont proscriit cette publicité' [our customs forbid this public display] (*ibid.*). In conclusion he notes simply that 'je ne garantirais pas qu'aucun n'ait vaincu sa répugnance et ne se soit conformé aux usages du pays' [I can't guarantee that certain ones didn't overcome their repugnance and conform to the customs of the country] (*ibid.*). This clash of desire and revulsion marks a moment of double hybridisation. French seed is sown in a Tahitian body, to produce bodies that are still Tahitian but with a French difference; while a French body is overwritten with Tahitian customs. In both cases a subject is produced who is not quite fully French or Tahitian, but something partaking of both. In *Perceforest*, Alexander's Greek body is similarly appropriated and transformed into an object of British desire. And the result is a new British Alexander: the knight Alexandre Remanant de Joie, a Briton on whose body is written the semblance of his illustrious Greek father.

Despite the sense of mission that characterises much colonial literature, then, such works can also betray an underlying current of insecurity and disorientation, as the coloniser struggles to preserve a sense of self in an alien surrounding. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* expresses both sides of this divide. Crusoe sets out to build himself an estate where he can live as lord of his own domain, replicating insofar as possible the conditions of his homeland. Nonetheless, as Boehmer stresses, '[n]o matter how much Crusoe, like the archetypal colonist he is, strives to assert his own reality and establish his right to the island "kingdom", the unknown remains a constant anxiety, represented by his horror of cannibalism'.<sup>40</sup> An even greater sense of malaise infects the portrayal of colonial rule in the works of Joseph Conrad nearly two hundred years later. The eponymous hero of *Lord Jim*, for example, finds himself strangely unsettled in his efforts to

<sup>38</sup> See Taylor, 'Alexander Amoroso'.

<sup>39</sup> Bougainville, *Voyage*, ed. Proust, II.2, p. 235.

<sup>40</sup> Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial*, p. 18.

rule over an island 'kingdom'. Again in Boehmer's words, 'his personal ideals remain centred in Europe but his experience is set on the colonial periphery' (p. 63). Thus his authority exists 'in relation to the native population', yet he remains 'in search of European approval, believing himself disconnected from native life' (pp. 63–4).

The precarious position of the colonial ruler, whose 'life-narrative is split' (Boehmer, p. 63), is fully acknowledged in the troubling isolation into which both Perceforest and Gadifer fall – the former temporarily, the latter permanently. News of Alexander's death plunges Perceforest into a debilitating melancholy that makes him unable to govern for some twenty years. It is only when he learns to detach himself from his idealised image of Alexander and to accept the heroic and courtly potential of his British subjects that Perceforest is finally able to become a true, and effective, British king. As for Gadifer, he is severely injured in a hunting accident in the Scottish forest, and becomes permanently disabled when a local woman, in league with the indigenous resistance, poisons his wounds. His wife Lydoire reacts by hiding the entire royal family in an invisible castle. The disappearance of both the king and his young heirs causes considerable consternation among the Scottish knights, who are henceforth allowed only rare and fleeting encounters with their king, at Lydoire's discretion. The English court, in other words, is blighted by the king's inability to perceive himself as anything other than a vassal to Alexander, or to appreciate his British kingdom as a sovereign entity in its own right. And the Scottish court is crippled by a pathological aversion to contact with its own subjects. Invisible in her castle but spying on all around her, as if in a medieval panopticon, Lydoire metes out severe punishments to anyone deemed disobedient or negligent, while even the most faithful knights are largely kept at bay. Both courts also reflect a pervasive fear of a resurgence of the indigenous *lignage Darnant*, a once-powerful clan whose warrior ethos might be described in modern terms as terrorist. The brutal sexual predations of the clansmen, their abduction and assassination of the knights of the Franc Palais, and their aggressive use of sorcery – which transforms the forests, at the height of their power, into a frightening realm of disorienting hallucinations – haunt the collective memory of Perceforest's Britain. 'In those times', people remind one another, there was no security, the weak were oppressed, women abused, those in power like rapacious beasts. If they should ever once again gain the upper hand . . .

The *Perceforest* author thus pits the chivalric culture of Greek imperial rule – the idealised image of his own culture – against an imagined era of barbarity, located in a distant and lawless past. As it happens, this construction of ancient Britain as an uncivilised wilderness corresponds to the vision outlined in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* by the character Marlow who, in a now famous passage, conjures up a vivid image of the colonising Romans who struggled to establish civilisation in the hostile and forbidding 'darkness' that was Britain.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> See Achebe, 'Image'; Ingham, 'Contrapuntal', pp. 55–58.