

## A Global Middle Ages

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*“Nowadays, national literature doesn’t mean much: the age of world literature is beginning, and everybody should contribute to hasten its advent.” This was Goethe . . . talking to Eckermann in 1827 . . . Not “comparative,” but world literature: the Chinese novel that Goethe was reading at the time . . . Well, let me put it very simply: comparative literature has not lived up to these beginnings. It’s been a much more modest intellectual enterprise, fundamentally limited to Western Europe . . . the literature around us is now unmistakably a planetary system. The question is not really what we should do – the question is how. (Moretti)*

*globalization theory . . . has had relatively little to say about literature. (Prendergast)*

Globalization theories may (once) have had relatively little to say about literature, but literature – across all time – has had a great deal it wants to tell us about globalizations.

Because a literary text in its brilliance has many cunning passages – fanning out in more than one direction, and speaking in voices to which our ear is not always attuned – the question for the would-be reader of textual globality is then *how* to receive the literary text (addressing an adjacent topic, Franco Moretti puts his finger on it exactly): how to tune the forms of attention to hear and respond to what may fall outside our aural zone, our cognitive susceptibilities.

But first of all, to what, exactly, are we responding?

Only one neighborhood of the Scholarly Community on the Global Middle Ages (SCGMA, pronounced “sigma”) – an expanding international collaborative

founded in 2007 by Susan Noakes and myself, and now engaged in a variety of projects on early globalities – is inhabited by literary scholars, for whom the purview of literature warrants significant attention.<sup>1</sup> Amassing views of worlding gathered multilocally across the planet, the Global Middle Ages Project (G-MAP) we founded privileges no academic discipline, geographic locale, or culture – neither continent, ocean, nor “system” – but conjures with an uncentered planet that encompasses a multitude of formations simultaneously seen as interdependent and discrete, dynamically transforming themselves, and offering multiple kinds of worlding in “deep time.”<sup>2</sup>

Our announced time parameters of 500–1500 CE – gathering stories from a thousand and one years, as someone blithely dubbed it – points to its own self-factitiousness and to the overlapping seams and unstable logic of *all* temporal edges; a number of our initiatives begin significantly earlier and end significantly later than the millennium announced as a convenient heuristic rubric. Even that elegant fable, “the Middle Ages” – an invention of Renaissance historiographers, as every euromedievalist knows, post-*Annales* – is embraced by us under erasure as a Eurocentric construct with little bearing for the not-Europe cultures and chronologies of the world, and perhaps with little bearing even for Europe itself. We recognized that there would be differential temporalities everywhere, that zones and cultures would be asynchronous.<sup>3</sup>

Embracing a *global* “Middle Ages,” however, in which access to early globalities demands transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary assemblages of epistemology, brought useful encounters with the apparatus of discipline. Disciplinary difference – always a challenging, early problematic for multidisciplinary collaborations – helps to shake up the axioms of praxis in one’s own discipline, and is especially valuable for the field of literary scholarship today, where a vista of practices featuring “surface” reading, “distant” reading, “thin, flat” readings, “fast” reading, and “new formalisms” contend with older modalities of praxis – symptomatic reading, depth hermeneutics, *ideologie-kritik* – that have governed access to texts since the 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

A 2007 workshop, moreover, quickly cued us to what texts are in different disciplines. To literary scholars and historians, a text is a document; to an art historian, a ceramic or fabric; and to a musicologist, an instrument or notations; but to an archaeologist, a text might be a grain of rice, requiring attention apposite to its own complexities. Posing the question of what the forms of attention are that are salient to a global Middle Ages thus returns us to the persistently *transactional* nature of the analytical or reading process, and to the specific *interactional demand* posed by the properties of each text.

Far from inhabiting a moment of posthermeneutics, as some literary scholars have claimed (see, e.g., Best and Marcus) – where all that remains is the mere description of textual surface, in which meaning is self-evident – we saw that in order to access even the surface of some texts, before we can unbind granularity and implications not at all evident on the surface, it was clear we would need reading practices of all kinds, offered at all speeds and distances, plumbing many ranges of

depth, and scaled differentially as needed. Reading globally, and transdisciplinarily, *nothing* can be foregone.

Forms of macro-reading advanced by Moretti and others – a kind of *fast* reading scaled by computational algorithms – can impart a view of global climate conditions and climate change across deep time, via the rapid parsing of data. Optical pattern recognition and pattern matching, a form of micro-reading involving pixel-counting and machine-learning, and currently deployed to identify manuscript hands and illuminators, can pick out motifs and styles in fabrics and weaves scattered around the planet: like the distant reading that undergirds Moretti's transformed understanding of the novel, this kind of micro-reading/distant reading can transform our understanding of global commerce, artisanal dispersion, and the mobility of patterns and weaves as summaries of socioeconomic and cultural relationships.

Quantitative analysis, a staple of sociological method, can reveal distributed industrial revolutions and economic, scientific, and demographic modernities that have erupted within global *premodernity*, to recalibrate our understanding of time itself. Phenomena we think of as occurring only in modernity, and which serve as modernity's identifiers, have had a repeating transhistorical footprint in various vectors of the nonmodern world moving at different rates of speed, across deep time (Goldstone 347, 380–9). Robert Hartwell's data tell us that 700 years before Western Europe's "Industrial Revolution," the tonnage of coal burnt annually in eleventh-century Sung China for iron and steel production was already "roughly equivalent to 70% of the total amount of coal annually used by all metal workers in Great Britain at the beginning of the eighteenth century" (122). A "global Middle Ages" affords recognition of the existence of more than a single scientific or industrial revolution, or a single geographic locale as the instantiating matrix (Hart). Alternative views of time, and human development, thus emerge (Heng, "Holy War Redux").

But our current focus in this volume is *Middle English literature*. What might a global Middle Ages signify for the literary artifacts of insular medieval England? Not usually understood as belonging to the ambit of "world literature" or sought out for attention by literary transnationalism's comparatist-globalist heuristics, these examples of nonmodern literature are not the wandering lyrics of Chinese poetry, Arabic cycles of heroic epics across Dar al-Islam, or migratory *Jataka* tales. In what follows, I outline ways to consider how various methods of reading might grant access to what medieval England's literature wants to tell us about globalizations.

This is not a project that follows England's literary influence around the world, nor does it attest how the European Middle Ages became universalized, reaching locations in the global South and North where, as euromedievalisms, they are embraced by local elites and contexts, and sometimes intervene in local conditions.<sup>5</sup> Given the vast history of European colonizations, the universalizing of Europe's cultural traces has had a certain historical inevitability, so that there has been Chaucer in India, King Arthur in Japan, Don Quixote in the Philippines, and so forth. Rather, the effort will be to see what kinds of *return relay* may exist: offshore

traces of global transmigrations from elsewhere into the literary artifacts of medieval England, where, secreted as contaminants, they help to proliferate the ineluctable strangeness of texts heterogenized from within.

### Out of Africa Came a Name: Or, How to Read One Word at a Time

In the *Sultan of Babylon* (*Sowdone of Babylone*) – perhaps the liveliest constituent in a well-known cluster of Charlemagne romances in Middle English representing rewritten versions (“translations”) of Old French *chansons de geste* – there is a scene of rapturous celebration among the bivouacked and encamped Saracen armies after they have captured, sacked, and despoiled the city of Rome. The Sultan, Laban, and his son Ferumbras propitiate and make offerings to heathen gods, burning frankincense whose smoky fumes linger strongly and long (ll. 679–682). The festivities are triumphant and raucous, filling the air, ear, and nostrils, and making for “a fearful fascination” (Lupack 3): the men boisterously blow horns of brass and drink the blood of beasts, along with milk and honey that was royal and good; serpents are fried in oil and served to the Sultan (ll. 683–688). In the midst of rowdy feasting, imbibing, and rejoicing; amid the brass horns, the din, and the smoky fumes, the men bellow out, “Antrarian, antrarian” (l. 689).

What is “Antrarian?” Why does the text pool attention around the Saracen army’s shout, by explicitly telling us in the next line that the word “signified ‘Joy generale’” (l. 690) – that it signified communal joy? “Antrarian,” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen responds, is a “nonsense word . . . introduced and glossed as if it were *Sarrazinois* – that is, as if the Saracens possessed a unifying, signifying language” (130). Cohen’s suggestion, part of a lucid and persuasive article on medieval race and racism, is an example of what recent proponents of “surface reading,” Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, might identify as exemplifying the hermeneutics of suspicion, critical practices embraced by many medievalist literary scholars today, including myself. Citing Alain Grosrichard’s remark that “the West as a political system relies on a fantasy of a distant and despotic *subject supposed to enjoy*” (emphasis in the original), Cohen offers the *Sultan* as an example of how literature in the West dreams up Orientalist fantasies of Asiatic pleasures, complete with made-up nonsense words like “Antrarian” (130). This is an unexceptionable and flawless reading, entirely legitimate and soundly grounded in a critical practice that remains of significant value in cultural politics today. Cohen is absolutely right.

But since scholarship is built on consent, followed by reinvestigation – what we can call the moment of the “yes,” followed by the moment of the “and . . . and then, what?” it’s also interesting to ask: what *else* might we find if we follow, offshore, the word *Antrarian*?

Antara ibn Shaddad, an African-Arab cultural hero equal in stature and fame to King Arthur or Charlemagne in the medieval Latin West, is the celebrated protagonist of one of the most famous, and largest, corpora of popular and literary

Arabic cycles of heroic romances, accumulated through some eight or nine centuries of oral and literary narration. Indeed, stories of Antara, the “black knight,” are still retailed today, sometimes by an *Antari* specializing in the aggregated corpus of the *Antarahya*, and are cited by Africanists and African-Americanists like W. E. B. Dubois (4, 33, 104, 108).

A pre-Islamic warrior-poet of the sixth century CE, about whom little is known originally beyond the tradition that he was born in slavery, his mother an Ethiopian slave and his father an Arab prince, and that he rose to become a towering hero of gigantic chivalry, courage, and prowess, Antara became an Islamic hero of the Banu Abs. Affectionately dubbed the “Father of Knights” in the Islamic Near East and Africa, and in final literary compilations of the *Sirat Antar* (more than 5,000 pages in printed volumes, with the earliest extant 1466 manuscript of 919 folios representing less than half the total narrative material), he variously appears as the foe, ally, friend, or rival of Greeks, Africans, Arabs, Franks, and crusaders. Featuring tournaments, single combats, service to women, widows, and the poor, chivalry, feasts, adventures, extraordinary, named horses, heroic vaunting, the presence of ladies, giants, magical devices, the conquest of cities (including Rome), warriors who are poets, and boisterous humor, the expansive narrative tree of the *Antarahya*, with variant plot endings and episodes, has certain consistent features. Antara’s blackness of skin is one focal point, for instance; another is his attribution of his prowess – his skill in the sword – to his lineage through his African mother (who is variously characterized as a slave or as a relative of the Ethiopian/Abyssinian *Negus*).

The globe inside the text delicately peels open when we see that the merrymaking Saracen armies in the *Sultan of Babylon* are shouting out the name of their semilegendary hero, *Antara* – just as King Arthur’s men might call out “Arthur!” or Charlemagne’s men “Montjoie! Saint Denis!” – raucously and expectantly, calling for stories from the *Antarahya*, as they feast in communal triumph and joy. Antara himself in one of his vaunts encourages men to summon his great legend by name – “If you call aloud the name of Antar . . . / all will take you for a hero” (Norris 215) – a legend appositely recalled during feasting and celebration, social rituals at which stories are also retold with joy in the Latin West, whether in the Anglo-Saxon mead hall or called forth by Arthur’s demand for a tale or adventure before the king sits down to his meat. *Antrarian* – the text winks – signifies communal joy and delight, “Joy generale.”

Following the trace of a famous name out of Africa and Arabia, we also glimpse a discontinuous tracery of global stories whose vestiges alight on some of the *Sultan’s* characteristic and striking features. Like the Saracen Floripas who chooses the Christian Guy of Burgundy as her lover and converts to Christianity, “Christian girls” in Arabic romances and heroic epics act “blatantly to seduce Muslims . . . [and] must be converted” (Lyons 40). The Hilali cycle (*Taghribat Bani Hilal*) denigrates “Christian dogs who worship stones” (Lyons 43), while the *Sultan’s* Laban, who worships graven idols, denigrates his foes as “Crystyn dogges” (l. 956). Magic devices abound in Arabic cycles, some furnishing food and wine, others simply removing hunger, like Floripas’s girdle which makes Charlemagne’s peers feel full

and revived (Lyons 51). In the *Sirat al-Amira Dhat al-Himma*, the Dailamis fight with clubs – so does the giant Alagolofur in the *Sultan*, who brandishes an oak log as his club (l. 2919) – and mountaineers wield sickles to mow down horses (Lyons 55); the giantess Barrok in the *Sultan* also wields a sickle to mow down all “like sheep in a fold” (ll. 2940–2941).

Beautiful, feisty Islamic princesses like Ain al-Hayat in the *Qissat Firuz Shah b. al-Malik Darab* are larkily casual about killing their own – dispatching a slave and three of her father’s guards (Lyons 110) as nimbly as the *Sultan*’s feisty Islamic princess Floripas drowns her governess and dispatches her father’s jailor (ll. 1578, 1605–1606). Using extravagant diets to characterize a culture or personage, the cycle of Firuz Shah has a sorcerer eat reptiles and drink “noxious brews,” while the *Sultan* has serpents fried in oil served to Laban, who has his men drink the blood of wild beasts to fire them up for battle (l. 1007). In matters of conversion, the Arab cycles “show a mirror image of the choice between conversion and death offered to Muslims in the Chanson de Geste” (Lyons 47), but there, of course, it is non-Muslim heathens, not Saracens, who break or strike their idols (cf. *Sultan*, l. 2507).

A dramatic development in the *Sultan* and the Middle English *Sir Ferumbras* is the appearance of twin sons by the giantess Barrok (as the *Sultan* names her) or Amyote (as *Ferumbras* names her) and the giant Astrogote – enormous black infants in a *family* of giants whose presence insinuates that the giants which are so common in medieval European romances are perhaps not singular aberrations *contra naturam*, as we are wont to imagine, but represent whole *races* of giants, races more fully attested in Arabic than in European romance (where giants usually appear as singular émigrés).

These massive black twins, christened “Roland” and “Oliver” by Charlemagne, we are told, so that they shall become men who are mighty of hand (l. 3029), are queerly reminiscent of the famously black-skinned Antara and his twin brother Shaybub, both of gigantic prowess and stature, and who as the Roland-and-Oliver of the *Sirat Antar* are indeed mighty of hand, amassing some nine volumes of adventures. Even Antara’s daughter, the black-skinned Untaira, is a giantess of sorts, “an exceptionally large baby” able to fight from the age of five and growing into a ferocious fighter as an adult woman, with the Prophet Muhammad himself being “astonished at her size” (Lyons 111). It is well, perhaps, that the *Sultan*’s black Roland and Oliver do not survive.

A global outside materializes inside the *Sultan of Babylon* via a sensorium of sensuous experiences. We are invited to imagine serpents crisped in oil as a delicacy, and beasts’ blood as energizing elixir; frankincense – a prime commodity of the East – wafts exotically and tantalizingly up our nostrils. Skin colors of blue, yellow, and black, and human bodies that fuse with animal faces and body parts capture and arrest our sight (ll. 1005, 2197–2198). Wines tempt with diverse colors – yellow, white, and red – as do meats, bread, and fragrant spices (ll. 2699–2702). Uncanny acoustics assail the ear: the metallic siren of brass horns blasting out in propitiatory and celebratory rites; the unearthly keening of human mourners bewailing their

dead. Burning fire and precious unguents (“riche oynement”) are part of a dead king’s funerary customs, and the Qur’an is sung as a dirge for seven days and seven nights, haunting the air (ll. 2269–2274). Insinuated through sound, sight, scent, and taste, the aura of foreign shores surrounds the sensory envelope, an ambient invasion.

The text’s engagement with the extraterritorial does not mean, of course, that it hesitates to judge what it imports. But though the *Sultan* duly has Saracen foes consigned to perdition, its evocation of global *translatio* nonetheless fashions a literary artifact where cultural fusion is a prime characteristic of the braiding and mixing of kinds. Ferumbras, a Saracen prince, has an uncle who is a king of Italy, and ends his life as a Christian holy man in Spain who takes the name of an Italian coin (ll. 1480, 3195–3198). Roland and Oliver are Charlemagne’s peers *and* black giant twins from Africa. Tracking a word – *Antrarian* – that unwinds back to other cultural networks, we are able to watch the *Sultan of Babylon* signal its participation in transnational circuits of exchange in which stories, traditions, goods, and motifs are globally traded. As a participant in such trading and exchange – and trading and goods, we note, are prime tropes dramatized by this narrative (ll. 2863–2864, 2885–2888) – the romance signals itself as a globalized text marked by crisscrossing international traces, with the global tracery that accrues becoming an important part of the text’s own symbolic capital.<sup>6</sup>

What does it mean to read a literary text in this way? Is focusing on a word that is highlighted by the text a means of dutifully practicing a “depthless hermeneutic” which attends “to what is present rather than privilege what is absent” – a way to acknowledge “Surface as literal meaning” as Best and Marcus instruct (12, 11)? Yet read literally, “Antrarian” is unintelligible: its phonemes only create noise that hits the ear, a *not*-word. Surface reading as literal reading in this case renders syllables meaningless – which may well be gratifying for some audiences of the text, as Cohen astutely intuits. By contrast, when the word is read archaeologically, not as a syllabary of sounds but as a name – or read genealogically, in the discontinuous way Foucault understands genealogy to mean – *past* its surface literality, *Antrarian* returns to the worlds of signification from which the name springs: thus awarding satisfaction, perhaps, to other audiences, so that the multilayeredness and multidimensionality of this text’s signifying systems ensures a certain durability for the strange appeal of this romance. Alternate forms of reading local and global suit an unsorted miscellany of audiences.

A decade and a half ago, I argued for following another name (not in a Middle English text, but still a text from medieval England) back through a discontinuum of cultural memories, oral and literary constructions, and alternate forms of knowing and memorializing, in order that trauma accruing from acts of crusader cannibalism performed during the First Crusade might be rendered narratable and discussible. I read “*Mons Aravius*” in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* literally as “the Arabian mountain,” and not as Mount Snowdon in Wales (which was then the preferred scholarly interpretation, given the author’s presumed identity as a Breton or Welshman). That act of surface reading startlingly led to a recognition

of the intimate, intertwining relations between medieval (Arthurian and European) romance and the crusades, braiding together the cultural histories of Europe and the Near East. Eventually, the recognition also brought a specific understanding of romance: as a mode of narration in which history and fantasy jostle together and collide, vanishing each into the other, without apology or explanation, at precisely the junctures where both could be mined to best advantage (Heng, “Cannibalism” and *Empire of Magic*, ch. 1).

In 1998, that micro-retrieval of a name, *Mons Aravius*, required surface and literal reading – the opposite strategy from how to read the word *Antrarian* here – yet both approaches give access to other times, places, histories, and globalities. Perhaps it is attention to the singular *detail* that matters – the thread or knot that rises above the warp and weave of text, calling attention to itself, and issuing its particular kind of interactional demand. Not surface, but what sticks out – what sticks to *you*, the text’s recipient – anywhere. Names – and details – from non-European worlds stick out all over Middle English texts, readable at whatever distances or speed: Genghis Khan in *Mum and the Sothsegger*, the Prophet Mohammad in *Piers Plowman*; place-names in the “Saracen” or “oriental” romances that make up the so-called “matter of Araby;” and even an incandescent Green Knight (Ng and Hodges).

The transactional properties of each particular work, each work’s invitation to transact, means that reading globally – to hear and see the global in the local – is part of the education of our desire. Feminists, queer studies scholars, and many others for whom educating desire is a continuous responsibility in all transactions with cultural artifacts will not find this news. Texts will sometimes signal loudly, encouragingly: the embroidery on a woman’s cloak in *Emaré* even puts a story in each of the cloak’s four corners, morphing multicorned worlds in stitch, color, and thread, woven into place by a global feminine figure, the shadowy daughter of a Sultan, in asking to be read.

### **A Fantasy from Persia and Syria: How Paradise and a Civilization Are Miniaturized**

One literary text in particular assembles a treasure house in which the planet, as it was known to fourteenth-century England, was collected and miniaturized for an audience at home: the travel narrative compiled under the name of John Mandeville, English knight. Preceding the wonder-boxes of the Renaissance – miscellanies of souvenirs amassed by desire and curiosity, and seasoned well with the pleasures of acquisition and consumption – *Mandeville’s Travels*, I have argued, functions much like the ethnographies, natural histories, cabinets of curiosity, and museum collections of the later ages of empire which also kept their eye on the world (*Empire of Magic*, ch. 5).

In the panorama of the *Travels*, many moments in narrative open windows onto globality: offering vistas of a Cathay where long-nailed Mandarins are fed by serving women, Juggernaut-worshipping Indians in South Asia, enemy-eating cannibals in

the Southeast Asian archipelago, or sons who drink from the skulls of their fathers in ancestor-reverencing Tibet. Each of these vistas is a portal to worldings, crucibles, and mobilities of early globality, and often the price of admission can be simply a traditional kind of historical scholarship, plain ol' historicized cultural studies.

Take, for example, the pathways to Dar al-Islam. The Islamic world is plurally materialized in the *Travels* through dialogue and commentary, memorable characters, events, and places, but a striking feature is also how a civilization can be compactly and economically summoned by means of a single cultural fantasy with which it has been linked for centuries. This is an argument that requires more complex treatment than I have words for in this short essay, but I will attempt to sketch a brief trajectory – this time not tracing backward from the text, but forward, into the text – to reconfirm historicist sleuthing as a form of attention productive for a global Middle Ages.

A popular cultural fantasy of the European Middle Ages involves the Assassins of Alamut and their shadowy master, the “Old Man of the Mountain.” First gaining a foothold in twelfth-century Latin crusade texts, fascination with the Assassins spread so rapidly in Europe that by the second half of the century, or early in the thirteenth, five Provençal poems were able to refer to Assassins and master as ready metaphors that a public could understand without explanation. In the fantasy, male youths are fed a narcotic and brought to a mountain fastness in the Orient, where a “sheik” or old man has connived a facsimile Islamic paradise, enabling the youths to revel in polymorphous pleasures, including the sexual services of pliant women. Told they can only return to this paradise by committing assassinations ordered by their master, the youths become infamous as assassins who perform sensational murders, their legend growing for nine centuries thereafter, and appearing even in cultural media of the twenty-first century.<sup>7</sup>

Historically, a breakaway populace of Ismaili Shiites did in fact congeal communities in mountain fastnesses in Persia and Syria for some 200 years, till extirpated by the Mongols. Known to scholarship today as Nizaris, they improvised a distinctive, territorially dispersed state formation out of chronically unstable historical conditions, a state formation remarkably adapted to the exigencies of regional existence. Spread across Persia and Syria as a network of nodal points anchored by approximately 250 fortified mountain enclaves and their surrounding villages and towns – with power loosely emanating from, but not only from, Alamut, the first site acquired in northern Persia – the decentered system was created after a critical split from the Mustalian Ismailis of Fatimid Egypt in 1094 over a succession dispute.

Under new leadership and their own imams, Nizari Ismailis improvised complex diplomatic and military affairs in the regional balance of power. Syrian Nizaris came to terms with the leader of the Sunni forces waging the counter-crusade, Salah ad-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub (“Saladin” to the West), and conducted rapprochements with his successors. They became tributaries of the orders of the Hospital and the Temple; lent support to these orders on occasion; and were defended on occasion by Hospitalers and the Ayyubid rulers of Aleppo and Damascus. Nizari adaptations to the volatilities of regional power – coming to terms where necessary, using tribute,

electing warfare, improvising political assassination as a strategy of advantage against superior forces – suggest rationality and discipline.

The name *Assassins*, by which the Nizaris are popularly known, was attached to them by their enemies. The sobriquet first appears in a polemical epistle in 1123 by the Fatimid caliph Al-Amir, leader of the Mustalian Ismailis, who, in refuting Nizari claims to the Ismaili leadership, vilifies the sect by tagging them “*Hashishiyya*” (users of *hashish*), a term of abuse that has dogged the Nizaris for 900 years. In the thirteenth century, this epithet connoting Nizari degeneracy also appears in rival Zaydi Shiite documents and miscellaneous Sunni documents, including Imad al-Din’s chronicle of the Seljuks, Abu Shama’s regional history of Syria, and Ibn Muyassar’s history of Fatimid Egypt. Early non-Arabic sources who report this pejorative for the Nizaris include the Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela (who calls them “*Al-Hashishim*”), the chronicler of the crusader states William of Tyre (“*Assissini*”), and the European chronicler Arnold of Lübeck (“*Heysessini*”).

Today, scholars of the Nizaris think little of the claim that Nizari communities indulged in hashish as an inducement to, or preparation for, assassination by their *fedawis*, the specialized devotees within the Nizari state directed to the commission of assassination. Conceding that Nizari imams – especially their ascetic and erudite founder, Hasan ibn Sabah – imposed strict regimes of rigorous asceticism on their communities, most argue that the inflammatory name was circulated by their enemies – Sunni Muslims, Shiite rivals, Ismaili foes – to cultivate an association of the Nizaris with popular notions of social degeneracy and lower-class infamy.

Archaeologists tell us that Nizari mountain enclaves constituted viable socio-economic entities, cultivating innovations in technology, fortifications, and agriculture. Hasan ibn Sabah enlarged the mountain fastness of Alamut, had cisterns, underground chambers, and storerooms hewn from solid rock, and a spring diverted for a permanent water supply. Alamut even had its own mint. In the Alamut valley, Hasan extended irrigation and cultivation, and had water canals dug and numerous trees planted – projects that insinuated the nucleus of an idea that Alamut might be an earthly paradise replete with wells, conduits, and orchards.

As the fortunes of the Nizari state fluctuated, one more element fed a European fantasy of an Assassin paradise. Nizaris were a theocratically organized polity based on a messianic creed vested in cycles of manifest and hidden, divinely inspired imams who led the faithful through requisite devolutions of time along the path to eschatological fulfillment (*qiyama*). Not only did their creed require patient waiting and survival while being surrounded by demographically and militarily superior hostile forces and populations, but theirs was a messianism committed to esoteric interpretations of sacred writ, and to strategies of dissimulation (*taqiyya*): defensive self-concealment through group behavior that deliberately obscured access to the lived realities of their communities and faith, and that sought to mislead and confound the uninitiated.

Under two successive Persian imams, the esoteric construal of eschatology led to a notorious period c.1164 or 1165 when the rules of Islam proper were contravened for some forty-six to forty-eight years at Alamut. This aberrant episode left a

footprint in Latin texts: William of Tyre, for one, tells us that the Assassins were devout Muslims who followed the law and traditions of Saracens so strictly for forty years that all others seemed like prevaricators by comparison, but had recently fallen under an eloquent and subtle leader who absolved them from fasting, allowed indulgence in wine and pork, and ceased religious observances. The aberration is also narrated by Muslim sources, among them Juvaini, Kashani, a Shiite of the Twelver sect, and the Sunni historian Rashid al-Din. Kamal al-Din reports how, in 1176, a faction of Syrian Nizaris misconstrued esoteric interpretations of doctrine and embarked on libertinism before being severely disciplined by their leader, Rashid al-Din Sinan, the infamous “Old Man of the Mountain” of crusading lore and *chansons de geste*. Reports of this interval of “libertinism” helped nourish tales of sensual excess by the Assassins of Alamut.

To Muslims, the Nizaris represented a breakaway population of heretics whose doctrines and esoteric traditions challenged Sunni orthodoxies – heretics who gave a face to troubling cleavages within Islam, Shiism, and even Ismailism. The very existence of Nizaris bore witness to a pluralized, unsettled, and unsettling Islam, a community of faith riven by counter-universalist fragmentations that surrendered Islam as heterogeneous and divided, with no end in sight to discord: Islam as the melodrama of an internally contradicted project. Underscoring failures in the transmission of an unbroken line of religious authority, Nizaris also underscored grave propensities for more than doctrinal disorder, as their assassinations of key Muslim leaders spread regional disruption and chaos at a time when Muslim energies were directed toward the counter-crusade being waged against the Latin Christian occupiers of Syria and Palestine. For Islamic communities, vilifications of the Nizaris thus seem keyed to representing the Nizaris as bizarre outcasts, an aberrant heretical sect festering outside the broken circle of Islamic communal self-identity.

In their earliest European fabrications, the Assassins carried over the memory that they represented something strange within Islam that might not be Islam altogether. Arnold of Lübeck’s *Chronica Slavorum*, among the earliest, contains an account attributed to Frederick Barbarossa’s envoy to Syria in 1175, in which the “*Heyssessini*” are described as *both* a race of Saracens in the mountains (“genus Sarracenorum in montanis”) *and* a breed or race of men living without law (“genus hominum sine lege vivit”). Against the prospect that they are genuine Saracens is the shocking knowledge that this bizarre community consumes pork, in direct violation of Islamic law: “carne quoque porcine vescitur contra legem Saracenorum.” They are also said to make use of all women without distinction, including their mothers and sisters. Even Benjamin of Tudela, no fabulator, was drawn to observe of *Al-Hashishim* that “they do not believe in the religion of Islam, but follow one of their own folk, whom they regard as their prophet.”

By the end of the thirteenth century, however, Marco Polo’s fabrication of Assassin history makes it plainer that the Nizaris are Saracens. Indeed, Polo’s account subtly closes a divide between the breakaway heretics and Islam proper, so that it is easier to forget that this cast-off group of Saracens do not represent Islam, but only

their own particular society. But if Polo's story loosens for Europe the memory of a fundamental distinction between Nizari Ismailis and Islam proper, it is in the fourteenth-century work purporting to relate the travels of one Sir John Mandeville from England to the Near East and Cathay that the Assassins come to stand in for Islamic civilization in a more general way.

*Mandeville's Travels* sketches a description of the Qur'anic paradise in a lengthy exposition on the Qur'an and Islam, before alighting on the Assassins. Paradise, the *Travels* says, is believed by Saracens to be

a place of delytez, whare a man schall fynd all maner of fruytez all tymes of þe zere, and riuers rynnand with wyne, mylke and hony, and fresch water; and þai schall hafe faire palaycez and grete and faire housez and gude, after þai hafe disserued, and þase palacez and housez er made of precious stanes, gold and siluer; and ilk man sall hafe iii<sup>xx</sup> wyfes of faire damiselles, and he schall hafe at do with þam ay whem him list, *and he sall euermare fynd þam maydens*. þis trowe þai all þat þai sall hafe in paradys; and þis es agayne oure lawe. (Warner 66, emphasis added)

Arriving at the Assassins' lair, the *Travels* describes it in vocabulary it has already established for the Islamic paradise: a beautiful garden with all manner of trees bearing diverse fruits and even sweet-smelling herbs that bore beautiful flowers (137). The Assassin garden also has springs which run with wine, milk, and honey, and many fair halls and chambers, painted with gold and azure. Precious stones and precious metals abound (137). But curiously, the Assassin paradise of the *Travels* also calls attention to marvels and feats of *engineering*. One marvel is intricate mechanical birds that sing most delectably, their motion animated by mechanical craft, so that it seemed as if they were alive ("bryddes that songen full delectable and meveden by craft, pat it semed that thei were[n] quyke," Hamelius 185; "brides þe whilk semed as þai sang and turned by engine as þai had bene all quikke," Warner 137).

Where Polo mentions in passing conduits of wine, milk, honey, and water, the *Travels* makes sure we understand that these are *subterranean* conduits, hydraulically laid down to supply the wells: wells that are highly ornamented, enclosed with jasper and crystal, and bound with gold (Warner 137; Hamelius 185). The halls and chambers of gold and azure are architectonically many stories high, and there is a high tower from which music issues, secretly played by "diverse minstrels" (Warner 137) or "diverse instruments" (Hamelius 185). The Cotton text of the *Travels* even emphasizes horticultural technique: the garden's trees bear all manner of fruits that *man knew how to devise* ("man cowde deuyse," Hamelius 185).

Unerringly, this garden's focal points recall not only Islamic eternity, but Islamic *civilization* at its apogee: the palatial, ornamented gardens and courts of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs, when tales of the glories of Arab civilization in the Near East and Andalusia made their way through Europe, along with exotic gifts and trade in luxuries. The vista of a delightful garden with underground hydraulic conduits and gilded, decorated wells; a cultivated diversity of fruit trees, scented herbs, and beautiful flowers; ornately adorned multistory chambers and halls; exquisite

automata that ingeniously blur the line between artifice and nature; the pleasures of music; and a high tower as a noted architectural element, all famously point to the magnificent caliphal gardens of Al-Andalus and the Islamic East. This false paradise even boasts a menagerie and aviary much like a caliph's, existing for the purpose of play and sportive delight (Warner 137; Hamelius 185).

The Assassins' paradise is serviced by the most beautiful maidens and stripling youths ("striplynges") in the world younger than fifteen ("vnder the age of .xv. 3eer," Hamelius 185). Novitiates who are drugged, brought here to taste the delights of this Islamic paradise "in full blisse" (Warner 137), are then plied with the lure that, should they die while conducting assassinations, they would return and be evermore of the same age as the damsels, and have pleasure and intercourse with them at will ("dalyaunce," Warner 138; "pleye," Hamelius 186), yet find their pleasure-companions perpetually virgin. Narrative insistence on the *perpetual virginity* of the *houri*-like companions, and the presence of beautiful boys as servitors – features conspicuously absent in Polo – shows how attentive the *Travels* is to the template of the Qur'anic paradise, even as it miniaturizes paradise as the gardens of Dar al-Islam.<sup>8</sup>

I discuss elsewhere what it might mean for a medieval literary text to summon a global civilization in this way, through a cultural fantasy of sex and death that has accrued its affective economy and its meaning from centuries of symbolic accumulation (Heng, "Sex, Lies, and Paradise"). Here, my interest is merely to attest how a detail that sticks, in the reading process, can be a word, a name, a character, or a fantasy cut from whole cloth, in calling attention to a global Middle Ages, and in issuing permission for the many ways to get you there.

### **Global *Translatio* from Asia, Eurasia, Everywhere: The Buddha's Gift of Many Tongues**

To conclude this random sampling of Middle English literature, a foray which has thus far managed to suggest that early globalities are best accessed through close (micro) reading or slow (micro) historicist sleuthing, I want to end with an example in Middle English that may suggest how *distant* reading across hundreds (or even thousands) of documents and dozens (or scores) of languages and dialects might be apposite for certain kinds of global texts. The literary example I have in mind traveled to England from two millennia of journeying around the planet, during which time human languages of almost every variety retold its story, changing some details while keeping others, growing new signatures and desires, and transacting with just about every major culture, society, and religion on the planet.

The Middle English text we know as *Barlaam and Iosaphat*, a story that in England and Europe exalts Christian sainthood through the depiction of two saints whose feast day in the Roman martyrology of 1584 commissioned by Gregory XIII is assigned as November 27, began in Asia as the life of Siddhartha Gautama, the most famous Bodhisattva known to humankind, birthing the philosophical episteme known as Buddhism. Lineaments of this eventually Christian story fan

out from early Sanskrit and Pali (Mahayana and Theravada) accounts of the life of the Buddha (fl. fifth or sixth century BCE), most notably, the *Buddhacarita* of Asvaghosha (the earliest full biography, stemming from the second century CE), the *Lalitavistara Sutra* (of the third century CE), and folklore-like *Jataka* tales (the traditional canon of which settled around the fourth and fifth centuries CE).

In the vast corpora of stories scattered around the planet, the plot goes like this: A young prince of India is secluded in luxury by his anxious royal father, after an alarming prophecy at the prince's birth, and grows up in a sheltered palatial cocoon, yet manages to encounter human misery in the form of old age, disease, and death. Finally, after a series of transformative events, parables, and lessons, the prince renounces worldly life, and turns to asceticism as the answer to human tribulation and suffering, becoming after his death a world-renowned exemplar of asceticism. Around this core content swarm variant details. The Christian version, for example, persistently retains throughout a web of dispersions the monk-hermit Barlaam as the prince's teacher in doctrine, liturgy, catechism, sacrament, and biblical knowledge.

The Buddha's story is an extraordinary allegory of global multilingual encounter and *translatio*: how mobilities of plot, names, ideas, motifs, and themes, strewn across the planet in a dynamic catchment over some 2,000 years, were transacted through tracteries of exchange that are still in the process of being discovered. Scholars working independently in many fields have tracked parts and stages of this vast catchment through the last centuries, but as early as 1446, an unknown editor of a Venetian version of Marco Polo had already noticed that Polo's account of the Buddha "is like the life of Saint Iosafat" (Almond 396). In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese traveler Diogo de Couto, visiting Sri Lanka, also intuited of Josaphat "it may well be . . . *he* was the Buddha, of whom they relate such marvels" (Lang 12).

In the westward spread of narrative (there's also an eastward spread), scholars surmise a peripatetic pathway from India to the West: first, through Central Asia, where story-fragments are found in Manichaean manuscripts (eighth-century copies of which were discovered in Chinese Turfan); then to recensions in Arabic; thereafter into Georgian; then transposed from Georgian to Greek by the Georgian founder-abbot of the Iviron monastery of Mt. Athos, St. Euthymius, in the early eleventh century; and thence from Greek into Latin, the earliest version of which, in the mid-eleventh century, has been traced to Naples. The vast forest of vernacular texts that sprung up thereafter in Europe over the centuries is seeded by the second Latin version of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries (other Latin forms, long and short, also exist). Vernacular texts have appeared in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Romania, Provence, Italy, Spain, Norway, Portugal, Russia, and of course, England; there are also Ethiopic and Armenian versions, and, in the eighteenth century, a Filipino version.

How the Buddha grew the name "Josaphat" or "Iosaphat" is a micrological specimen of global *translatio*'s spoor. From Sanskrit descriptions of him as a *Bodhisattva*, the enlightened Indian prince is called "the *Bodisav*" in Manichaean

fragments (Almond 404–405); *Bodhisattva* (Bwdysdf) is even among the titles given to Mani in Middle Iranian hymns (Lang 25). In Arabic recensions, the honorific becomes *Budhasaf* and from a scribal slip emerges as *Yudhasaf* (Lang 29): “Because the Arabic B and Y differ by only a single diacritical point, Budhasaf by virtue of a scribal error became Iodasaph in Georgian, Ioasaph in Greek, and finally Josaphat in Latin” (Almond 404). In the geographical round of how a name morphs, we catch a glimpse of early globalizations that plant the Buddha as “a saint in Christendom for some nine hundred years” (Almond 395). Involving so massive a web of texts, languages, dialects, crossings, and traces that it beggars by comparison Moretti’s computational target – the novel as world literature – the kind of world literature represented by *Barlaam and Josaphat* arcs across millennia in foresting the world with literary texts.

Stories of the Buddha exemplarily deserve distant reading of the computational kind, but *Barlaam and Josaphat* is also susceptible to close reading of the local kind that zooms in on a single text, *and* crosscultural analysis of the comparative kind that zooms out to straddle texts plausibly linked by a few languages and cultures. In global *translatio*, the Buddha and his Christian avatars, it turns out, teach us that mixed usages of global/local, surface/depth, distant/close, fast/slow are all apt forms of attention for a global Middle Ages.

See MARGINS; POSTCOLONIALISM; RACE.

### Notes

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Eugene Vance, scholar and friend, whose vision was always global.

- 1 Projects in progress include special issues of *Literature Compass*, *Digital Philology*, and a 750-page volume on the Global Middle Ages; in 2012–13 the University of Minnesota will convene a year-long faculty-graduate seminar on Early Globalities. Current *digital* projects focus on premodern Africa, Constantinople/Istanbul, and the “discoveries” of the Americas. See also Heng, “Global Middle Ages” and “Experiment.”
- 2 Dimock adapts the term “deep time” from the physical sciences; my essay’s title is a tribute to her work. Abu-Lughod represents the best example of world-systems theory applied to premodernity. Grewal’s objection to Mediterranean studies perspectives that sideline the Indian Ocean (187) issues a reminder to keep attention multilocational.
- 3 See Goldstone; Hart; Heng, “Invention of Race,” 263–265.
- 4 To sample some new reading practices, see Moretti, Best and Marcus, Levinson, and Rooney.
- 5 Work of this kind has most recently been accomplished by Davis and Altschul, whose anthology compiles euromedievalisms in postcolonies and various colonial and neocolonial spaces.
- 6 Norris, Lyons, and others emphasize the multidirectionality of such interchange. For other examples of global circulation, see Metlitzki, Lasater, Menocal; also Heng, *Empire of Magic*.

- 7 Word limitations make detailed citation here impossible: see Heng, "Sex, Lies, and Paradise." The Assassins' contemporary appearances are many, and popularly include *The West Wing* (television), *Assassins' Creed* (a digital game), and of course, mass fiction.
- 8 See Qur'an 76:19, 56:17, 52:24 on *ghilman* and *wildan*, young male servants and boys of perpetual freshness who serve in the Islamic paradise.

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