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During the course of the last decade there has been sustained reflection on intersections between medieval studies and postcolonial theory, the books reviewed here being just a sample of the scholarship now available. But postcolonial approaches to the Middle Ages have proved controversial. Indeed, in the view of some medievalists the Middle Ages cannot be “postcolonial,” because the term by definition refers to historical circumstances and cultures that emerged only after the disintegration of the global empires that were formed in the modern period by European powers such as England, France, and Spain. The intellectual challenges for “postcolonial medievalists” are therefore not negligible, particularly when considering that the model of periodization that is widely (but usually tacitly and uncritically) accepted in postcolonial studies casts the Middle Ages as an undifferentiated, homogenous “Other.” However, just as medievalists have something to learn from postcolonial theory, so postcolonial theorists might have something to learn about the history and specificity of their own field of inquiry from a better-informed view of the past.

This essay offers an appreciative account of, and response to, some recent scholarship in the field of postcolonial medieval studies. It is suggested that postcolonial medieval studies requires 1) working outside the framework of a single literary tradition, since few texts in the Middle Ages were produced solely within such a limited context; 2) working across different languages and understanding the dissemination and use of different languages in the Middle Ages; 3) returning to manuscripts and/or revising the canon, rather than relying on critical editions produced in a tradition of modern national literary histories that is bound to occlude important evidence of cultural contact and hybridities; and 4) recognizing that the insights afforded by

postcolonial theory give us a better understanding of how “Europe” came into being, how it related to the rest of the world, and how the medieval history of contact between Europe and Asia or Africa is in fact an important element of the longer history of which colonialism and postcolonialism are part.

University of Oregon

2009

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