
In the late 1990s, articles and books started appearing using postcolonial theory to read medieval texts. The combination struck some as anachronistic, and some asked how useful this trend was. The insights of the work of the last decade answer those critics and reveal that postcolonial theory has enriched our understanding of medieval chronicles of the Crusades, medieval travel writings, and even chivalric romance as Sylvia Huot’s new book *Postcolonial Fictions in the Roman de Perceforest* demonstrates.

Huot, of Cambridge University, has written a number of articles on Perceforest. Her last book, *Madness in Medieval French Literature* (2004), was a broad study of madness across Old French texts and genres. Her new book continues her focus on categories of alterity as she examines one medieval French work through the lens of postcolonial theory.

Written about 1340, the prose *Roman de Perceforest* is not well-studied. The lengthy, complex work comprises six books. The first through fourth books are available in modern editions in multi-volume sets. The fifth and sixth are only available in a sixteenth-century edition making the work relatively inaccessible. *Perceforest* was popular in its time and remained so through the early modern period as Europe entered the age of discovery and colonization. Huot’s elucidation of the romance’s complex tangle of themes should inspire more readers to tackle this vast medieval romance.

The work tells the story of a forgotten, chivalric, pre-Arthurian Britain ruled by a dynasty
established by Alexander the Great. The Greeks conquer the native Britons only to be ousted in a later generation. *Perceforest* presents a third-world Britain "in need of foreign, imperial guidance" (4). The intermingling of British (coded Trojan) blood with Greek gives rise to Arthur and his knights. The wholly fictional and original story draws on the romance tradition, medieval historiography, travel writing, and English colonial activity in Ireland and Wales. As this brief summary hints, the attitudes that lead to British and European colonialism in Asia, Africa, and the Americas are already present in this fourteenth-century work in a nascent form.

Huot's Introduction provides a summary of *Perceforest* and an overview of postcolonial theory. (Additionally, a helpful list of the dozens of major characters is provided in an Appendix—for anyone not intimately familiar with the romance, this list is indispensable.) Huot's situating of the theoretical framework of her analysis is a prerequisite for any study using postcolonial theory to read a medieval text, and she does an excellent job connecting text and theory. The Introduction is divided into sections that link the themes of *Perceforest* with important concepts of postcolonial theory: godlike conquerors, the civilizing mission, women's liberation, colonial insecurities, and colonial desire. She acknowledges that Alexander's adventure in Britain does not have an explicit colonial agenda—he is not trying to set up trade between his Macedonian empire and Britain. Nonetheless, she argues, "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*" (8). Thus, her book "examine[s] *Perceforest*'s portrayal of the shifting constructions of gender and ethnicity, of purity and hybridisation, that emerge in the colonial encounter and in the competing discourses of the postcolonial world" (21).

The book is divided into three parts entitled "Founding Myths: Nature, Culture, and the Production of a British Kingdom," "Heteronormative Sexuality and the Mission Civilisatrice," and "Greeks, Trojans, and the Construction of British History." While Part II will be of most interest to feminist scholars, this book is not easily read in pieces. Part I includes analyses of first encounters, the conflict between nature and culture, and the imposition of a legal system
with laws regulating property and rape. Part II, with its analyses of compulsory love, marriage, homosociality, and sexual violence, is connected to Part I, especially in the analysis of legislation to protect women. Part III returns to the previous analyses and connects the text's construction of history to postcolonial themes of remembrance and repression.

As a result of these related themes and analyses, the phrase "this will be discussed more in another chapter" is repeated many times. However, rather than a weakness, this interconnectedness is one of the book's strengths. Perceforest constructs a world in which Greek knights are the norm and everyone else is Other. As Huot demonstrates, that category of Other subsumes multiple alterities (gender, race, ethnicity, religious belief) that are inherently linked. The imposition of heteronormative sexuality as a regulator of society is key—establishing and participating in a cult of love is what initially separates the Greeks from the British, what then produces chivalric culture, and what ultimately assimilates the natives. The indigenous British are incestuous rapists whose violent culture must be suppressed. Greek men must save British women from British men (to adapt a phrase from Gayatri Spivak, as Huot does). British men who wish to be assimilated must learn the cultural script of the Greeks. The Founding Myths in Part I and the Construction of British History in Part III cannot be separated from the problematic of gender and sexuality, and Huot's analysis and organization highlight that fact.

This book is insightful and thought-provoking, especially in regards to the intersection of categories of alterity. One of the most interesting analyses in the book concerns the bonds between men. The Greek's establishment of the chivalric code based on heteronormative sexuality mediates the relations between men, legitimates homosocial bonds, and allows an outlet for regulated violence. Surprisingly, however, Perceforest makes almost no mention of homoeroticism or the threat of homosexuality, and Huot takes that silence to speak volumes. The knights in Perceforest abhor any knight who does not have a girlfriend to the point that Huot argues it becomes obvious that something else is going on. It is as if the threat of homosexuality is "too taboo even to be mentioned" (143). Given that the book codes the British as Trojan, this silence is telling. The Trojan Aeneas is condemned for his
sexual preferences in the twelfth-century *Roman d'Enéas*, for example. *Perceforest* displaces that threat onto stated fears of incest, miscegenation, and endogamy. The threat of homosexuality lurks silently underneath.

Ultimately, Huot’s study demonstrates that the orthodox romance *Perceforest* subverts any myth of British ethnic purity. The British are a hybrid, fused, and assimilated race—Celts, Romans, Angles, Saxons, Picts, Normans, etc. The history of Britain is one of conquest, ethnic rivalry, and colonization, even in the ancient and medieval world, and its empire building of later centuries is built on this ideological background, fictional as it may be in *Perceforest*. Huot’s book has much to recommend it, both to the medievalist interested in intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender in the Middle Ages and to the modernist with an interest in the origins of the European colonial ideology and the literary imagination that constructed it. Huot’s style and scholarship make this book accessible to those not familiar with either postcolonial theory or *Perceforest*. It is a good read.

*Elizabeth A. Hubble*

*University of Montana*


The subject of this collection of essays, queenship in medieval and Early Modern Iberia, as editor Theresa Earenfight remarks in her preface, is “similar to but substantially different from that of northern Europe” (xiii). Beyond the principal queenly obligation to produce heirs, Iberian queens were often much more visibly active in politics and wielded greater public authority than their northern counterparts. Their power manifested itself in regencies, lieutenancies, military and administrative decision-making, and the artistic patronage that shaped monarchical images.

The ten chapters are arranged chronologically and in three thematic sections: “The Practical Limits of Partnership;” “Practicing the Politics of Religion;” and “Representing the Politics of Queenship.” The contributors are both well-established and newer scholars in the fields of history and art history. The first section opens