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*John F. Cartwright*

Basilisks, Brahmins and other Aliens: Encountering  
the Other in Sir Gilbert Hay's *Alexander*

Every act of writing is an act of interpretation, an opportunity for critical engagement with the given materials of one's culture, including language itself. In particular, the telling, re-telling, and re-shaping of stories is a way of constituting—and possibly criticizing—a particular subjectivity or sensibility, not merely of presenting a sequence of events or a body of ideas.

In this paper, I propose to look at some of the ways in which literary forms are used in order to construct such a subjectivity in a didactically conceived late-medieval epic romance. I shall especially be examining the ways in which the narrative representation of Otherness may contribute to the construction of a particular subject and a particular state of consciousness.

*The Buik of King Alexander the Conquerour*<sup>1</sup> provides ample material for a study of this kind—it presents a dominant central character who is constantly on the move, encountering a great variety of Others in a variety of relationships, all of which add to the presentation of Alexander as the subject chiefly in question.

Let us begin with the obvious Others, creatures immediately identifiable as different, even alien. The Alexander legend had by the mid-fifteenth century incorporated the body of material generally known as the "Wonders of the East," which is essentially a catalogue of marvelous beasts and

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<sup>1</sup>*The Buik of King Alexander the Conquerour*, ed. John Cartwright, STS, 4th Series, 16 (1986), Vol. II, Textual Introduction, text, ll. 1-9264; 18 (1990), Vol. III, text, ll. 9265-19369; Vol. I (forthcoming), General Introduction, Commentary and Glossary.

humanoids of improbable habits, also drawn upon in, for example, Mandeville's *Travels* and Shakespeare's *Othello*.

These creatures may be either quite unfamiliar (what we, but not Hay, would call legendary or fantastic), such as unicorns, basilisks, sidendranys (*l.* 12112; a monster, so far unidentified) and nyctigorax (*l.* 11669; some form of night-heron), or they may be familiar creatures but of a monstrous size: ants the size of apes, doves the size of geese, etc. A particularly nightmarish example of these monsters is a herd of carnivorous mice the size of foxes, who live in hollow reeds as broad as barrels and come out at night and bite men to death as they sleep (*ll.* 12127-34).

These alien creatures (along with lions, tigers and vultures, who are included without distinction along with the legendary beasts) are hostile to humans by nature and are repelled and killed without remorse or question by Alexander and his men.

Such stories of fearful marvels in faraway and fantastic places appear to have no conscious intent other than to amuse and divert. Even this kind of tale in its entertaining naivety, however, is not neutral or autonomous, but carries implications of reassurance and normativeness: readers can enjoy a mild frisson of horror because these creatures in their narrative context are after all so clearly fanciful, so obviously not a threat to what we—and Alexander—perceive and assume to be normal. The more entertaining and involving this fiction of Otherness is, indeed, the more powerful is the relief that life is after all not like that, and the conviction that we are the ones that are the norm within the natural world.

Even these monstrous and apparently unassimilable creatures ("ill beistis," as the narrator calls them) turn out, however, to have direct benefits for human beings—some of them have diamonds and other precious stones set in their heads (*ll.* 11559-602), while their skins have wonderful properties: they protect against "hete, cauld, wappin, na thrist" (*l.* 13980), poison, disease and treason. So these alien-seeming and hostile elements of creation may be defined and assimilated within the sphere of human needs and human benefits.

A clear assertion of this centrality and dominance of the human species is to be found in the famous story of Alexander's aerial journey. Alexander has four young griffons captured, and trained under his personal direction; he exploits their strength, their ability to fly, even their carnivorous habits (he steers the specially constructed cage in which he is sitting by pointing a pole with meat fixed on the end in the direction in which he wants them to fly). So even these fearsome creatures may be subjected to human needs, and their very alienness turned into a benefit, rather than a challenge or interrogation.

Alexander's famous horse Bucephalus has five horns, a head like a bull, and is carnivorous, but is invariably referred to as a horse. After being wild

and unapproachable by all others, he immediately recognizes Alexander as his master, and kneels to him and licks him. This ambiguous creature thus becomes "naturalized" and fulfilled in serving a human being. Similarly, at the siege of Tyre a hideous monster comes from the sea and begins to destroy Alexander's army, until it becomes aware of Alexander himself, and "with ane murmuring" (*l.* 2970) it returns to the sea.

These examples make the point of the non-autonomous existence of non-human creatures—while they seem at first to be merely hostile and essentially alien, they turn out to be potentially of benefit to human beings, once they have been either killed or subjugated, or they at least instinctively recognize their own inferior status.

An opposite variation in the relationship of human and alien, that is, an apparently innocent and normal human being who has been deliberately deformed into a hostile alien, is the Poison Maiden. She is

...of þe propirrest portratoure  
That euer was formit of þe goddis of nature, (*ll.* 9293-4)

It turns out, though, that she has been specially brought up as a trap for Alexander, having been fed exclusively on poisonous snakes, until she is deadly even to kiss. Appearances, therefore, are not a reliable guide to true Otherness. This difficulty is taken up with greater explicitness in the *Physiognomy* section of the poem.

This widely known and copied work has often circulated as a separate treatise, and occasionally, as in Hay's poem, as a supplement to the "regiment" supposedly written by Aristotle for the edification of Alexander. The *Physiognomy* is a catalogue of physical and related features (hair color, height, fatness or thinness, voice, gait, etc.), a kind of Identikit in verbal form, to be used as a guide in choosing servants, advisers, courtiers or any potentially employable person.

Just as we have seen how alien species, however repellent and dangerous, may be conceptually integrated into a world-view in which humans as a class are the center and touchstone, so in the *Physiognomy* we may observe, in the assessment of individual human beings, the dominance of one set of norms in relation to which other characteristics may be regarded as inadequate or inferior, and from which those less desirable characteristics take their meaning. Thus, through a detailed explication in physiognomic terms of individual forms of Otherness, the reader may arrive at some sense of what constitutes a desirable subject or state of being.

The basic assumption of the *Physiognomy* is that

. . . God giffis oft wisdome a gud figure. (*l.* 10269)

and, on the other hand

Quhare nature falzeis his proportionis,  
Thare followis oft tymes ewill conditionis. (ll. 10286-7)

There is, therefore, a supposedly *natural* ideal, which is connected with proper proportions and the "mydlin way" (ll. 10372, 10419). There is no querying of particular cultural criteria in the presentation of this norm—it is assumed that there are clearly deducible and universal models of desirable physical characteristics, but in practice all the detailed examples given are based on the range of physical features to be found among the peoples of Western Europe. Any Other exists only as deviation from this norm, and the ideal "mydlin way" is the center point of a rather limited sample of human possibilities.

As an essential part of the construction of a norm, moreover, persons showing severe deviations from it may be seen as in danger of forfeiting their status as humans. For example,

Quha has ane hede excedant grete and fatt,  
Nocht till his vper memberis accordant pat,  
It signefeis beistiall conditionis,  
Wyth carnelle appetete, and but ressouns. (ll. 10292-5)

This begs the question as to what reasonable behavior consists in, and this too turns out, not surprisingly, to have a very particular cultural base, against which unacceptable degrees of Otherness may be measured. In the preamble to his book of advice to Alexander, Aristotle refers to "thir cruell pepill of barbary" (l. 9403), as being

Wnhonest, beistlike, and full of felonly,  
Quhilkis be ressoun wald neuer reullit be,  
Na tak na teiching of divinitie,  
Na Moyses' lawis, na law of God na man,  
Bot leffis like beistis sen first be warldit began. (ll. 9404-8)

If we move from individuals to groups, it appears that the primary factor distinguishing the desirable human model from others verging on bestiality is not racial or broadly cultural, but specifically religious, for

The barbarynis trowis all in malmentry,  
Bot we trow nane bot goddis immortale, (ll. 14043-4)

As presented in this poem, therefore, we may think of the world as a massive zoological and anthropological collection, in which Alexander and

his culture (barely distinguishable from that of the narrator/author) fulfil the roles of director, interpreter and guardian (Alexander is several times referred to as the "wand of God"). The various cultures and creatures in this divinely-ordained display may at times provide Alexander (and, it seems, the intended reader) with some surprises and some grounds for valuably chastening re-assessment of the observing self, the dominant sensibility, but the grounds for that sense of self remain essentially unmoved—indeed, reinforced by these encounters.

Let us now consider some of these surprises, interrogations and apparent exceptions, and the degree to which they do or do not force re-consideration of the form of consciousness that appears to be becoming dominant in the poem.

Towards the end of the work, when Alexander is still travelling about in order to see the marvels of the East, he encounters several individuals and peoples who, despite their isolation (in European terms) and their superficial Otherness, cannot be classified as irremediably alien.

In one land, Alexander goes disguised to a court of law, and observes a court-case concerning the ownership of some buried treasure that has been accidentally dug up. Neither party involved (that is, the previous owner and the present owner) wants the gold, and the matter is finally resolved in an open and delicate way. Alexander is greatly moved by this example of how justice should be: Otherness here functions to remind him—and the reader—of an ideal which is in fact deeply human.

Two well-known anecdotes that Hay includes concern Alexander's encounters with Diogenes and with a pirate, and are often used elsewhere in moralizing contexts to criticize Alexander as representing covetousness and tyranny. Hay, however, manages to absorb them into his map of normative values centered on Alexander.

Diogenes accuses Alexander of avarice and of foolishness, for he can finally keep nothing of what he has gained; Alexander cannot answer him:

The king herd he spak baith soith and [f]are,  
And past his way and spak *with* him na mare. (ll. 17726-7)

The pirate, captured by Alexander, accuses Alexander of causing him, through his destructive campaigns, to become a pirate out of desperation. Alexander should not be his judge, for he is even more guilty than the pirate, on a far greater scale:

The king saw him ansure sa racionably,  
And of his reiff schew gudlie ressouns quhy,  
And knew him-selff was culpabil in þe dede, (ll. 17782-4)

He then takes the pirate into his employ.

In both these encounters, the criticisms are deflected, becoming occasions for Alexander to show his humility, and thus reinforcing rather than weakening his status as ideal subject. The radical potential of these episodes is blunted, and they are assimilated to the dominant paradigm.

Another kind of challenge from an Other is presented in Alexander's correspondence with Dindimus of the "Bragmanaris," or Brahmins, a peaceful people living in a fine and fruitful land (*l.* 12612 ff.). Dindimus presents what is essentially a monastic view of Alexander's life of action and conquest; he stresses that his people live a simple life close to nature, being all of equal honor and needing no laws,

For we mak na exces of vnressoun. (*l.* 12791)

He recommends that Alexander should concentrate on putting to flight his inner foes of greed and ambition, rather than external ones.

Alexander replies sarcastically that they must be gods, not men, they are so virtuous—but then claims that their closeness to nature is a sign of

... beistlynes,  
Or falt of craft ...  
Or fen3ett gudnes for ypocrisy, (*ll.* 12996-7; 13001)

This occasions a full restatement of hierarchy and degree as part of divine and natural order, in which mankind is "lord of allkyn leving thing" (*l.* 13006), and in which the sovereignty of kings is a direct reflection of the ranks of God and the angels. The Brahmins' lack of degree is

... propir kynd of bestialetie,  
Quhare dog and man and lad is all elike,  
Baith king and knaif—now fy on þat kinrike! (*ll.* 13041-3)

Alexander asserts that the world was made for "intercomonyng" (*l.* 13121), but that if the Brahmins wish in their pride to have no part of it, and to tread upon the gold in their land which should rather enrich the world at large, he will close them up as anchorites, so that they have no "intercomonyng" at all.

The Brahmins, who insist on questioning Alexander's motivation in his conquests and the very foundations of the social order of which he is the apex, present a potentially radical challenge, and must be symbolically sealed off and at the same time discredited as being hypocritical and lacking in integrity. Alexander's values and way of life are in this way validated and confirmed by contrast with the Brahmins' detailed version of cultural Otherness.

Another form of potentially subversive Otherness is represented by the Amazons, who "wald nocht be thare men g[ou]er[n]it be" (*l.* 11720). Alexander courteously suggests to them that

... ladyis suld be led be suetnes,  
And fauorit and defendit be nobilnes; (*ll.* 11765-6)

and that

It settis nocht ladyis batalis for to lede ...  
Na maistres oure þare husbandis for to be, (*ll.* 11773; 11775)

for

The man is hede to woman, and ledare,  
And at his biddin suld be euermare;  
Then may ane woman be callit, husbandles,  
Like till ane mannys bodie war hedeles, (*ll.* 11777-80)

In her response, Palisseda, the Queen of the Amazons, has it both ways, and thereby blunts the potential challenge of the Amazonian way of life: she refuses to change their customs, but she at the same time appeals to Alexander's chivalry, suggesting that instead of demanding tribute of them he should "succoure, favore and defend" them (*l.* 11828). She defies him, and at the same time points out that it would be no honor

To ourethraw ladyis and to put þame down— (*l.* 11839)

The Amazons, therefore, are not—despite first impressions—posing a radical proto-feminist challenge to the patriarchal assumptions of Alexander, Sir Gilbert Hay, or the majority of his readers—they turn out instead to be another kind of curiosity among the Wonders of the East, merely proving the general rule.

In considering the presentation of the Other in this poem, we have so far moved from obvious alien forms to individual human variations in the *Physiognomy*, and then to broader examples of cultural Otherness. I now propose to stretch the definition of Otherness a little further, and briefly to mention some more explicitly political manifestations.

A central and self-conscious theme of the poem is in the presentation of an ideal of kingship. This is done partly through the direct intervention and commentary of the narrator/author, but this central ideal is expressed and refined to a large extent by means of juxtaposition and contrast, in Alexander's encounters with other rulers, particularly Nicholas, Darius of Persia and Por-



rus of India. These three important rulers, and several minor ones, are presented as imperfect versions of a knightly or kingly state of being. They are not aliens, but unfulfilled human beings, and their particular mixtures of virtues and deficiencies are used to give detail and reinforcement to the presentation of Alexander.

Hay's version of an exemplary Alexander, a dynamically mythic figure for late medieval Scotland, is therefore not presented as a systematic theoretical construct, as in a treatise, but through the means of narrative fiction. In certain passages of the poem there are rules of conduct suggested for particular circumstances, but the work as a whole, although didactic and exemplary, does not work through presenting a set of rules but through the incremental constitution of a particular sensibility or consciousness, strongly centered but flexible, out of which certain kinds of action are seen to flow.

This way of writing does not offer readers explicit slogans that may be easily memorized and as easily discarded—it rather requires them to assimilate to their own consciousness a detailed and complex cumulative vision of a way of being in the world. From our perspective *The Buik of King Alexander the Conquerour* may be read as one intelligent response to a culture under stress. Hay does not offer a criticism of the hierarchical model, the "body politic," by his presentation of forms of Otherness, or indeed by any other means. There is no deconstructive questioning, no subversive move from the margins to the center. Rather, Alexander's encounters with the Other serve to confirm the centrality and normative status of humans in the natural world, kings and princes in the political world, males in the social world, Christianity in the religious world, and the principle of degree in the universe as a whole.

Explicit conformation of this view within the poem may unexpectedly be found in the story of Alexander's encounter with an extreme form of alienness, in his undersea adventure. Alexander has a diving sphere built, "For to persaue the secretis of þe sey" (l. 15860). He sees many marvels, some of them terrifying, but even the world of this utterly alien element may be assimilated to the world of human order. Alexander's main conclusion from his undersea observations is that the bigger fish eat the smaller, as is their nature:

Sic is the law and custumye of þe sey. (l. 15892)

So it is among the birds, where

. . . euer the mare has maistry of þe les. (l. 15895)

and on the earth

Quhat ferly is than þat riche man wald be  
 Maister of þe laif þat ar in law degre,  
 Sen God and Nature ordand has it sua. (ll. 15897-9)

From the orders of angels to the power relations of fish, the world therefore, in its apparent differences and forms of Otherness, offers to an enquiring mind the constant reassurance that order is attainable in human affairs also, and that—with several safeguards arising out of the proper use of reason tempered by mercy—this order consists in the recognition and strengthening of hierarchy and degree.

Hay, then, in his free reordering of the received material, presents a way of seeing which carries with it clear implications of a way of being and thus of acting. Unlike, for instance, Malory's Arthurian cycle, Hay's *Alexander* does not, however, contain within itself distancing devices which might to some degree call into question the dominant sensibility constructed and depicted within the work. The movement of the poem is towards not cultural criticism but cultural affirmation: in particular, the potentially subversive features of Otherness are either ignored, assimilated or deliberately defused. Indeed, I have attempted to show that manifestations of the Other are, in this poem, not merely recuperated and naturalized but are deliberately presented so as to support, confirm and reinforce a particular form of consciousness, a narrativized subjectivity centered on Alexander, which is Hay's chosen method for making a myth and a meaning for his time.

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