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Modeling medieval world literature

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ABSTRACT
This article describes three models for integrating the study of medieval texts within world literature. First, "Mediterraneans" point to sites where diverse cosmopolitan regional centers are connected by a sea. Second, "distant reading" is deployed in tracing literary forms and themes over long periods of time and across cultures within medieval literature. Third, and most extensively, a model based on "moving things" is developed to track the ways in which objects and persons are used in medieval texts to precipitate cultural and social change on a large scale. Following the traveling objects in *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Book of John Mandeville*, the *Kebra Nagast*, and the *Travels of Ibn Battuta*, the article presents new patterns of conceptualizing literary history.

What is the place of "the medieval"? In popular culture, it is the place of the strange and the magical—dragons, wizards, elves, and so on—and the place of extremes—ideal figures, such as the fearless knight and the beautiful lady; and also paradigms of evil, such as the corrupt king or the necromancer. In academic departments, the medieval is the place where the strange and in-between is kept safely contained, if it is retained at all: many national literature departments have decided that Old French or Old High German are luxuries that they can no longer afford; the oddities of Old English philology are still valued by the modern English department, but are often confined to a very specific, narrow role within the curriculum; the medieval philosopher is a fish out of water in the modern Philosophy department, surrounded by the swifter streams of analytic philosophy and bioethics; and medieval history is rendered doubly strange by its remoteness in time and by the difficulty of translating the pre-modern era of holy war and religious reform into terms that do not degenerate into anachronistic comparisons with modern cross-cultural conflicts.

For a medievalist, then, it is all too easy to retreat into the fortress of the discipline of Medieval Studies—a very collegial fortress, to be sure, bustling with dynamic innovation and exchange within its walls—and to avoid thinking about the ways in which medieval studies might fit into the bigger picture. For historians, this bigger picture might include the emergent paradigm of world history; and for those who work in departments of English, Comparative Literature, or national literatures, this bigger picture might

include world literature. Medieval texts make it easy to sketch out poetic continuities and disjunctions over a long span of time, to describe how the path of literature winds its way from antiquity down into modernity, taking various routes across literatures and across cultures. There is no one path, in the same way as there is no single canon of "great books": there are many paths, and many concatenated chains. These various paths allow us to trace out literary histories whose value lies both in what they tell us about worlds gone by and in what kinds of "instrumental knowledge" they might offer for the present and the future. I borrow this phrase from Hayden White's account of Michael Oakeshott's distinction between the "practical past" and the "historical past": for White, the historical past is the kind of work historians "recognize" as historical, while the practical past is where:

> the past interests us only in the extent to which it is or seems to be relevant to the solution of a practical matter … [I]t might follow that our interest in the "history of literature" has more to do with "the practical past of literature" than with "literature's historical past".[1]

In general, we might associate research into literary history with the historical past, while associating the pedagogical work we do (teaching in the classroom, writing anthologies or other teaching materials) with the practical past. For the study of world literature, this distinction enables us to tease apart our different aims and—potentially—different methodologies in the domains of research and teaching. Yet such a distinction also raises new questions: is the relation of these two sequential, so that we are obliged to focus on the historical past before we can turn to the practical past? Or are these two always already intertwined, in the very research questions we ask?

The following pages lay out three paradigms for ways in which we might attempt to bring together some of the strengths of Medieval Studies with new directions in the field of world literature, while being attentive to the relationship—and the tension—between the practical past and the historical past, and between our modes of teaching and research. First, I suggest how Mediterranean Studies might serve as a way of integrating the study of medieval texts into the world literature frame, and then extend that paradigm outward into a discussion of what we might call (following David Abulafia) "Mediterraneans": that is, the various sites where diverse cosmopolitan and regional centers are linked together via a connecting sea. In this view, the Mediterranean Sea itself is just one of these "mediterraneans," or "middle seas." This portion of my argument refers particularly to the work of the historian/geographers Horden and Purcell. Second, I turn to the ways in which we might study medieval literature comparatively, over long periods and across cultures and language groups, using a methodology that strategically sacrifices—or, at least, puts aside—close reading in favor of a broad view of how waves of literary forms or themes move across a range of cultures. In developing this approach, which we might call "distant reading," I have drawn upon Franco Moretti's work on the 19th-century novel as a template for how we might approach medieval genres, especially romance and travel narratives.

I turn finally to a third model that we might use to integrate Medieval Studies and world literature, that of "moving things"—that is, the ways in which objects and persons are used in medieval texts to precipitate cultural and social transformation on a grand scale. This model is developed here more fully than the previous two, grounded in a reading of four 14th-century texts, two of which are likely to be at least somewhat familiar to western

readers: Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale, from his *Canterbury Tales*, and *The Book of John Mandeville*, often referred to as *Mandeville's Travels*. The two less familiar works, also from the 14th century, are the Ethiopian *Kebra Nagast*, or *Book of the Glory of the Kings*, and the *Rihla* or *Travels* of Ibn Battuta. I will conclude by returning to the teaching of medieval texts within the world literature frame, suggesting some ways in which the alignment of Medieval Studies and world literature might enrich both teaching and research, although in very different ways.

Model for world literature research 1: Mediterraneans

Over the last 15 years or so, the study of Mediterranean culture as a synthetic, dynamic world of cross-cultural exchange has emerged as a new paradigm in medieval studies. This trend is evident in a range of historical fields, including art history, history of science, and religious history, and has come to exert a strong influence on current developments in literary history as well. Such study of literature has tended to focus on regions where there is demonstrable evidence of diverse cultures living in close proximity with one another, such as Iberia during the period of Muslim rule, or Sicily during the reign of the Norman kings; more recently, important work has also been done on cross-cultural exchanges in "Outremer"—that is, the Middle Eastern territories inhabited by Europeans (Crusaders and others) from the late 11th century onward.[2] This section of the article briefly explores some ways in which this paradigm of Mediterranean culture might serve as a lens through which broader trends in medieval literature can be viewed.[3]

As Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell have argued in their co-authored study *The Corrupting Sea* (published in 2000), Mediterranean culture can best be understood not in terms of a continuous period during which geographically and culturally contiguous societies engaged in sustained interaction, but rather as a variable phenomenon, where "periods of intensification" alternated with "periods of abatement." This insight offers a way of approaching comparative literary studies that is dynamic, focused on the ebb and flow of cultures rather than on their static and bounded nature. In particular, it allows us the opportunity to distinguish between works produced during periods of "intensification" and periods of "abatement," even though these texts might be produced within the same national literature and during the same approximate time period.

It is easy to see how this formulation of Horden and Purcell might be useful to the enterprise of trying to find a way to analyze cross-cultural interactions in the medieval period. We might, for example, apply their methodology to the numerous depictions of the Islamic Orient produced over a long period (from the 11th to the 15th centuries) across Christian Europe. The intensification and abatement of cultural interactions between Christians and Muslims was scarcely a linear process during the Middle Ages: on the contrary, repeated cycles of military engagement and disengagement, as well as social, diplomatic, and political encounters, affected the basis on which depictions of the Islamic world were constructed. This is the case both on the pan-European level as well as within individual national literatures. It would be all too simple to identify a trajectory from an "age of ignorance" to an "age of enlightenment," from a simple lack of "real" knowledge to a more generous understanding of religious differences. More recent work, however, in the field of European views of Muslims has shown just how limited this generalization is: 15th-century depictions are as likely to grossly misrepresent

their object as 12th-century ones do, and insightful assessments of Islamic theology can be found in the writings of 12th-century writers like Peter the Venerable as readily as they can be found in much later periods. Yet it is crucial, in rejecting this generalization, not simply to embrace its reciprocal: that is, to assume that literature depicting Muslims produced in what we might call "contact zones," in environments where the knowledge of Islam and Muslims was less mediated, was necessarily more accurate or realistic. On the contrary, it is only necessary to look at the bitter anti-Islamic polemics produced in Spain in the wake of the ninth-century martyrdom of Christians in Cordoba to see how contact zones could be the hotbed of bitter distortion and hateful rhetoric.

What we might do, then, following Horden and Purcell a bit further, is to locate representative texts that would allow us to take in the broad picture of depictions of the Islamic Orient, ranging from the 11th to the 15th centuries and across a wide range of national literatures. In their effort to reconstruct an image of what they call "the weave of the world" (or "la trame du monde," following Braudel) to be found in the Mediterranean environment, Horden and Purcell propose to identify four locations which can serve, in their words, as "definite places"; that is, locations whose "distinctive identity [is] derived from the set of available productive opportunities and the particular interplay of human responses to them found in a given period."[4] For Horden and Purcell, anchoring their overarching study of Mediterranean culture on the foundations of four selected "microcultures" allows them to analyze the rich complexity of the ebb and flow of culture, and then to integrate these selected studies into an expansive survey of the region and the interplay that can be observed among its constitutive parts.

What does such a mode of historical analysis have to offer those who study medieval literatures? A great deal, if part of our purpose is to understand more fully the large-scale movements of intellectual and literary history. In the particular case of depictions of the Islamic Orient, Horden and Purcell's selection of four "definite places" might serve as a model for the selection of certain representative narrative templates, the multiple versions of which attest to the dynamic changes taking place within the European imagination on a number of levels: with regard to notions of religious alterity and identity, with regard to the nascent sense of national identity, and with regard to the extent to which gender roles serve as a foundation for the organization of society—to name just a few.

One way of carrying out such a study would be to focus on a particular genre or set of literary texts; this could be as broad as, for example, epic or romance, or texts that deal with the exploits of Charlemagne and his peers. This would be to paint with a very broad brush indeed. I would like to suggest a somewhat less diffuse way of accomplishing this goal, which is to select a group of texts that all form part of a single narrative tradition. For example, one might choose the numerous versions of *The Book of John Mandeville*. As Iain Higgins has shown in detail, the multiple versions of Mandeville's *Book* are not simply an example of textual mouvance and scribal alteration; on the contrary, this book of wonders has served strikingly different purposes for the many audiences that have enjoyed it, from its first readers in the mid 14th century to the early modern travelers who saw it as a reliable guide to the New World. Alternatively, we might choose the romance of *Fierabras*, a text whose earliest surviving versions are in 12th-century French, but which was reproduced and regenerated in a wide range of vernacular languages (as well as Latin), from the 12th century to the 20th century. Texts of *Fierabras* were composed in Old and Middle French, Middle English, Provençal, Italian, Spanish,

Latin, and Old Irish; oral versions of the romance survived into the 20th century in South America; and in the 19th century yet another version was adapted as an opera by Schubert.[5] On the one hand, the widespread popularity of the *Fierabras* romance reveals what cultures have in common, extending over a long period of time and including a wide geographical range: clearly, they share an interest in the matter of chivalric romance—that is, the competition of knights, the alluring pagan princess, hideous giants, and so on. At the same time, however, the numerous redactions of *Fierabras* reveal how cultures differ from one another, for several of the versions vary in ways that show how the narrative was adapted to fit the needs, concerns, and interests of the culture in which it appeared. Some versions, for example, depict the Saracen knight Fierabras as a giant, others merely as a magnificently built knight; some versions minimize the descriptions of the relics of the Passion sought by the Christian knights, while others expand those sections, transforming courtly romance into devotional literature.

Yet perhaps the aspect of the romance of *Fierabras* that most strikingly reveals the cultural norms which lie at the heart of each redaction is the portrayal of Floripas, the sister of the eponymous hero. Floripas has sometimes been seen as representative of what might be called "the pagan princess convention," related to figures such as Bramimonde (of the *Chanson de Roland*) or Guiborc (of the Guillaume d'Orange cycle).[6] She differs from those figures, however, in a number of ways; perhaps the most significant respect in which Floripas stands out is with regard to her behavior and, even more importantly, her status during the period between her avowal of the desire to become Christian and her actual baptism at the close of the narrative. During this time, Floripas exhibits apparently paradoxical behavior: she is beautiful and delicate, but also aggressive and violent. Floripas is both the exquisite object of men's admiration and the dominant mastermind supervising the Christian victory over the pagan forces led by her father. She speaks out forcefully; she laughs openly, often in response to violent behaviors of which she approves; she even kills with her own hands. In some versions of the romance, Floripas's behavior is explicitly characterized as unfeminine, and she herself is described as a dangerous combination of masculine and feminine qualities. In others, Floripas's behavior is not characterized as unfeminine, because her Saracen identity is dominant in the determination of what constitutes normative behavior. In each case, however, the extended period during which Floripas is neither wholly Saracen nor wholly Christian repays examination, because it constitutes a liminal phase during which not only Floripas's identity, but also the feminine ideal itself, is in flux. In certain late versions of the *Fierabras* romance, the liminality of Floripas's role is mirrored in the elaboration of the description of the river crossings that are hotly contested by the Christians and the Saracens; like the river itself, Floripas's body is a marker of contested territory, the field of a battle whose outcome is never in doubt.[7]

By looking closely at the polyvalent portrayal of Floripas, this focal figure in the *Fierabras* romance, it is possible to see the heterogeneity of cultural adaptations within the framework of a single literary text—single, in that all the versions represent a single narrative; multiple, however, when we make our focus of inquiry not "the" romance of *Fierabras*, but the multiple versions of this romance produced over several centuries, in a range of national literatures. This kind of approach to literature allows us to make the most of approaches rooted in Medieval Studies, while also extending our range outward to

encompass the ways in which texts circulate across borders, across linguistic traditions, and over a long period of time.

Model for world literature research 2: "distant reading"

I will turn from the first of my three models—based on how we might borrow Horden and Purcell's concept of the "definite place" to follow the movement of a single textual tradition (whether Mandeville's *Book* or *Fierabras*)—to a second model, one which focuses not on the "definite place" of a single text but on the role of genre in assessing literary history on a large scale. In this approach, which draws upon Franco Moretti's work on the 19th-century novel, we are able to evaluate medieval literature comparatively, over a long period of time and across cultures and language groups. This approach, which Moretti describes as "distant reading," puts aside close reading in order to take in a bigger view of how waves of literary forms or themes can move across a range of cultures.

Franco Moretti's 2000 article titled "Conjectures on World Literature," published in the *New Left Review*, incited a passionate response on the part of those working in the field of Comparative Literature. In part, the objections to Moretti's outline of how we might go about generating a "synthetic" study of world literature center on what, in Moretti's own admission, would have to be sacrificed: that is, close reading. As he puts it, "Less is more. If we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something."[8] In using Moretti's method, "You define a unit of analysis … and then follow its metamorphoses in a variety of environments"; to his credit, he does acknowledge the difficulty in choosing "how to set up a reliable sample."[9]

Moretti goes on to describe what kinds of insights might be enabled by such synthetic study of world literature. In contradistinction to the model of the tree, derived from Darwin and the mainstay of comparative philology,[10] he proposes the alternative model of the wave. For Moretti, the wave serves as a framework within which literary works can be seen as part of the same current even though they may not be directly adapted or translated from one another. The wave might be composed of works in a single genre, linked by a general theme, or some other common ground. In Moretti's words, "the tree describes the passage from unity to diversity: one tree, with many branches … The wave is the opposite: it observes uniformity engulfing an original diversity."[11] Moretti's evocative metaphor of the wave may serve us well in the effort to develop a comparative literary history of the Middle Ages. It might allow us to produce useful generalizations as we chart the movement of what Moretti calls the "reliable sample"; or, to put it in slightly different terms, using the theoretical framework of Horden and Purcell, to observe the ebb and flow of cultural changes as they wash over the "definite place" that we have selected, whether that place be located within the histories of Alexander, the "textual isotopes" of Mandeville's *Book*, or the romance of *Fierabras*. In each case, it is necessary to locate a central element—a center of gravity—to chart the tidal movements that, taken together, produce the big picture we hope to glimpse.

In closing his second article on this topic, Moretti acknowledges that he is inevitably confronting "the old question of whether the proper object of historical disciplines are individual cases or abstract models."[12] It is clear which side of the argument Moretti is on, at least strategically and for the time being, because he has gone on in his later work to suggest that we definitely do need to develop abstract models—the graph, the

map, the tree—in order to talk about large-scale movements within comparative literary history. I agree that we need to talk about these large-scale movements, but would suggest that we need to avoid, to the extent we can, the apparently inevitable consequence of saying "goodbye" to close reading. By adapting Horden and Purcell's model of the "definite place" into our literary methodology, it may be possible to preserve a place for close reading within the enterprise of charting the ebb and flow of comparative literary history.

One example of how we might attempt to preserve close reading even within Moretti's proposed framework of "distant reading" appears in the contribution of Wai Chee Dimock to the 2008 special issue of *New Literary History* on "Literary History in a Global Age" cited earlier. Her contribution, titled "The Egyptian Pronoun: Lyric, Novel, the *Book of the Dead*," moves from the use of the first-person pronoun in Walt Whitman's poetry to the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, back to Whitman, and finally to Norman Mailer's 1948 novel *The Naked and the Dead*. Dimock explicitly grounds her approach to literary history in terms of Moretti's proposals, proposing that we can "rescale" Moretti's undertaking to bring together disparity of genre (such as that we find in lyric poetry and the novel) and disparities of language, culture, and period. As she puts it, "Kinship among genres, though a large-scale problem" can be "*rescaled* into a form of close reading."[13] Dimock produces a lovely and evocative reading, although this methodology of "rescaling" could be focused more sharply on what is gained and what is lost as we move from distant to close reading. In my own work, and especially in the graduate research I have supervised, I have tried to adapt some of Moretti's methodologies for the study of the 19th-century novel to the study of medieval romance, a natural analog if there ever was one: it is almost commonplace that the romance is the novel of the Middle Ages, in terms of the almost infinite capaciousness of the genre and its tremendous popularity. The large-scale work that can be carried out on medieval romance is, of course, limited by the extent to which the texts (in all their many redactions) are available in electronic versions; as the availability improves, it will become possible to do more. Until that time, however, it is still possible to produce readings across textual traditions—in the vital plurilingual culture of the north Atlantic, encompassing Middle English, Anglo-French, medieval Irish, Middle Welsh, and Old Norse, no less than in the sea of languages that is the medieval Mediterranean.

Model for world literature research 3: moving things

Having explored two models of how we might bring together Medieval Studies and world literature—the first focused on Horden and Purcell's Mediterranean Studies model of the "definite place," the second focused on Moretti's model of "distant reading"—I will turn to a third model, that of "moving things." This approach focuses on the ways in which the movement of objects in space constructs a kind of imaginative geography that can be fruitfully read not merely in terms of sources and influences, but in terms of common narrative strategies, ritual patterns, and conceptions of space. This phenomenon will be illustrated with two pairs of 14th-century texts: first, a comparative reading of the anonymous Ethiopian *Kebra Nagast* and Chaucer's Middle English Man of Law's Tale; then, a brief account of how this sort of comparative reading would work for another pair of 14th-century texts, also widely separated by region and language of origin—Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* or *Travels*, and the *Book of John Mandeville*.

In both the *Kebra Nagast* and the Man of Law's Tale, things move and cultures are consequently transformed. This is a phenomenon we see across a wide range of texts, from antiquity to the present day: in Virgil's *Aeneid*, as Aeneas carries the household gods out of the fallen city of Troy, on the road to the foundation of the new empire of Rome; in the fifth-century historian Orosius's account of *translatio imperii*, where imperial might itself travels from one ruling city to the next; in the evocative images of Josephus carrying heavy books, chronicles of Jewish history, out of the fallen city of Jerusalem on the road to newly Christian Rome; and in depictions of Byzantines fleeing 15th-century Constantinople, bearing scrolls written in ancient Greek, in the wake of the Ottoman invasions. In each case—and we could name many others—the object that moves from the first city to the next on its itinerary has a transformative effect. The old location moves, inexorably, into the past; and the new location is launched into a powerful present and a dynamic future.

The *Kebra Nagast*, or *Book of the Glory of Kings*, is, like the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels, and the Qur'an, both literature and sacred scripture. It is revered by Ethiopian Christians as a true account of the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, the birth of their son, and the movement of the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to the Ethiopian capital of Axum, and continues to be read as a divinely inspired work by Rastafari communities in Jamaica and throughout the world. Yet the aims of the *Kebra Nagast* concern nation-building as much as religious unity, because the Christian religious appropriation of the identity of the "true Israel" and the Ethiopian national appropriation of "real" Jewish identity go hand in hand. The movement of the Ark from Jerusalem to the heart of Ethiopia, like the movement of the sacred images of the gods from Troy to Rome in Virgil's *Aeneid*, provides a tangible focal point for the movement of empire and stakes a nation's claim to supremacy.

It is worth pausing here to provide a brief overview of the context of the *Kebra Nagast*'s composition and audience. The Christian communities of Ethiopia date their origins to the first decades following the crucifixion of Jesus, based on verses in the Acts of the Apostles that recount the baptism of a visiting official from the court of the Queen of Sheba, his subsequent return, and the conversion of the nation. By the fifth century, however, the Ethiopian Church had come to identify its relationship with Christianity not as founded in the wake of Jesus' ministry, but rather in older connections with the forefathers of Jesus, especially Solomon, son of King David and ruler of Jerusalem. The connection of Jerusalem and the Ethiopian Christian capital at Axum was expressed both through holy texts such as the *Kebra Nagast* and through the art and architecture of the region. Many Ethiopian Christians still believe that one of their most sacred sites, the church of Our Lady Mary of Zion, houses the very same Ark of the Covenant that the Jews carried with them through the desert on their way to the Promised Land, as recounted in Exodus. Given the importance of the Ark, the daughter churches of Ethiopia continue to install in each individual church a reproduction of the tablets of the Law, copies of the originals kept in the Ark at Our Lady Mary of Zion. Although the common vernacular language of the region is Amharic, the language used in the religious services of the Ethiopian Church is Ge'ez, which is also the language of the *Kebra Nagast* and other sacred scripture.

The *Kebra Nagast* itself is a compilation put together by a community of religious scholars, united by the divine inspiration that lies behind the written text. It establishes the

origins of the national religion of Ethiopia in part by emphasizing the antiquity of the ruling house. The text includes a postscript or colophon that claims it was originally written in Coptic (a language used by the Christian communities of Egypt and North Africa), then translated into Arabic in 1225, and finally rendered in the local Ethiopian language of Ge'ez. Scholars agree that the Ge'ez version of the work, which is the only one that survives, dates from the 14th century, and conjecture that there must have been a lost Arabic version given the presence of Arabic vocabulary in the Ge'ez text; but no trace of a previous version in Coptic has been found.[14]

The *Kebra Nagast* begins with a broad overview of the book's own purpose and origins, followed by a brief account of world geography. But the main thread of the narrative centers on a love story—that of Solomon, King of the Jews and ruler of Jerusalem, and Makeda, the lovely and accomplished Queen of Sheba. After learning from a traveling merchant about the profound wisdom of Solomon, the Queen decides to travel to Jerusalem. There, she is as enraptured by Solomon's wisdom as he is by her beauty, and converts from her people's traditional worship of the sun, moon, and stars to instead worship the "God of Israel." The blissful union of Solomon and Makeda results in the birth of a child, Menelik, who will be heir to the Ethiopian throne. Although Solomon adores the Queen, as well as the first-born son she has given him, it is impossible for him to install Menelik as his heir in Jerusalem. As a sign of his special favor, however, Solomon determines to ensure that his son would carry with him back to Ethiopia a very special treasure: the luxurious cloth used to cover the Ark of the Covenant containing the Tablets of the Law, which had been carefully preserved in the great Temple. When Menelik is on the journey homeward, however, he makes an extraordinary discovery. The young men of Jerusalem that Solomon has sent along to accompany his son to Ethiopia have brought with them not only the ceremonial cloth, but the Ark itself.

For the purposes of this methodological discussion, I will focus on just two chapters from the *Kebra Nagast*: the one a description of the Ark as it was originally built according to the instructions Moses received from God (which can be compared with the last chapters of Exodus), and the second a description of "How they carried away Zion"—that is, how the Ark made its way from Jerusalem to Axum. From the outset, the Ark is described as a container or a "habitation" that is filled with the "glory" of God; it is precisely this glory that is infused into the rulers of the Ethiopian kingdom, generating the "glory of kings" that gives the *Kebra Nagast* its title:

> And as concerning Zion, the Tabernacle of the Law of God: at the very beginning, as soon as God had established the heavens, He ordained that it should become the habitation of His glory upon the earth. And willing this He brought it down to the earth, and permitted Moses to make a likeness of it …
>
> … He Himself created it for the habitation of His glory. And it is a spiritual thing and is full of compassion; it is a heavenly thing and is full of light; it is a thing of freedom and a habitation of the Godhead, Whose habitation is in heaven, and Whose place of movement is on the earth, and it dwelleth with men and with the angels, a city of salvation for men, and for the Holy Spirit a habitation.[15]

The Ark makes its first transmigration into "the land of [their] inheritance, which is Jerusalem, the City of Zion." There it remains, until the events chronicled in the *Kebra Nagast* unfold, and the Ark makes its second journey—this time to the Ethiopian city of Axum.

Here, God still directs the journey of the Ark, but the passage is carried out in a rather different way. Azaryas, the son of one of the priests of the Temple, is directed by an angel to carry the Ark out of Zion:

> [Azaryas] went into the house of God—now they found all the doors open, both those that were outside and those that were inside—to the actual place where Azaryas found Zion, the Tabernacle of the Law of God; and it was taken away by them forthwith, in the twinkling of an eye, the Angel of the Lord being present and directing. And had it not been that God willed it, Zion could not have been taken away forthwith. And the four of them carried Zion away…. [16]

As in the first passage, the Ark is said to be a "tabernacle," an enclosure containing the "Law of God." It transmits not only the "law" but also, as we have seen, the "glory" of God, thus simultaneously binding its chosen people to obey and marking them out as specially favored by heaven. This movement transforms both the people whom the Ark leaves behind, now bereft of the "glory" of God, and the people who receive it. Moreover, the city where the Ark formerly resided, like the city that receives it, is similarly transformed. Jerusalem is no longer "the City of Zion"; instead, the Ethiopian capital of Axum now holds that title.

We might compare this remarkable set of passages from the *Kebra Nagast* with medieval traditions concerning Jerusalem and Rome, chronicling the destruction of the Temple by Titus and Vespasian in a concomitant erasure of the Old Covenant and reaffirmation of the New Covenant, as the Christian Church becomes established in Rome. What I would like to do instead, however, is to juxtapose these chapters from the *Kebra Nagast* with another narrative of the transformation of cultures—the one left behind, and the one renewed—as seen in another 14th-century text, Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale. What logic is there in comparing two texts drawn from such disparate literary traditions, so geographically distant—one from northern Europe, one from East Africa— and so different in terms of genre? The value is two-fold: first, it de-familiarizes the extremely familiar text of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a standard and ubiquitous opening text in English literature surveys; and, second, it makes it possible to see the common ground that lies behind these two works. To put it another way, the comparative reading allows us more clearly to recognize shared backgrounds within the literary tradition. Perhaps more importantly, it allows us to foreground the notion of movement in our own conceptualization of literary history—that is, the movement of meaningful objects, of "habitations," of persons, that have a transformative effect both on what they leave behind and on what they encounter.

To turn now to Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale is to return to more familiar literary territory, placing it in two different contexts that will illustrate what a reading based in "moving things" might enable. First, the Man of Law's Tale will be juxtaposed with its two analogs in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, drawing upon the transnational, cross-cultural framework that has become increasingly important in the field of medieval Mediterranean Studies, emphasized in the opening of this article. Second, the Man of Law's Tale will be juxtaposed with the very different comparative framework of the movement of the Ark in the *Kebra Nagast*. It is not necessary to provide a detailed summary of the Man of Law's Tale, but only to highlight the extent to which the subject of the tale is circulation itself: circulation of the "tidynges / And tales" (lines 129–130) that merchants carry with

them from port to port, along with their cargo of goods and currency; circulation of the word—that is, the Word of God—as Christianity is transmitted throughout the world; and, finally, the figure of Custance herself, who travels from port to port, both a desirable object and an agent of change. Her ability to impact the cultures she encounters is mediated not so much through language as through her ineffable ability to make change happen: as the Tale puts it, "alle hir loven that looken in hir face" (line 532).

Analogs to the tale of Custance, of which there are a considerable number, sometimes highlight the extent to which the woman functions as a passive commodity, and sometimes the extent to which she functions as an active subject. This distinction can be most succinctly summarized by a comparison with two tales in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the story of Gostanza (5.2) and the story of Alatiel (2.7). Like Chaucer's Custance in Northumberland, Boccaccio's Gostanza is washed up on the shore of an unfamiliar land. For Gostanza, however, language proves to be both an index of familiarity and of unfamiliarity, an initial barrier that turns out to be a means of local assimilation. The woman who finds Gostanza on the shore near Tunis addresses her in Italian: Boccaccio writes, "hearing herself addressed in Italian, the girl wondered whether she had been driven back to Lipari by a change of wind."[17] Gostanza is soon taken in by a Muslim (or "Saracen") lady who has a household full of women, into which Gostanza is soon assimilated: "Her benefactress and the other ladies were remarkably kind and affectionate towards her, and before very long they had taught her to speak their language."[18]

Gostanza's experience of assimilation, language acquisition, and the generous company of women contrasts sharply with the story of Alatiel, recounted earlier in the *Decameron*. Unlike Gostanza, who is able to make her way in foreign places through the acquisition of languages, Alatiel remains cut off by the barrier of language as she is traded, bartered, and stolen by a sequence of men all around the Mediterranean. Her inability to communicate is repeatedly emphasized by Boccaccio, who relates how Alatiel tries to "explain" her situation "by means of gestures" and notes that "she was unable to make herself understood [except] by way of her gestures."[19] When Alatiel is seated between two men, Boccaccio states "the pleasure of conversing with her was denied them because she understood little or nothing of their language."[20] When at last her old associate, Antioco, encounters Alatiel and she is finally able to communicate, the end of the language barrier serves to punctuate the repeated cycle of circulation that Alatiel has undergone and to introduce the resolution:

> [Antioco] was familiar with her language, and this pleased her immensely because for several years she had been more or less forced to lead the life of a deaf-mute as she could neither understand what anybody was saying nor make herself understood.[21]

Turning back to the Man of Law's Tale, it is evident that Custance inhabits a linguistic space comparable with that of Alatiel. She is not, like Alatiel, "Fortune's plaything"; she is, however, the "sonde" of God, the thing that God has sent. Both Alatiel and Custance are objectified: they are things that are significant for what they are rather than subjects who are significant for what they say or think, excluded as they are by the barrier of language. The Mediterranean framework of trade and exchange—a context sketched out only in the briefest terms here—provides one very useful way of contextualizing Chaucer's tale and, in particular, of explicating how Custance's limited language ability can be seen in connection with the Mediterranean language of trade. The "maner Latyn corrupt" that she speaks

when washed up on the shores of Northumberland marks her out as the product of the trade and exchange routes of the late 14th century, an object that reflects the vernacular of the shipboard rather than a speaker who belongs to any one native land.

So much for the Mediterranean frame, which allows us to highlight the role of language in mediating between cultures, whether in the form of the barrier of different languages that frustrates Alatiel in her efforts to return to her homeland, or the ability of the Word to convert those who hear it, even if it comes in the form of Custance's "corrupt Latin." What the comparative framework of the *Kebra Nagast* offers us is quite different: it offers us a more sharply focused view of "thing-ness"; that is, the way in which Custance functions, like the Ark, as a "habitation" for God. This function is made apparent in a passage where the narrator of the Man of Law's Tale explains the reasons for Custance's exemplary life, and the reason why the story of that exemplary life should be retold:

> God liste to shewe his wonderful myracle
> In hire, for we sholde seen his myghty werkis;
> Crist, which that is to every harm triacle,
> By certeine meenes ofte, as knowen clerkis,
> Dooth thyng for certain ende that ful derk is
> To mannes wit, that for oure ignorance
> Ne konne noght knowe his prudent purveiance. (MLT 477–83)

Custance is compared with Daniel, saved from the lions by God; with Jonah, preserved within the body of the whale; with the "peple Ebrayk"—that is, the "Hebrew people," the children of Israel—protected from the dangerous sea during their Exodus out of Egypt. This series of comparisons inscribes Custance within a kind of typology, in which this series of precursors is fulfilled and superseded in Custance's transformative mission. She is a person who is moved from place to place, like the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land; but she is also a thing, a "habitation." In the Man of Law's Tale's opening description of Custance, she is said to be a "mirour of alle curteisye," her heart a "verray chambre of hoolynesse" (lines 166–167). Like the Ark, Custance is a container, significant not for what it is but for what it contains. Moreover, like the Ark, Custance is transmitted from place to place not through the will of man, but through the will of God:

> She dryveth forth into oure occian
> Thurghout oure wilde see, til atte laste
> Under an hoold that nempnen I ne kan,
> Fer in Northhumberlond the wawe hire caste
> And in the sond hir ship stiked so faste
> That thennes wolde it noght, of al a tyde;
> The wyl of Crist was that she sholde abyde. (MLT 505–11)

Here, Custance reaches her new location, moved from her former (unsuccessful) domicile in Muslim Syria to a more promising place in pre-Christian England. She arrives here not through her own effort but through "the will of Christ," marking an inevitability and a fundamental rightness to the journey that Custance herself recognizes, in the concluding

line of the passage: "She kneleth doun and thanketh Goddes sonde" (MLT 523). Literally, she expresses thanks for "what God has sent," his "sonde." Yet this "sonde" has a double nature: it is the thing for which Custance is grateful, and is also Custance herself, "sent" just as surely to the shores of Northumberland as the Ark is sent to Axum.

The common ground of the Man of Law's Tale and the *Kebra Nagast*, in these passages, is evident: in both cases, a container—a "habitation" or "chambre" of the divine—moves from one location to another, marking the place left behind as a mere relic of past glory, and the place of encounter as the new recipient of divine favor, inheriting the promise of future glory. There are, to be sure, many disparities that separate these two texts; but they also offer the promise of mutual illumination, of casting an indirect light upon one another. This light comes from the common source texts, the common discourses, the common symbolic geography of the divine that these two very different works—one English, one Ethiopian—share in common. We might like to think of these traveling objects—the Ark in the *Kebra Nagast*; God's "sonde" in the Man of Law's Tale—as literary analogs, parallel cases of movement. By juxtaposing them, we can highlight features in each work that might otherwise be effaced. Within each of these works, we observe a thing in motion—whether the Ark or the "sonde"—that effects a transformation upon the place it inhabits.

We could carry out other comparative readings that follow a similar methodology, observing the ways in which the movement of a thing in space charts out an imaginative geography, a conception of the shape of the world and the nature of its divisions. For example, if space permitted, I would outline such a reading of Ibn Battuta's *Travels* and the *Book of John Mandeville*, both produced in the 14th century; one composed in Morocco and written in Arabic, one composed in north-western Europe and written in French. Here, the charting out of an imaginative geography takes place not so much through the movement of an object, but the movement of the traveler's body in space: the moving thing, in other words, is the sentient body of the one who sees, hears, smells, tastes, and feels as he moves through the landscape. Ian Netton has argued that, in Ibn Battuta's travel narrative, we can observe a kind of "pilgrim paradigm," in which the movement through the sacred precincts of Mecca and Medina establishes a narrative template that is subsequently reenacted at a series of other locations described later in Ibn Battuta's *Rihla*. Something similar takes place in Mandeville's *Book*, where the gradual movement of the narrator through the holy sites in Jerusalem establishes a pattern for his subsequent physical experience of other sacred spaces, including his purely speculative encounters with Prester John's Land and the lost paradise of Eden. As was the case in the *Kebra Nagast* and Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale, there is no question of a source and influence relationship between Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* and Mandeville's *Book* (although such an argument has sometimes been made). What we can speak of instead is a common framework rooted not only in shared pilgrimage practices and ritual behaviors but also in textual common ground: Ibn Battuta and the Mandeville author shared a notion of world geography that appears in the opening sections of the fifth-century Latin chronicle of Orosius— known to the Mandeville author in Latin and vernacular versions, and to Ibn Battuta and his collaborator, Ibn Juzayy, through a 10th-century Arabic translation of the Latin Orosius. This world geography, I would argue, contributed a crucial common ground to the imaginative geography that appears in these two works.

We might think of these traveling objects, these moving things — whether they be objects such as the Ark of the *Kebra Nagast* and the "sonde" of the Man of Law's Tale, or else the roaming body of the traveler in Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* and Mandeville's *Book*— as a kind of synecdoche of the textual traditions whose movement we trace out in the classroom. To put it another way, these traveling objects offer new perspectives not only on our scholarly research but on how we might think of our teaching, the natural counterpart of that research. They allow us to distinguish between what Hayden White calls the "historical past" and the "practical past," teasing apart our aims and our methodologies in the domains of research and teaching, and considering how to make the tension between these domains a fruitful one. Finally, in thinking of how one follows the traveling object through time and space, we can establish new paradigms for how we might conceptualize patterns in literary history, and especially in world literature, that foreground the role of the medieval. Our teleological master narrative, after all, describes this period as the "middle" age (*medium aevum*) that separates the glory of imperial Rome from the renewed glory of its Renaissance or "rebirth" in Italy. Yet that same middle can be thought of as the moving place of passage, the site where the journey of the traveling object is enacted. In the literary histories we write and tell, therefore, the Middle Ages has a very special place: we owe it to our students, both inside the walls of the universities and outside, to make that place fully visible.

Notes

1. White, "Commentary," 743; see esp. 742–743. See also White, *The Practical Past*.
2. Although much of this work has centered on medieval history and art history, new work on language and literature in the region has begun to appear: see especially Morreale and Paul, eds, *French of Outremer*.
3. For a more detailed investigation of this kind of approach, see Akbari and Mallette, eds, *A Sea of Languages*.
4. Horden and Purcell, *Corrupting Sea*, 78 and 80; see 77–88.
5. de Mandach, *Naissance et développement*, 165–186.
6. On Bramimonde and Orable/Guiborc, see Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries*, 15–73.
7. For a more detailed account of the Floripas narrative in a range of French chansons de geste and English romances, see Akbari, "Woman as Mediator"; and Akbari, *Idols in the East*, 173–189.
8. Moretti, *Graphs*, 57.
9. Ibid., 61–62 and 62n21.
10. Ibid., 66.
11. Ibid., 67.
12. Moretti, "More Conjectures" 80.
13. Dimock, "Egyptian Pronoun," 620 (her emphasis).
14. An excellent account of the continuities of Jewish and Islamic traditions within Ethiopian Christian culture can be found in Belcher, "African Rewritings." For a short overview of the *Kebra Nagast*, see Marrassini, "Kebra Nagast." A wide-ranging perspective on the sources of the *Kebra Nagast* appears in Munro-Hay, *Quest for the Ark of the Covenant*. On the intersection of Ethiopian literary history with pictorial art, focused specifically on the *Kebra Nagast*, see Nosnitsin, "Ethiopian Literature in Ge'ez."
15. *Kebra Nagast*, trans. Budge, ch. 17.
16. Ibid., ch. 48.
17. *Decameron* 5.2; ed. Branca, 344, trans. McWilliam, 380–81.
18. *Decameron* 5.2; ed. Branca 345, trans. McWilliam 382.

19. *Decameron* 2.7; ed. Branca, 124 ("con atti"), 125 ("co' fatti"); trans. McWilliam, 128, 130.
20. *Decameron* 2.7; ed. Branca, 128, trans. McWilliam 134.
21. *Decameron* 2.7; ed. Branca 133, trans. McWilliam 140.

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Disclosure statement

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