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The Legend of Prester John and its Use in English Literature

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THE LEGEND OF PRESTER JOHN AND ITS USE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

By

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CHAPTER I

"PRESTER JOHN ENDURES FOREVER"

General cultural knowledge of the present day includes legends of diverse origin and content. These legends date from many different levels in the growth of civilization, but they persist because in some way they seem to satisfy basic needs of the cultures through which they exist. Eventually they become separated from the specific location, incident, or time which gave them birth and are assimilated into the popular imagination. Legends change as the cultures in which they persist change and as they are used by the writers of literature for either entertainment, didactic, or symbolical value. Many legends even become extended to symbolize a quality or a dream in which people wish to believe. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the persistence in English literature of one particular legend, the Prester John legend, and to illustrate its development, the pattern of its use in literature, and its ultimate possible extension of meaning.

The ramifications possible in a study of any legend are unlimited. Although no attempt has been made to analyze all the references to the Legend which occur in English literature, the works of the major writers have been consulted and have been further examined through concordances, books of sources and analogues, and

and bibliographies. The number of writers who neglected to utilize the Legend of Prester John is striking. Although Robert Greene undoubtedly knew the name of Prester John from Ariosto's epic, Orlando Furioso, his play contains no references to the Legend. Marlowe's Tamberlaine is set in Eastern Asia, but those details which would seem to parallel the Legend have been traced to definite biographical sources known to have been available to the playwright. The absence of the romantic Asiatic materials from Wordsworth and Coleridge, as well as from the Romantic period generally, is noted in Chapter VI. No use of these materials could be found among such of their contemporaries as Byron, in Don Juan or Childe Harold; or Shelley and Keats, or later, Browning. Concordances of the works of Herrick, Gay, and Wyatt reveal a similar absence of the Prester John materials. It is hoped that the analyses given in this discussion will be sufficient to illustrate the pattern in the development of the Legend of Prester John.

Chapter II contains a brief discussion of the historical materials in which the Legend of Prester John originated. Chapter III is composed of examinations of some references illustrating the use in English literature of Asiatic materials in the Legend of Prester John. In Chapter IV the emphasis has been placed on those works of literature which have drawn on African materials in this Legend. The literature analyzed in Chapter V shows both the continuation into the modern era of the name of Prester John

and also the merging of the two dominant strains in the Legend itself. This chapter also indicates that Prester John has become a symbol, like The Isles of the Blessed or The Avalon of the Arthurian Legend, for the place in which man's dreams for happiness can be realized.

For purposes of clarification in organization the exact chronology of certain works examined in Chapter III and V has been ignored. It seemed more logical in Chapter III to place Chaucer and Spenser in as close juxtaposition as possible, since the latter author continued work begun by Chaucer. The five writers covered in Chapter V, Tennyson, Eliot, Byrne, Moyes, and Buchan, have been grouped according to their use of material from the Legend of Prester John. In general, however, the chronology of the use of each major strain of the Legend has been observed. Those authors, such as Mandeville, Hakluyt, and Purchas, who provide the literary sources of the Legend, have been introduced as the material they cover became utilized by other writers, rather than covered in a chapter dealing exclusively with literary sources. The beginning of the modern era has been arbitrarily set at 1880.

The history of the Legend of Prester John has been extensively studied by such men as Henry Yule and Edgar Prestage in England, Friedrich Zarncke in Leipzig, and M. D'Avezac in France. The Cordier edition of Yule's Travels of Ser Marco Polo contains extensive notes on the historical origins of Prester John, and an

excellent summary can be found in Yule's article on Prester John in the Encyclopedia Britannica. Both Marco Polo's Travels and Yule's article are listed in the Bibliography. Three periodical articles on Prester John are available: J. G. Rowe, "Did Prester John Exist?" Catholic World, 123 (August, 1926), 676-680; "Who Was Prester John?" All The Year Round, 44 (April 24, 1880), 521; and "Who Was Prester John?" Eclectic Magazine, 42 (November, 1857), 312. These are popular resumes which contribute nothing original in materials or in organization to the history of Prester John.

Wherever possible, this discussion of the Legend of Prester John has been based on translations of the original manuscripts of the major early explorers of Asia and Africa: William de Rubruquis, Joannes de Plano Carpini, Sir John Mandeville, Marco Polo, Father Francisco Alvarez, Gaspar Correa, Duarte Barbosa, Gomes Eannes de Azurara, Friar Jordanus, and Father Jerome Lobo. The Letter of Prester John, from which many of the details of the Asiatic materials in the Legend have been drawn, has not been available in its entirety. Excerpts have been found in summary in Thorndike's History of Magic and Experimental Science, II; in the glossary notes to the Latin excerpts printed in Bryan and Dempster's Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales; and in direct translation in Baring-Gould's Curious Myths of the Middle Ages. There are three previous investigations which bear

some relation to this study. John Livingstone Lowes has examined Chaucer's "Squire's Tale" with direct reference to the use of Asiatic materials in the Legend of Prester John. Lane Cooper's article and, to a more complete extent, Lowes's Road to Xanadu have indicated the possible sources for Coleridge's mention of Mount Abora in "Kubla Khan." Two studies of other oriental matter in English literature have been examined: Edna Osborne's Orientalism in English Poetry, 1740-1840, and Martha Pike Conant's Oriental Tale in English Literature in the Eighteenth Century. These works contain no mention of Prester John or of any of the materials which are definitely associated with the Legend.

Titles of the six chapters that comprise this study are quoted from the following sources; complete bibliographical date can be found in the Bibliography.

Chapter I: "Prester John Endures Forever." From Alfred Noyes's "Forty Singing Seamen."

Chapter II: "I, Presbyter Johannes, the Lord of Lords." From Baring-Gould's translated excerpt of the Letter of Prester John.

Chapter III: "Reports on Just Nothing." From the Journal of William de Rubruquis.

Chapter IV: "Of the Lineage of Judah." From the Narrative of Father Francisco Alvarez.

Chapter V: "The Heritage of John." From John Buchan's novel, Prester John.

Chapter VI: "Magic in the Distance." Also from Noyes's poem, "Forty Singing Seamen."

It is believed that the importance of this study of the Legend of Prester John lies in its relation to the general field of legends. As an example of the use of a legend by English writers, the Legend of Prester John has been followed from its inception in Western European minds to its extension into an ideal in the present day. Many other legends may have followed similar patterns of development, and the understanding of these legends might be considerably enriched if they were to be explicated more fully. This study is in no way considered definitive; it is an examination of some of the ways in which a legend can be used in English literature and by which that legend can become a symbol.

CHAPTER II

"I, PRESBYTER JOHANNES, THE LORD OF LORDS"

During the last half of the twelfth century the imaginations of Western Europeans were stimulated by stories of a great Christian monarch who ruled over a fabulous kingdom somewhere within the indefinitely defined boundaries of Asia. The appearance in Europe around 1165 of a Letter[1] purporting to come from "Presbyter, Johannes, the Lord of Lords,"[2] who surpassed all under heaven in virtue, riches, and power, gave a seemingly credible foundation and a definite name to the rumors of such a Christian king in Asia. Many descriptions of the wonders to be found within the kingdom of Prester John were given in this Letter. Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries European sovereigns tried for military, commercial, and religious reasons to locate the kingdom in Asia and to find a ruler who could be Prester John. No one person could be identified definitely enough to satisfy

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[1] Although the first Letter seems to have been addressed to Alexander III, the copies and translations which immediately appeared bore various addresses. Such subsequent copies were addressed to Manuel Commenus, Emperor of Byzantium; to the Roman Pope; and, later, to Frederick Barbarossa, the German Emperor. Leonardo Olschki, Marco Polo's Precursors (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1943), p. 19. The Chronicle of Albericus Trium Fontium preserves one version of the Letter that dates before 1241 which is addressed to Manuel Commenus. E. Cobham Brewer, The Reader's Handbook (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1901), p. 870.

[2] Sabina Garing-Gould, Curious Myths of the Middle Ages (New York: John B. Alden, 1884), p. 26.

the popular imagination. Knowledge of the geography of Asia gradually became more exact, and the search for Prester John was transferred in the fifteenth century to Africa, where western Europe knew Christianity had existed for some time. Portuguese explorers believed they had found Prester John around 1500, when they reached the court of the Christian kings of Abyssinia. The factual accounts of African and Asiatic exploration, the Letter of Prester John, and the oral reports of Eastern mysteries became the general sources for the materials that comprise the Legend of Prester John.

To the medieval mind, and to the modern mind as well, Prester John appeared an enigma: was he one man, several men, a dynastic name, or a figment of the imagination? Both African and Asiatic tradition seem to claim the name of Prester John, although the two sources seem to have little intrinsic connection other than in the transfer of the search for the Asiatic ruler to Africa when explorations had produced no such kingdom in Asia as matched the descriptions. In Africa Prester John is the title of the rulers of Abyssinia, who trace their lineage to the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. In Asia Prester John is a person, or rather several persons, for many travelers to Eastern Asia who left journals of their explorations found different men to hail as Prester John.

Western Europeans of the Middle Ages derived some idea of at least the kingdom of the mysterious monarch from the Letter

which was believed to have come from Prester John.[3] The many fabulous details seemed wholly credible. His kingdom was enormously vast, including the three Indies and extending eastward to the rising sun and westward to the Tower of Babel.[4] Peoples of every faith except Moslems lived in the diverse provinces of the kingdom, and such half-human and half-freak tribes as the Satyrs, Fauns, Pygmies, Cynocephali, Giants, Monoculi, Amazons, and Brahmans were subjects of Prester John. The Terrestrial Paradise was near the boundaries of the kingdom. Rivers were filled with gold and endless quantities of precious and magic stones; and in magnificent and enchanted forests were unicorns, dragons, civet cats, and other wild beasts[5] and miraculous plants such as the assidios, which enabled its bearer to rout impure spirits and to force them to disclose their names and origins.[6] The Fountain of Youth flowed from Mount Olympus through part of the kingdom. Over another part

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[3] Although the Letter is now thought to be a forgery, it was very popular during the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. Many translations are believed to have existed, and it even appeared in print before 1500. Cf. Lynn Thorndike, A History of Magic and Experimental Science, Vol. II (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923), p. 241. Some authorities cite approximately one hundred extant manuscripts of the Letter. Cf. Henry Yule, "Prester John, Encyclopedia Britannica, Eleventh edition, XXII, 305.

[4] Olschki, op. cit., p. 17.

[5] Ibid., p. 18.

[6] Thorndike, op. cit., p. 241.

eagles dropped small stones which imparted invisibility to the bearer. There were salamanders whose skins were made into robes that could be cleansed only by fire.[7] Between two burning mountains was an entire mountain of gold.[8] The kingdom was a viritual Eden, for neither falsehood, poverty, nor crime existed there. The palace of the Prester had gates of sardonyx mixed with the horn of serpents, and the square before the palace was paved with onyx. A magic mirror revealed all plots in the provinces subject to the Prester John or in adjacent lands. Among the additional wonders attributed to the kingdom of the Prester John through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries[9] were huge man-eating ants who mined gold by night. The men of one subject tribe lived on manna. Other men tamed dragons by incantations and rode them through the air. The Prester had five marvelous stones: two stones were unconsecrated and could turn water to milk or wine, and three were consecrated and caused fish to congregate and wild beasts to follow the possessor. He also owned a wonderful tree on which grew the healing apple. And

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[7] Ibid., p. 242.

[8] Friar Jordanus, The Wonders of the East, Hakluyt Society Publications, Series I, Vol. 31 (Henry Yule, editor; London: Hakluyt Society, 1863), p. 45.

[9] Copyists and translators of the Letter of Prester John evidently took considerable liberty with their sources and added to their own versions the new wonders and fables of which they had private knowledge or which were current during their times.

located near the palace was an unbelievable chapel of glass which was always just large enough for as many persons as entered it.[10]

Prester John had not been entirely unknown in Western Europe before the appearance of the Letter in 1165. The first notice of a conquering Asiatic potentate so styled had been brought to Europe by the Syrian Bishop of Gabala in 1145. This bishop reported that a "certain John"[11] was making war on the King of the Medes and Persians and was stopped only by the Tigris River from going to the aid of the Crusaders in delivering Jerusalem. The story is preserved in Otto of Freisingen's Chronicle of the year 1156, which also gives Prester John lineal descent from the Biblical Magi.[12] The John of whom the bishop was complaining was, self-styled, the Gurkhan or Universal Khan and was chief of the tribes of Turkestan. He was a Karacathayan prince and seems to be the first conqueror in Asia to whom the name of Prester John was

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[10] Thorndike, op. cit., pp. 242-244.

[11] Henry Yule, The Book of Ser Marco Polo, Vol. I (third edition, revised by Henri Cordier; London: John Murray, 1929), note 4, p. 231. This note refers to the editorial notes and comments of Henry Yule and Henri Cordier which are published in The Book of Ser Marco Polo. Subsequent references to these notes will be cited under Yule. References to the original manuscript of Marco Polo, published in translation in this book, are cited under the name of Marco Polo. Cf. note 28.

[12] Brewer, op. cit., p. 870.

applied. The origin of the title Prester John may lie in corruptions of Gurkhan. The English name, John, conceivably may be a corruption of Gurkhan or Kurkhan, softened in West Turkish pronunciation into Yurkhan and may have been confounded with Yochanan or Johannes.[13]

Such a corruption appears to be typical of similar possible corruptions of the names of several Asiatic chieftains who were converts to Christianity. One Ung Khan, chief of the Central Asiatic Mongol tribe of Kariths or Keraits, received at baptism the title of Malek Juchana, which can be translated as King John.[14] Confusion or corruption of the names of Mongol chieftains, alien as they are to Western ears, would be facilitated by the almost complete lack of knowledge concerning the regions over which the chiefs were reported to rule. The conversion during the tenth or eleventh century of any Asiatic prince would introduce Christianity to ruling dynasties of Central Asia and might establish some title from which Prester John could be derived by corruptions, erroneous translations, or mistaken concepts. From the earliest reports the title of Prester John has denoted both spiritual and temporal power. The adoption of some form of Prester John by such an Asiatic chieftain as the Ung Khan would be a logical means of commanding both the religious and secular loyalties of his people.

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[13] Yule, op. cit., p. 232.

[14] John A. L. Riley, "Nestorians," Encyclopedia Britannica, eleventh edition, XIX, 408.

There seems to be a definite source for prester in the terminology of early Christian congregations. Asiatic legends record Prester John as a Nestorian Christian, and the various Asiatic chieftains whose names may have contributed to establishing the title are also Nestorians. Since this sect was considered heretical and was banished from the Roman Empire, Nestorian missionaries had built a string of churches of their own in Asia, and by the tenth century Nestorian Christianity had been introduced into Syria, Armenia, Arabia, Persia, Media, China, India, and even into Tartary.[15] There is no reason to believe that the organization of local Nestorian mission churches would differ from the pattern that prevailed within the Roman Empire. Two types of officials governed congregations, those who preached only and those appointed by the congregations to act as judges and to maintain order and tradition. The latter type gradually gained in importance and eventually acquired the general appellation of presbyters.[16] If, as seems likely, similar officials arose in Nestorian congregations, the word prester from presbyter would enter the vocabularies of of various converted Asiatic tribes. Regardless of the origin of the title, Western minds seem to have applied the name of Prester

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[15] Loc. cit.

[16] Hans Achelis, "Presbyter," The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, 1911 edition, IX, 201-202.

John freely to any Christian Asiatic chieftain whose conquests were of sufficient extent to command attention.

Some Crusaders returning from Jerusalem were full of stories of one of these Christian chieftains who had tried to come to their aid. The combination of such word of mouth information with the ancient reports of Nestorian communities in Asia and with the actual appearance in 1165 of the Letter of Prester John caused considerable interest in the monarch among Western Europeans. Harassed by Mohammedans, Christian Europe was vitally interested in news of any possible powerful Christian ally. The Pope wished to draw the ruler of Asia into the Roman Catholic church, and the secular sovereigns wished to establish military alliances against the Mohammedans. The first efforts to contact the Prester John were made around 1177, when Alexander III sent an answer to the Letter of Prester John with his physician Philip. But Philip vanished completely into the shadows of the Eastern fantasies.[17] Then the Mongol conquests of the middle thirteenth century united much of Asia under Genghis Khan and his descendants and opened the way to exploration and embassies from Europe. Seeking in vain for an adequate representative of all the stories who could be the Prester John, European explorers found several, all of whom to some degree at least fit the traditions, but none of whom were still living.

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[17] Olschki, op. cit., p. 16.

Persistent demand, however, produced a supply of Prester Johns and several possible identifications result from the first century of Asiatic exploration by the Europeans.

Considerable confusion of fact and fantasy has resulted from the merging, misunderstanding, and ignoring of the Prester John material in the journals of Joannes de Plano Carpini and William de Rubruquis, two of the earlier official explorers. Around 1247, seventy years after Philip's disappearance into Asia, Innocent IV commissioned Plano Carpini to obtain reliable information about the great Tartar Empire and to protest the Mongol invasions of Europe.[18] Plano Carpini reports that Prester John's kingdom was located behind Armenia and Persia at the extremity of the East. The Prester was supposed to be a Nestorian Christian like his people and united in himself regal and sacerdotal power. He was reputed to be the conqueror of a great part of Persia and Media.[19] Plano Carpini reports what he was told about Prester John; he himself did not find the kingdom. In his failure to do so he moves its location out of the countries which he had explored into India the Greater. He does record Genghis Khan's war "against

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[18] Charles R. Beazley and Henry Yule, "Joannes de Plano Carpini," Encyclopedia Britannica, eleventh edition, V, 328.

[19] Charles R. Beazley, editor, The Texts and Versions of John de Plano Carpini and William de Rubruquis (London: Hakluyt Society, 1903), note, p. 279.

Christians dwelling in India maior. Which the King of that countrey hearing (who is commonly called Presbiter John) gathered his souldiers together, and came foorth against them."[20] The Tartars were expelled from the domain; "neither did we heare that ever they returned thither againe."[21] Carpini's report of this battle is quite different from the reports of William de Rubruquis and Marco Polo, both of whom give the victory to Genghis Khan.

William de Rubruquis traveled through Eastern Asia in 1249 and 1250. In his Journal he records that

> a Nestorian shepherd...was governor of the Nayman people... /after the death of CanCan,[22] who was the king of Karakatai, this shepherd/ exalted himselfe to the kingdom, and they called him King Iohn, reporting ten times more of him then was true. For they blaze abroade great rumors, and reports upon just nothing.[23]

Rubruquis, traveling along the territories supposed to belong to this shepherd, could find no man who knew anything of him, except a few Nestorians. He carried the history farther, however, with the shepherd's brother, presumably upon the basis of local rumor. John's brother was Vut, lord of the Crit, or Kerait, and Merkit, and also a Nestorian. When the shepherd died without male issue,

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[20] Ibid., p. 117.

[21] Loc. cit.

[22] The ConCan of Rubruquis is the Gurkhan of other authorities. Cf. Beazley, op. cit., note, p. 279.

[23] Ibid., p. 214.

Vut became Khan. He was overthrown in a civil revolt led by a blacksmith named Cyngis or Genghis, who had united a nearby tribe of Tartars. Vut fled to Cathay, and his daughter was married to a son of Genghis. From that union came Mangu Khan, who was ruling at the time of Rubruquis's travels.[24] The Karakatai Empire was supposed to extend from the Sayan Mountains and the modern Siberian border to Khiva and the Aral.[25] The Naimani tribe, of which this Prester John was originally chieftain, is located somewhere west of Tartaris, believed to be the northeast corner of the medieval world.[26] Rubruquis locates the Crits about three weeks' journey "beyond the Alpes of Cara Catay."[27]

With Marco Polo the Legend of Prester John seems to have become established for the other thirteenth century explorers; they do not add anything original to the report. Marco Polo did not find Prester John, but he did find what he called a descendant of that monarch holding in fealty to Kublai Khan the province of Tenduc, east of the Gobi Desert in the northern bend of the Yellow River.[28] In his

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[24] Ibid., pp. 214-215.

[25] Ibid., note, p. 279.

[26] Ibid., p. 108.

[27] Ibid., p. 214.

[28] Marco Polo, The Book of Ser Marco Polo, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 284.

Travels he places the Tartars originally in the north on the borders of the Manchu country. They paid tribute to Unc Can, "the same that we call Prester John, him in fact about whose great domain all the world talks."[29] Confusion from the consonance of names appears to have been general among Europeans in China;[30] and Vut Khan, mentioned by Rubruquis as the brother of the Prester John who became the emperor of Karakatai, is also Vuc, Aung, Ung, and the Unc of Polo. Polo's identification of Unc Khan as the Prester John was evidently assumed by many contemporaries to be definitive, and Polo was convinced of his success in locating the history of the sovereign. According to the Travels, the chief of the Crits or Keraits and Genghis Khan were friends until a quarrel broke out either over the chief's refusal of his daughter to Genghis[31] or over a supposed plot to overthrow and murder Genghis.[32] In the war that followed, about 1203, Prester John of the Keraits was slain and his kingdom passed to Genghis Khan.[33] The proper name of Polo's Unc Khan is Tuli in Chinese, or Togrul in Persian histories, or Wang. Wang was corrupted by his people into Awang

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[29] Ibid., p. 226.

[30] Yule, op. cit., note, p. 237.

[31] Polo, op. cit., p. 239.

[32] Yule, op. cit., p. 237.

[33] Polo, op. cit., p. 244.

or Avenk from which Polo derived the spelling that indicates the pronunciation was Aung or Ung Khan.[34]

Marco Polo's identification of Prester John with Unc Khan is similar to that recorded by Abdul-Faraj, or Bar Hebraeus, in his Syriac Chronicle. Bar Hebraeus, a Jacobite bishop of the middle thirteenth century, has left valuable information on Southeastern Europe and Western Asia.[35] He makes Unc or Wang Khan to be the Prester or the Malek Yuhanna and the King of the Keraits.[36] John of Monte Corvino, Franciscan missionary and archbishop in China and India from 1275-c.1328,[37] writes in a letter dated January, 1305, of a King George, the descendant of Prester John of whom Marco Polo spoke. King George was a Nestorian and was descended from "that great king who was called Prester John of India."[38] Friar Odoric, who traveled through the Eastern regions from about 1317-1329,[39] visited the country of Polo's Prester John in Tenduc around 1326 and speaks as if the family still existed in

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[34] Yule, op. cit., p. 237.

[35] Norman McLean, "Bar Hebraeus," Encyclopedia Britannica, eleventh edition, III, 400.

[36] Beazley, op. cit., note, p. 279.

[37] Charles R. Beazley, "Giovanni di Monte Corvino," Encyclopedia Britannica, eleventh edition, XVII, 763-764.

[38] Yule, op. cit., p. 287.

[39] Charles R. Beazley and Henry Yule, "Odoric," Encyclopedia Britannica, eleventh edition, XX, 10.

authority, although much reduced from its legendary magnificence.[40]

From these accounts of the early explorers only one positive identification can be derived. Marco Polo and many travelers who follow him identified Unc Khan with Prester John, but Polo's facts were based on hearsay and local legend and in all probability were exaggerated. Rubruquis disagrees with the Polo tradition and does not seem convinced of his own identification of the monarch with the Nestorian shepherd. Plano Carpini, who admits his failure to find the kingdom, merely moves its location into as yet unexplored parts of Asia; he does not deny the existence of such a king.

Until the middle of the fourteenth century many of the texts and maps agree in assigning Prester John to Asia and usually to Central or Eastern Asia somewhere in the general vicinity of India. Much of the geographical confusion over the location of the kingdom may have arisen because of the different signatures used in the manuscripts of the Letter of Prester John. In extant versions the writer signs himself variously as the king of India, the king of Persia, the emperor of India, presbiter ultra of Persia and Armenia, and Maximus Indorum and Emperor of Christian Ethiopia.[41]

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[40] Yule, op. cit., p. 288.

[41] John Livingstone Lowes, "The Squire's Tale and the Land of Prester John," Washington University Series, Series IV, Vol. I, No. 2 (Allyn Abbott Young, editor; St. Louis, Missouri: Washington University Press, October, 1913), note 5, p. 4.

To the medieval mind India was vast in extent.[42] Friar Jordanus divides India into three parts: Lesser India, including India along the coast as far as some point immediately north of Malabar; Greater India, extending from Malabar very indefinitely to the eastward; and India Tertia, lying in the east of Africa.[43] Marco Polo's account reverses these designations and calls India Tertia Middle India or Abyssinia.[44] Many writers among the ancient Greeks applied the term Ethiopian not so much to a country bounded by certain geographical limits as to inhabitants of a certain complexion. Ancient historians, including Herodotus, divide the Africans into Libyans and Ethiopians. Ethiopians were thus scattered over a considerable portion of the ancient world. Although Africa contained the greater portion, a large tract of Asia was occupied by a race who bore the same designation. India was often made to be the southern division of Asia, and Ethiopia was frequently described as including souther India.[45] For Friar Jordanus "the Emperor of the Aethiopians is called Prestre Johan."[46] The lord of the land is "more potent than any man in the

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[42] For this discussion of geography the reader is referred to the sketch map in Appendix C.

[43] Friar Jordanus, op. cit., note, p. 11.

[44] Loc. cit.

[45] Michael Russell, History of Nubia and Abyssinia (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1836), pp. 19-20.

[46] Friar Jordanus, op. cit., p. 42.

world...He is said to have under him fifty-two kings, rich and potent."[47] Such a concept undoubtedly inspired the boast in Prester John's Letter that he ruled all the kingdoms of the three Indies.[48] Medieval maps carried the extremities of Ethiopia far to the east and minimized the size of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean in such a way as to bring Central Africa within no great distance of India.[49] It is easy to see how confusion over the location of Prester John's mighty kingdom could arise.

Until about the fifteenth century the emphasis was on an Asiatic location of the kingdom of Prester John, but belief in an African location was also current earlier. Around 1330 Friar Jordanus had placed the kingdom in Africa,[50] and others also appear to have held this belief. As the geographical knowledge of Asia became more exact, it was apparent that there was no fabulous kingdom of Prester John within the boundaries of that continent. Geographical confusion over the location of Abyssinia and India, however, contributed to the transfer to Africa of the search for

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[48] John Kirtland Wright, The Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades (New York: American Geographical Society, 1925), p. 272.

[49] Ibid., p. 303.

[50] Friar Jordanus, op. cit., p. 42.

Prester John's kingdom. The existence of Christians in northeastern Africa was known to Western Europeans. From the fifth century there had been a distinct Coptic Church in Alexandria, Egypt,[51] and Athanasius, patriarch of Alexandria, records the conversion of the Ethiopians about 356 A. D.[52] Many Crusaders and other visitors to Jerusalem had reported meeting pilgrims who came from Abyssinia.[53] Reports existed of Abyssinians in Aragon as early as 1327, and from time to time others had visited Rome, Naples, and France.[54] In fact Alexander, the Prester John of Abyssinia in 1494, told the Portuguese that

> he and his ancestors had their own information by hearsay respecting the great kings there were in Christendom. This was related to him by some of his people whom, at times, he sent to visit Jerusalem and the Pope of Rome.[55]

There seems to have been adequate knowledge in Europe of the

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[51] Lynn Thorndike, The History of Medieval Europe (revised edition; New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928), p. 108.

[52] Russell, op. cit., p. 84.

[53] Wright, op. cit., p. 286.

[54] H. V. Livermore, A History of Portugal (Cambridge, England: The University Press, 1947), p. 220.

[55] Caspar Correa, The Three Voyages of Vasco da Gama from Lendas da India, Hakluyt Society Publications, Series I, Vol. 42 (Henry E. J. Stanley, translator and editor; London: Hakluyt Society, 1869), p. 11.

existence of African Christians.

Motives similar to those involved in the search for Prester John in Asia instigated the Portuguese exploration and conquests in Africa. Both commercial and military advantages were to be gained by alliances with the king of the Christians known to be in Africa. The terminals of the rich trade routes to the Orient had been barred by the Mohammedans, and if the very remunerative trade with the East was to be perpetuated, other routes were essential. In addition to the economic interest in challenging the Mohammedan control of the Eastern trade routes, there was a spiritual advantage to be gained by fighting pagans. A continuation of the crusading spirit undoubtedly contributed to the Portuguese explorations. Under the direction of Prince Henry the Navigator, the Portuguese mariners began the exploration of the islands and the coast of Africa. Azurara lists as one of Prince Henry's motives for Portuguese exploration the desire to find a Christian kingdom to help Portugal in a war against the infidels of northern Africa.[56] Prince Henry desired "to have knowledge of that land [Africa], but also of the Indies and the land of Prester John, if such might be."[57] Confusion over Prester John, the Indies, and Africa was still present even as late as

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[56] Livermore, op. cit., p. 187.

[57] Ibid., p. 186.

the first half of the fifteenth century; indeed, not until Bartolomeu Diaz rounded the Cape in 1487 did the Portuguese and the European world have much idea of the vast extent of Africa.

The capture of Ceuta in North Africa in 1415 gave the Portuguese their first foothold in Africa. Exploration continued under the sponsorship of John I and, after his death in 1433, under Prince Pedro the Regent and Afonso V. Antão Goncalvez brought back the first captives from Africa in 1441 and obtained for Prince Henry information on caravan routes and commerce.[58] Other men, interested in Africa for various reasons, also believed with Prince Henry of the existence of a Christian monarch there. The 1436 mappe-monde of Andrea Bianco places the Imperium Prete Iani in Ethiopia; and a letter to Charles VII of France in 1448 from Jeane de Lastic, Grand Master of Rhodes, refers to the African Prester.[59] A Portuguese document of 1452, eight years before the death of Prince Henry the Navigator, shows the monthly bill for wheat and wine for "George, ambassador of Prester John."[60] Thirty-five years passed before this visit was returned.

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[58] Ibid., p. 189.

[59] Beazley, Texts and Versions of Carpini and Rubruquis, op. cit., note, p. 279.

[60] Livermore, op. cit., p. 221.

The fall of Tangier in 1471 gave the Portuguese a firm hold on the North African coast. However, internal strife and the possibility of war with Castile prevented any full scale attempts to pursue further military operations against the Turks until the accession of John II in 1484. The Papal bull of the crusade for the war in Africa, granted John II in 1485, was given increased interest in 1486 when King John heard from the embassy of the Negro King of Benin of a priest-king in Africa named "Ogane, a Christian at heart."[61] The accounts of the Asiatic explorations were probably known to John II or to some member of his court. There is a remarkable phonetic similarity between the name of the newly reported "Ogane" and the "Ung Khan" mentioned by Rubruquis, Marco Polo, Bar Hebraeus, and others. Such a similarity may have contributed to the king's determination to reach the African Christian monarch. John II sent out two expeditions, one by sea under Bartolomeu Diaz and the other by land under Pero da Covilhã and Afonso de Paiva. Diaz heard nothing of Prester John, and Afonso died in Cairo. But in 1494 da Covilhã reached "the court of the Prester John, who was named Alexander, which they call Escander, who received [him] with honour."[62]

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[61] Gomes Eannes de Azurara, Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea, Part II, Hakluyt Society Publications, Series I, Vol. 95 (C. R. Beazley and Edgar Prestage, translators and editors; London: Hakluyt Society, 1896), p. xxxii.

[62] Correa, op. cit., note, p. 10.

Vasco da Gama bore letters to the King of Calicut and to Prester John on his 1497 voyage.[63] In March, 1498, at Mozambique, he heard from some Arab merchantmen of the rich traffic of the Indian Moors with Prester John, who lived inland but who owned many cities on the coast.[64] This report was verified by Duarte Barbosa's description of the coasts of East Africa which lists the Moorish town of Dalaqua (Dalacca) as the seaport used by the Abyssinians of the country of Prester John.[65]

An embassy from the Abyssinian monarch reached Portugal in 1510, and in 1520 Manuel I sent Rodrigo da Lima to the court of the Prester John of Abyssinia as official ambassador. With the da Lima embassy the Portuguese search for the Prester John ended: he had been found in Africa, alive and at the head of a large Christian kingdom. The Narrative of this embassy by Father Francisco Alvarez assured the designation of the Abyssinian kings as the Prester Johns. Throughout the Narrative Father Alvarez calls the ruling king by that title. The almost

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[63] Livermore, op. cit., p. 229.

[64] Ibid., p. 230.

[65] Duarte Barbosa, Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar, Hakluyt Society Publications, Series I, Vol. 35 (Henry E. J. Stanley, translator and editor; London: Hakluyt Society, 1866), p. 18.

invariably present definite article indicates that even the Portuguese assumed the name to be a title. Some basis for this use of the name may lie in Father Alvarez's report of the conversion to Christianity of an early Abyssinian queen. The report states that ten years after the death of Christ the eunuch of the Queen Candace was visited in a vision by a saint and was converted. He taught the religion to the Queen Candance, and she spread it throughout her kingdom and that of her son, the Prester John. Since that time Ethiopia has always been ruled by Christians.[66] The use of the given name Candace as part of the title is reported as early as Pliny, who said that Candace was the name of many queens, as Pharoah was of the kings of Egypt.[67] It is probable that if the term Prester John has any origin in Africa at all, it was used in much the same way as the Queen Candace. Prester John continued in use as a title during part of the sixteenth century, but it had been abandoned at least by 1623.[68]

From the African source materials of the Prester John legend there comes another possible origin of the name Prester John to add

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[66] Father Francisco Alvarez, Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia, 1520-1527, Hakluyt Society Publications, Series I, Vol. 64 (Lord Stanley of Alderley, translator and editor; London: Hakluyt Society, 1881), p. 208.

[67] Ibid., note, p. 80.

[68] In 1626 Father Lobo entitles the Abyssinian King as the Sultan or the Emperor. Prester John does not occur as a title. Cf. Father Jerome Lobo, Voyage to Abyssinia (Samuel Johnson, translator; New York: Cassell and Company, Limited, 1893), pp. 17, 70, and 159.

to those derived from the Asiatic references.[69] The pedigree of the Abyssinian royal house is traced by the people to the visit of the Queen of Sheba, or Queen Saba, to King Solomon in Jerusalem.[70] Father Alvarez found an old chronicle which tells the story of this visit. Queen Saba bore Solomon a son, whom she left with the king when she returned to her own country. When the son was seventeen, the people of Judaea complained to Solomon of the son's excessive pride and asked that the lad be sent back to his mother. Solomon sent him with officers usual to a king's household and with many rich gifts.[71] Among these gifts was a gemmed ring from which the son derived the cognomen Belul Gian meaning precious stone. Gian (pronounced zion) can be easily corrupted into John, and Belul translated into precious. In Latin the title becomes Johannes preciosus (precious John), and a further corruption could change preciosus into prester or presbyter. Solomon's son, who first bore this title, was Malech Gian Belul, and the title may have remained as the nominal designation of the kings of Abyssinia.[72] There is a striking similarity between the Abyssinian name of Malech, the

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[69] Ante, pp. 4-6.

[70] Russell, op. cit., p. 82.

[71] Alvarez, op. cit., pp. 78-79.

[72] Brewer, op. cit., p. 870.

Malek assigned an Asiatic Prester John by Bar Hebraeus, and the Nestorian tradition of the conversion and baptism of Ung Khan of the Keraits as Malek. Such a similarity serves to illustrate the confusion among the medieval scholars over Prester John. Pieces of journals and oral reports were so interwoven as to make any separation of fact from fantasy almost impossible--particularly so when the medieval world was equally content with either fact or fantasy or with both.

Based solely on the dubious tracing of possible corruptions of Belul Gian, the tradition of the lineal descent of Abyssinian kings from Solomon does not appear very valuable. However, Father Alvarez gives in the Narrative translations of the Abyssinian Prester's letters to Diego Lopez de Sequeira and to Manuel I of Portugal. In the salutation to Diego Lopez, the Prester calls himself "David, the head of his kingdome. . .a relation of the lineage of Judah, son of David, son of Solomon. . ."[73] The letter to the king of Portugal bears the same list of ancestors and adds a list of the Prester's kingdoms which includes Ethiopia and "Sabaim, where was the Queen Saba. . ."[74] According to these two letters it would seem that the monarchs of Abyssinia did think they were descended from Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. This same belief is reported by Father Lobo in his Voyages to

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[73] Alvarez, op. cit., p. 368.

[74] Ibid., p. 389.

Abyssinia, 1625-1634: "The Kings of Aethiopia draw their boasted pedigree from Minilech, the son of this Queen [of Sheba] and Solonon."[75]

The Portuguese reports of the Christian kings of Abyssinia, the various accounts of Asiatic exploration, and the Letter of Prester John provide the bases for the Legend of the fabulous priest-king. Two strains are visible in this historical background, the traditions surrounding the Asiatic Prester John and his imaginative kingdom and those surrounding the African Prester John and his actual kingdom. No one man was discovered during the several centuries of Asiatic exploration who could be the original Prester John. It seems probable that he is a composite of many chieftains who were converts to Nestorian Christianity and who were mighty conquerors. The name itself may have originated through corruptions of the names of Asiatic chieftains or of the Christian names which they perhaps assumed upon baptism. As a title, Prester John seems to bear both religious and temporal significance and may derive from the designation of early officials of Christian congregations. The many efforts to locate a specific Prester John seem to have had the three motives of obtaining military aid against the Mohammedans in the Holy Land, of advancing commercial interests in the Orient, and of reuniting such a powerful kingdom to the Roman Catholic Church. The journals of such

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[75] Lobo, op. cit., p. 69.

thirteenth and fourteenth century Asiatic explorers as Plano-Carpini, Rubruquis, and Marco Polo have contributed many of the romantic and strange details which comprise the Asiatic strain of the Legend. The Letter of Prester John contains the fanciful and exaggerated descriptions on which the medieval Western European appears to have based his concept of the kingdom of the mythical monarch. The failure to find the kingdom in Asia and a more exact geographical knowledge seem to have turned the search for Prester John in Africa. The Portuguese led the explorations in Africa and appear responsible for the designation of the Abyssinian kings as the Prester Johns. Their factual reports, particularly the Narrative of Father Alvarez, have become the source for most of the material dealing with the African strain of the Legend of Prester John. For nearly eight hundred years Prester John has remained a part of the Western European imagination. It is not likely that factual evidence could destroy completely the romance which the elements of the unknown, the remote, and the wonderful have given any mention of Prester John. Writers of many nationalities have made use of Prester John material from both strains of the Legend, the romantic descriptions of his incredible kingdom and the factual descriptions of the Abyssinian country.

CHAPTER III

"REPORTS UPON JUST NOTHING"

Since the reports of the Portuguese explorations in Africa were not published in English until the early seventeenth century, the early references in English literature to the Legend of Prester John were drawn from the Asiatic strain. Descriptions of the great wealth of the priest-king, the tribes of half-human and half-freak monsters, the many magic possessions, and the remoteness of the location in Asia are details of the Asiatic strain which appear to have become part of the English author's heritage of Oriental materials. This Asiatic strain seems based at first on oral reports of the Orient and on the numerous translations and versions of the Letter of Prester John. In the English medieval drama and verse romances use is made of such Oriental terms as Mohammedanism, the Crusades, and pilgrimages to the Holy Land.[1] Similar allusions occur in the writings of Chaucer and Shakespeare. Chaucer appears only once to have utilized to any extent the Oriental material in the Asiatic strain of the Legend of Prester John. The background of his unfinished "Squire's Tale" seems to be drawn from the Letter of Prester John. One of the plot threads in

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[1] Edna Osborne, "Oriental Diction and Theme in English Verse, 1740-1840," Bulletin of the University of Kansas Humanistic Studies, Vol. II, No. 1 (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, May 1, 1916), p. 9.

this Tale was completed in the sixteenth century by Spenser, who also may have been indebted to some of the Oriental material included in the Legend. Spenser may have relied on details in Chaucer or he may have utilized the mendacious stories in the Travels of Sir John Mandeville. Published in English in 1499, Mandeville's popular Travels seems to be a repository for many of the wild details that had been connected with the name of Prester John. Shakespeare possibly drew on Mandeville for his Oriental terms and very probably used the Travels as the source for the name itself. Shakespeare and Mandeville are the only two discovered authors, using the Asiatic strain before 1880, who mention Prester John by name.

With one possible exception Chaucer makes only fleeting use of his Oriental material for settings and for references that would stimulate the imaginations of his readers. In the Canterbury Tales the Man of Law lays the first part of his story in Syria.[2] The names of Mahomet[3] and of the Koran[4] also are found in this Tale. And the setting of "The Prioress's Tale" is in Asia.[5]

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[2] Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales, The Poetical Works of Chaucer (F. N. Robinson, editor; New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1933), lines 134-441, p. 75.

[3] Ibid., line 224, p. 77.

[4] Ibid., line 332, p. 78.

[5] Ibid., line 488, p. 194.

Chaucer also mentions Eastern idols, magic, and sorcery, and the spices and precious stones considered typical of the Orient.[6] In the "Squire's Tale" Chaucer uses not only such Oriental terms as these, but also material that seems traceable to the Prester John Legend. The "Squire's Tale" seems to contain the first extended references to the Prester John stories that appear in a major English work. The name of the priest-king does not appear in the Tale, but much of the background parallels descriptions which occur in the Letter of Prester John. No single narrative which Chaucer could have used as source for the "Squire's Tale" has yet been discovered, and the best critical opinion favors the theory that he derived the background material for the Tale from many quarters.[7] Though the plot seems to be original with Chaucer, the poet must have applied his imagination freely to themes of Arabian magic and to scraps of knowledge about Tartary and the Far East. From the reports of the traders and sailors with whom he was in close contact in the port of London, Chaucer may have picked up considerable knowledge of the East. Internal evidence from the "Squire's Tale" would seem to indicate that another possible source for much of the Asiatic background is the Letter of Prester John.

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[6] Osborne, op. cit., p. 10.

[7] H. S. V. Jones, "The Squire's Tale," Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, editors; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), p. 337.

The setting of the Tale is in Sarray, in what is now southeastern Russia. At the elaborate birthday feast of King Cambuscan, there appears a strange knight who brings four magic gifts from the King of Arabia and India. The gifts are a flying brass horse, a mirror that will reveal any trouble within Cambuscan's kingdom, a ring that enables its wearer to understand birds and to know the healing virtues of all herbs, and a sword able to pierce anything and also to heal wounds. The ring is given to Canacee, beautiful daughter of Cambuscan, and the mirror is carried to a high tower. On the morning following the great feast, Canacee arises early. As she strolls through her garden, she finds a badly wounded falcon in a tree. The magic ring enables her to understand the bird's cries, and she hears a tale of true love forsaken. The princess promises the bird her assistance. The Tale is unfinished beyond this point, but a synopsis of what was planned is provided: Cambalo, brother of Canacee, helps the falcon regain her lover; Cambuscan wins a wife with the aid of the brass horse; and Cambalo jousts with two brothers who wish to marry Canacee.[8]

The many versions of the Letter of Prester John which existed through repeated copying and translating seem to have had the same general outline but differed in the details of magnificence or of strangeness which were attributed to the Prester

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[8] Chaucer, op. cit., lines 9-670, pp. 154-162.

and to his vast kingdom. Exotic descriptions in the many versions of the Letter seem to have increased as time passed and as succeeding copyists and translators found additional wonders of which the Prester could boast in his Letter. H. S. V. Jones makes the unsupported statement that there are definite indications that one or more of the various versions of the Letter were known in England in Chaucer's time.[9] In all probability the version which was available to Chaucer was in Latin, as tradition assumes the original had been; Chaucer, like most educated men of his day, knew Latin. From the Letter he could have obtained many of the details which give the "Squire's Tale" its exciting Oriental atmosphere. In addition to the Letter, Chaucer may have known of a fourteenth century German poem by Osswalt der Schriber. This poem, "Oswald's Poem," is a verse story similar to the "Squire's Tale" and curiously makes direct use of many details that are included in the manuscript of the Letter extant in England.[10] That a poem should appear in Germany which follows a source known to be in England at the same time is a strange coincidence. Although Chaucer made several trips to the continent of Europe, he may not have known "Oswald's Poem." The work indicated that the same version of the Letter which was available to Chaucer could have been used as a literary source. If an obscure German poet had sufficient access to a

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[9] Jones, op. cit., p. 358.

[10] Loc. cit.

manuscript of the Letter to base whole sections of a work upon it, it seems possible that Chaucer could have made a similar use of the same source. The striking parallels between the "Squire's Tale," the Prester John material transcribed in "Oswald's Poem," and the Letter itself seem to indicate such a usage.

Similarities between the Tale and the Letter are found in the geography, magnificence of kingly array, descriptions of foods, magic elements, and the powers of the mirror. Cambuscan rules in "the land of Tartarye;"[11] Prester John rules in the three Indies; and popular concepts of geography placed Tartary in the Indies. The strange knight's liege lord is "the kyng of Arabe and of Inde."[12] Even in Chaucer's time India was often represented as the southern part of Asia.[13] Because of this geographical confusion the King of India could be the King of Arabia very easily. Seven kings wait upon the Prester John monthly, in turn, with "sixty-two dukes, two hundred and fifty-six counts and marquises; and twelve archbishops sit at table with us on our right, and twenty bishops on the left..."[14]

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[11] Chaucer, op. cit., line 9, p. 155.

[12] Ibid., line 110, p. 155.

[13] Supra, Chapter II, p. 10.

[14] Sabina Baring-Gould, Curious Myths of the Middle Ages (New York: John B. Alden, 1884), p. 30.

At the feast with which the Squire begins his Tale, there was such an array of people that a summer's day would have been necessary for the complete description.[15] The Squire refuses to tell of the strange foods served at Cambuscan's feast: the Letter brags of subject tribes which eat the flesh of men[16] and describes large ants which other subjects consider delicacies[17] --both foods which "in this lond men recche of it but smal."[18]

There are two possible parallels referring to religious observances. Inexplicably, in the midst of the feasting and dancing reported by the Squire, Cambuscan and the entire assembly visit the temple.[19] Unless he were following an exotic source which stimulated his imagination, there seems to be no reason why Chaucer should write of divine service at just this time. Such a source may possibly be the reference in the Letter to the wonderful chapel which appeared suddenly near the palace on the Prester's birthday.[20] Such a chapel can be assumed to have had importance to Prester John on succeeding birthdays.

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[15] Chaucer, op. cit., lines 63-64, p. 155.

[16] Baring-Gould, op. cit., p. 26.

[17] Jones, op. cit., p. 359.

[18] Chaucer, op. cit., line 71, p. 155.

[19] Ibid., line 295, p. 157.

[20] Jones, op. cit., pp. 358-359.

More striking then this similarity in chapels is Chaucer's description of Cambuscan's strict observance of his religion. The Squire says of Cambuscan that "as of the sect of which that he was born/He kepte his lay, to which that he was sworn..."[21] In the Letter, Prester John, who is traditionally regarded as a Nestorian Christian, is sufficiently anxious concerning religion to question the correctness of the religious beliefs held by the Emperor of Constantinople.[22]

Another parallel between Chaucer's Tale and the Prester John material concerns the birthday gifts. Of the four gifts, the sword and the ring may possibly derive indirectly from the Letter through "Oswald's Poem," assuming Chaucer's familiarity with that work. The German description of the ring mentions three precious stones, one of which has the power of preventing wounds.[23] Chaucer's ring does not prevent wounds, but it gives knowledge of the healing powers of all the herbs, and only the sword can heal wounds it has made. A ring set with a stone that prevents wounding is neither so interesting nor so real

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[21] Chaucer, op. cit., lines 17-18, p. 154.

[22] Baring-Gould, op. cit., p. 26.

[23] Jones, op. cit., p. 360.

as a magic sword and a magic ring. Swords were familiar to Chaucer's contemporaries, and the idea of magic swords was popular, from the Arthurian cycle at least. Chaucer's genius for verisimilitude may have changed a possible source to bring the detail closer to his readers. Interestingly, in Spenser's completion of the Canacee-Cambalo plot thread, the powers of the ring are similar to those described by the German poet.

Practically all extant versions of the manuscripts of the Letter, including the copy in England on which "Oswald's Poem" seems based, mention a wonderful mirror such as Chaucer describes.[24] Its magic powers, position in a high tower, and guard of officers appear the same in Chaucer and in the Letter. In the Letter there is this description: "On top of our highest column is a mirror, guarded by armed men, which shows any plot against us."[25] In Chaucer's Tale the strange knight describes the gift mirror as having

> ...swich a myght that men may in it see
> Whan ther shal fallen any adversitee
> Unto youre regne or to youreself also,
> And openly who is youre freend or foo.[26]

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[24] John Livingstone Lowes, "The Squire's Tale and the Land of Prester John," Washington University Series, Series IV, Vol. I, No. 2 (Allyn Abbott Young, editor; St. Louis, Missouri: Washington University Press, October, 1913), p. 7. The writer's discussion of Chaucer's use of the Prester John material was worked out independently of this study by Lowes, although details and conclusions are essentially the same.

[25] Jones, op. cit., p. 358.

[26] Chaucer, op. cit., lines 133-136, p. 155.

The mirror is born into the high tower with certain officers ordered for the task.[27]

In the German poem several gifts are presented to Frederick Barbarossa[28] by an ambassador from the Prester John. The gifts are a ring, a garment of salamander skin which cannot burn, and a bottle of water from the Fountain of Youth. Powers similar to those of Chaucer's ring are ascribed to the German ring. The bottle of water seems to be based on details in the Letter; in one of the lands owing allegiance to the Prester John, there is a spring which bubbles from the foot of Mount Olympus. One who tastes of this spring will "be as a man of thirty years as long as he lives."[29] The Letter also mentions cloth made from the skins of salamanders which can be cleaned only by immersion in fire.[30] There is nothing in Chaucer which reveals any use of the salamander or Fountain of Youth details, but the parallel indicates one of the uses Osswalt der Schribar made of the Letter. The mirror appears in "Oswald's Poem" with the same presaging powers which Chaucer attributes to

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[27] Ibid., lines 176-177, p. 156.

[28] The various translations and copies of the Letter of Prester John had different addresses: the Pope, the Byzantine Emperor, and the German Emperor. The Letter used by Osswalt der Schribar was evidently addressed to the latter.

[29] Baring-Gould, op. cit., p. 27.

[30] Ibid., p. 29.

it. However, in the German poem the mirror is not a gift but is already in the possession of the German Emperor, a transfer of magic resources probably made to heighten the prestige of Frederick Barbarossa.

One of the most enigmatic bits of description in the Tale is that of the tree in which Canacee finds the wounded falcon. Chaucer writes of the tree, "For drye as whit as chalk,"[31] which may be translated either "very dry" or "because dry." The Letter also mentions a "dry tree," which is called the "tree of Seth,"[32] but it is very beautiful, large, full of fruits and birds, and produces a sweet odor.[33]

Such striking parallels as these do not seem to be coincidence. They point towards a probable use of either the copy of the Letter which was in England or to an indirect use of that manuscript through "Oswald's Poem." Whether Chaucer might have run across the German poem during one of his excursions to the Continent cannot be determined: he could have seen the poem in France. However, if the Prester John material is not a direct source, it seems almost certainly an element that entered into

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[31] Chaucer, op. cit., line 409, p. 159.

[32] Jones, op. cit., p. 559.

[33] Loc. cit.

the creation of the Tale, to enhance the romantic atmosphere of the setting. The Tale is probably Chaucer's, since no plot source is known, but the Orientalism of the setting may derive from the Letter of Prester John. At the very least, the parallels between Prester John's Letter and the background details of the "Squire's Tale" indicate that by Chaucer's time exotic exaggerations like those surrounding the name of Prester John had become pervasive.

The "Squire's Tale" remained unfinished until the last quarter of the sixteenth century when Edmund Spenser incorporated the story into Book IV of the Faerie Queene. Stanza xxiv of Canto II gives ample proof of Spenser's source in Chaucer. He believed that the major part of the Tale had been lost instead of merely left unfinished. Addressing the spirit of the dead Chaucer, he asks pardon for his presumption in trying to revive part of the lost story.

> Then pardon, O most sacred happie spirit,
> That I thy labours lost may thus reuiue,
> And steale from thee the meede of thy due merit,
> That none durst euer whilest thou wast aliue,
> And being dead in vaine yet many striue:
> Ne dare I like, but through infusion sweete
> Of thine owne spirit, which doth in me survive,
> I follow here the footing of thy feete,
> That with thy meaning so I may the rather meete.[34]

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[34] Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene, The Works of Edmund Spenser, Book IV, Ray Heffner, special editor (Variorum Edition, Edwin Greenlaw et al., editors; Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins Press, 1935), canto II, stanza xxxv, p. 25.

It is the Canacee-Cambello plot which Spenser included in Cantos II and III of Book IV of his Faerie Queene. Canacee, famed for her beauty, knowledge, and purity, is wooed by many knights. To avoid contention among the suitors, Cambello challenges to single combat any three of them. Only three brothers--Priamond, Diamond, and Triamond--do not fear the magic ring which protects Cambello from wounds. In the ensuing combats, Cambello kills Priamond and Diamond. As each brother dies, his soul passes into the next brother until the soul of Triamond is completed by the souls of his two brothers. Cambello and Triamond fight fiercely and are stopped only by the appearance on the tourney field of Cambina, Triamond's sister. She gives the two knights a draught of Nepenthe, a magical beverage that assuages violence. The two knights swear eternal friendship; Cambello weds Cambina; and Triamond gains the hand of Canacee.[35]

Spenser has Canacee wise "in power of herbes, and tunes of beasts and burds..."[36] She retains this knowledge even when she is not wearing the magic ring which she has sent to her brother. This ring, according to Spenser, "mongst the manie vertues, which we reed,/Had power to staunch al wounds, that mortally did bleed."[37]

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[35] Spenser, op. cit., canto II, stanzas xxxv-liv; canto III, pp. 25-44.

[36] Ibid., canto II, stanza xxxv, line 6, p. 25.

[37] Ibid., canto II, stanza xxix, lines 8-9, p. 26.

Spenser has departed from his source here to describe the power of the ring as it appeared in Osswalt der Schribar's use of the Letter of Prester John. Throughout the combats Cambello remains fresh:

> All was through vertue of the ring he wore,
> The which not onely did not from him let
> One drop of bloud to fall, but did restore
> His weakned powers, and dulled spirits whet,
> Through working of the stone therein yset.[38]

Chaucer makes no mention of any particular stone set into the ring; but this reference is similar to the stone described in the German poem. The change in the powers of the ring and in the number of brothers whom Cambello fought seems to be the only changes Spenser made of his source, although the story of the ring is the only variation attributable to the Legend of Prester John.[39]

There is no indication that Edmund Spenser could have had access to "Oswald's Poem." He did, however, hold two degrees from Cambridge, and it is possible that during his university days he may have discovered one of the Latin versions of the Letter of

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[38] Ibid., canto III, stanza xxiv, lines 1-5, p. 37.

[39] In Le Morte D'Arthur, Dame Liones gives a ring with similar protective powers to Sir Gareth to wear during a tournament. "Who that beareth my ring shall lose no blood." Cf. Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte D'Arthur (Everyman's Library edition; New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1947), p. 224. Le Morte D'Arthur was published in 1485, fourteen years before Mandeville's Travels, and could also have been utilized by Spenser.

Prester John which circulated in England. The similarity between the ring Spenser describes and that described by Osswalt der Schribar from material in the Letter seems too obvious to be dismissed as another coincidence, particularly so in view of Spenser's faithful following of other details derived from Chaucer's Tale. In addition to a version of the Letter and the reference in Malory, Spenser had another possible source for the healing powers he ascribes to the ring Cambello wore during his combats. In the Travels of Sir John Mandeville, a mendacious report of travels in the Orient which appeared in print in 1499, there is a direct reference to precious stones having protective powers. These stones are found in one of the kingdoms subject to the rule of Prester John.

> ...and at the knots of those roots men find precious stones that have great virtues. And he that beareth any of them upon him, iron ne steel may not hurt him, ne draw no blood upon him; and therefore, they that have those stones upon them fight full hardily both on sea and land, for men may not harm [them] on no part.[40]

Mandeville also lists the magic powers supposed to accrue to any virtuous man who wears a diamond. Among these powers is that of giving the wearer "hardiness and manhood, and it keepeth the limbs of his body whole."[41] The best and most precious diamonds are to

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[40] Sir John Mandeville, Travels of Sir John Mandeville (Library of English Classics; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905), p. 127.

[41] Ibid., p. 106.

be found in "Ind"[42]; and the Emperor of Ind, according to Mandeville, is Prester John.[43]

The Travels is a compilation[44] of all the fantastic stories which were known by 1499 of the shadowy, unknown Orient. Written in French, the book immediately appeared in Latin translations and in a series of English translations.[45] It purports to be a true account of the lands, peoples, flora, and fauna encountered by the author during an extended exploration through the eastern regions. The Travels is a wonderful fabrication, based on the Letter of Prester John and on the reports of William of Rubruquis, Johannes de Plano Carpini, and Friar Odoric. The absolute incredibility

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[42] Loc. cit.

[43] Ibid., p. 177.

[44] Mandeville owes much to Image du Monde, the Old French original from which Caxton translated his Mirrour of the World, published in 1480. Cf. William Caxton, Mirrour of the World, Early English Text Society, Extra Series, Vol. 110 (Oliver H. Prior, editor; London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1913 (for 1912), note, p. 88. No mention of Prester John occurs in Mirrour of the World, but many of the descriptions of the strange beasts, fish, and peoples found in countries in India parallel similar descriptions in Mandeville. Caxton's book amounts to an encyclopedia. Like Mandeville's Travels, it probably became a source of picturesque and weird details for future writers. The book must have been popular, for Caxton produced two editions and a 1527 reprint was done by Lawrence Andrews. (Caxton, op. cit., p. vi.)

[45] Mandeville, op. cit., "Bibliographical Note" by A. W. Pollard, p. vii.

of the stories narrated by Mandeville is unimportant because the book served to spread the general knowledge of Prester John. The translations of the book are among the first attempts to bring secular subjects within the domain of English prose. Paucity of reading material in the sixteenth century insured the popularity of any book, and Mandeville's Travels probably became as common reading entertainment as Le Morte D'Arthur. Modern scholarship has denied the authorship to Sir John Mandeville. The name, as it appears in the Travels, is a nom de guerre borrowed from a real knight of this name who lived in the reign of Edward II. No author of the work can be identified.[46]

The author of the Travels had his own theory of the origin of Prester John: no similar supposition is presented in the Letter or in any of the three journals. In Mandeville the origin lies in the wish of a certain noble emperor, who had Christian knights in his service, to see a church service in a Christian land. He travels through "Turkey, Syria, Tartary, Jerusalem, Palestine, Arabia, Aleppo and all the land of Egypt"[47] to attend service in an Egyptain church. With a Christian knight he hears the service at which "the bishop made orders."[48] The bishop wishes to know

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[46] Loc. cit.

[47] Mandeville, op. cit., p. 197.

[48] Loc. cit.

what degree the two strangers would be, and the knight answers that "they should be priests."[49] The emperor does not wish to be addressed as emperor in the future, but would be called a priest with the name of the first priest who had left from that church. "And so ever-more sithens, he is clept Prester John."[50] There might be an historical source for Mandeville's story in the conversion to Christianity of an Asiatic chieftain who assumed the religious-secular designation. The source might lie in a manuscript which is lost to scholars of antiquity, or it may be merely one of the author's highly imaginative fabrications. These conjectures seem valuable only in emphasizing Mandeville's ignoring of the other possible origins presented in the Latin journals. Since he used entire parts of the Letter and of the journals, it is odd that he should provide his book with an original version of the adoption of the name of Prester John.

That Mandeville made ample use of some version of the Letter of Prester John can be seen clearly. An example of such use is apparent from the following comparison. Baring-Gould's translation of the Letter[51] describes Prester John's array when

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[49] Loc. cit.

[50] Loc. cit.

[51] Baring-Gould, op. cit., pp. 25-30.

riding:

> When we go to war, we have fourteen golden and bejewelled crosses borne before us instead of banners; each of these crosses is followed by 10,000 horsemen, and 100,000 foot soldiers...When we ride abroad plainly, we have a wooden, unadorned cross, without gold or gem about it, borne before us...[52]

Mandeville enlarges this description in his characteristic manner.

> This Emperor Prester John when he goeth into battle against any other lord, he hath no banners borne before him; but he hath three crosses of gold, fine, great and high, full of precious stones, and every of those crosses be set in a chariot, full richly arrayed. And for to keep every cross, be ordained 10,000 men of arms and more than 100,000 men on foot...And when he hath no war, but rideth with a privy meinie, then he hath borne before him but one cross of tree, without painting and without gold or silver or precious stones...[53]

Mandeville seems to have used the journals and the Letter as only the starting points for his own stories. The Letter mentions a "certain waterless sea, consisting of tumbling billows of sand never at rest."[54] Near the sea is a "stony, waterless, river."[55] In the Travels these brief descriptions provide material for several paragraphs of fantastic narration. Mandeville has a

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[52] Ibid., p. 29.

[53] Mandeville, op. cit., p. 181.

[54] Baring-Gould, op. cit., p. 28.

[55] Loc. cit.

"Gravelly Sea, that is all gravel and sand,"[56] but which contains eatable fish. The stony river of the Letter becomes "full of precious stones"[57] in the book. Similar extensions and embroideries of the material drawn from the three Latin journals are common in the Travels.

Mandeville's book is important to the Legend of Prester John because it contains in English most of the widely-circulating fables. As long as the Prester John material was available only through Latin journals or through the Letter, it does not seem probable that the legend could have become general knowledge. The Travels, however, must have been in great demand by contemporary readers; a prose work, it was neither a scholarly treatise nor a religious confession, the most common types of prose writing in England up to the sixteenth century. Subsequent writers would more likely turn to such a popular work for inspiration than to Latin manuscripts, and they would undoubtedly have had a better opportunity of reading the Travels than the manuscripts. Then, also, the book would more easily satisfy the English craving for free range of the imagination, the craving to escape the local and the practical, and the longing to discover the hinted wonders of the remote Orient. It was some combination of these or similar factors which stimulated sixteenth century writers to use the

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[56] Mandeville, op. cit., p. 180.

[57] Loc. cit.

Oriental material of which the Legend of Prester John forms a part.

Obvious use of Oriental terms and phrases occurs in the work of William Shakespeare, almost a hundred years after the publication of Mandeville's Travels. References like those which occur in Chaucer provide Shakespeare with similar metaphors, geographical allusions, descriptive details, and one definite use of the name of Prester John. For the dramatist's familiarity with eastern lore, credit is probably due to the Travels of Sir John Mandeville, possibly to Caxton's Mirrour of the World, and also to the explorations in Africa and in India by Spanish, Portuguese, and English sailors. The assumption that Shakespeare had read the Latin Letter cannot be made; on the basis of internal evidence from the plays and the unknown extent of Shakespeare's education, such an assumption seems improbable. His direct mention of the name seems to point to Mandeville as source because only in this book does the name of Prester John appear in English during the first three hundred years of literary use of the Legend. From the Travels or from Caxton Shakespeare could have obtained all the reference material needed for his casual use of Oriental matter.[58]

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[58] Shakespeare's well-known use of Hakluyt's Principall Voyages (Cf. Supra, Chapter IV, p.63) has little pertinence to this discussion of English literary use of the Prester John Legend. The dramatist's only definite connection with the Legend is in Much Ado About Nothing, generally dated in the winter of 1598-1599. Hakluyt's first folio of the Voyages did appear in 1589, but the only mention of Prester John was in the Latin text of Mandeville's Travels. (George Bruner Parks, Richard

Shakespeare appears to have used Oriental matter for three general purposes: to indicate comparative wealth, to hint at knowledge of strange foreign peoples, and to make descriptive metaphors. He makes no discernible separation between Ethiopia and India, referring in one play to riches in Ethiopia and in another play to Indian wealth. Despite the extension of knowledge of world geography through explorations, Shakespeare, at least, still seems to have considered Africa and India as adjoining or as synonymous place names.

Use of a reference to the East to indicate wealth in a comparison can be found in King Henry IV, Part I. Edmund Mortimer

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Hakluyt and the English Voyages (New York: American Geographical Society, 1930), p. 127. As has been indicated, the assumption that Shakespeare knew Latin cannot be made. The English version of Mandeville was still accredited in 1576 when a copy was purchased very cheaply for the ship's library of the first Frobisher expedition. (Parks, op. cit., pp. 45-46.) The twenty-five years from the date of this purchase to the date of Much Ado About Nothing does not seem sufficiently long for the book to lose its popularity. Since the Travels was available in an English edition and since Hakluyt's text was in Latin, it seems probable that Shakespeare used Mandeville. The Travels disappeared completely from the final 1599-1600 edition of Hakluyt's Voyages, but among the several additions were "two lengthy medieval narratives of journeys to the Tatar East, the first important narratives of the sort... between Roman times and the times of Marco Polo." (Parks, op. cit., p. 175.) These two narratives were the journals of Joannes de Plano-Carpini and William de Rubruquis. Although the journals mention Prester John, Shakespeare probably did not derive the Much Ado reference from them since they appeared in print about two years after presentation of the play.

describes his father-in-law, Owen Glendower, with reference to Indian riches:

> In faith, he is a worthy gentleman,
> Exceedingly well read, and profited
> In strange concealments, valiant as a lion
> And wondrous affable and as bountiful
> As mines of India . . .[59]

In a similar manner Macduff answers Malcolm in Macbeth with a comparison to Oriental riches:

> I would not be the villain that thou think'st
> For the whole space that's in the tyrant's grasp,
> And the rich East to boot . . .[60]

Romeo's famous description of Juliet follows this comparative use of the eastern wealth reference: "It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night/As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear;"[61] A more direct listing of eastern wealth that resembles many of Mandeville's exaggerations is found in the Comedy of Errors: "Oh, sir, upon her nose, all o'er embellished with rubies, carbuncles, sapphires . . ."[62] These stones are all typical of such oriental wealth as

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[59] William Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part I, The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare (William A. Neilson and Charles J. Hill, editors; New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942), III, i, 165-169, p. 652. With the exception of the reference to Othello cited in footnote 65, all citations to Shakespearean dramas refer to this edition.

[60] Shakespeare, Macbeth, op. cit., IV, iii, 35-37, p. 1205.

[61] Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, op. cit., v, 47-48, p. 983.

[62] Shakespeare, A Comedy of Errors, op. cit., III, ii, 137-138, p. 13.

[illegible] V, 47-48, p. 380.

[illegible] Shakespeare, A Comedy of Errors, op. cit., III, 11, 137-139, p. 12.

was connected with Prester John.

Examples of Shakespeare's use of his undoubtedly slight actual knowledge of the real Orient to hint at strange peoples occur in Othello and in The Tempest. Othello, to explain how he has won the heart and hand of Desdemona, relates the nature of his conversations with her:

> It was my hint to speak,--such was my process,
> And of the Cannibals that each other eat,
> The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
> Do grow beneath their shoulders . . .[63]

Mention is made by Mandeville of several tribes in the eastern regions which "eat more gladly man's flesh than any other flesh."[64] The Anthropophagi, or man-eaters, are mentioned in Pliny and in some of the voyages of the sixteenth century travelers;[65] it seems plausible, however, to suggest that Shakespeare might have known of this tribe from Mandeville as well as from these other sources. Mandeville also describes "folk of foul stature and of cursed kind that have no heads. And their eyen be in their shoulders."[66] Source for Mandeville seems to be in the Letter of Prester John, which lists among subject peoples "men with

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[63] Shakespeare, Othello, op. cit., I, iii, 142-145, p. 1101.

[64] Mandeville, op. cit., p. 120.

[65] William Shakespeare, Othello, Shakespeare (Hardin Craig, editor; New York: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1931), note, p. 802.

[66] Mandeville, op. cit., p. 134.

horns, one-eyed, men with eyes before and behind, centaurs . . ."[67] Cannibals appear in the Letter: "We have some people subject to us who feed on the flesh of men and of prematurely born animals . . . When any of these people die, their friends and relations eat him ravenously . . ".[68]

The allusion in The Tempest is only slight and links "men of Ind"[69] with savages.

Use of some form of "Ethiopian" is metaphorical, as in Rosalind's description of Phebe's letter from As You Like It:

> Woman's gentle brain
> Could not drop forth such giant-rude invention,
> Such Ethiope words, blacker in their effect
> Than in their countenance . . .[70]

Other references make a similar play on the black skin color of the Ethiopian people: Proteus thinks Julia an Ethiope in comparison with Silvia,[71] and Florizel compares a hand to the whiteness of an Ethiopian's tooth.[72]

Mention of India occurs many times in Shakespeare's plays--in A Midsummer Night's Dream, A Comedy of Errors, The Merchant of

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[67] Baring-Gould, op. cit., p. 26.

[68] Loc. cit.

[69] Shakespeare, The Tempest, op. cit., II, ii, 60-61, p. 552.

[70] Shakespeare, As You Like It, op. cit., IV, iii, 34-37, pp.236-237.

[71] Shakespeare, Two Gentlemen of Verona, op. cit., II, vi, 25-26, p. 38.

[72] Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale, op. cit., IV, iv, 372-374, p. 525.

Venice, Twelfth Night, Henry VIII, Henry IV, Part I, Troilus and Cresida, and Henry VI, Part 3. In these references the use of India indicates Shakespeare's awareness that such a country existed and that it was at an exceedingly great distance. The use seems to have no relation to Prester John material other than in mentioning the name of the country over which he is supposed to rule.

Although Shakespeare made wide use of eastern material, the only direct connection with Prester John is in Much Ado About Nothing. The assumption that Shakespeare was familiar with Mandeville seems to be borne out in the use of the name of Prester John in this comedy. The reference occurs when Benedick lists all the improbable tasks of which he can think that he is willing to perform to avoid a meeting with Beatrice.

> I will fetch you a toothpicker now from the furthest inch of Asia, bring you the length of Prester John's foot, fetch you a hair off the Great Cham's beard, do you any embassage to the Pigmies, . . .[73]

Combined as it is with the Great Khan and the Pygmies, the reference to Prester John bears a double connotation. Benedick might have added a trip to the moon to his list: it would have seemed no less improbable to Elizabethan audiences than approaching the great

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[73] Shakespeare, Much Ado About Nothing, op. cit., II, ii, 274-278, p. 188.

priest-king or molesting the Great Khan's beard. Stimulus to the imagination of the audience is achieved by the reference, through mention of the most remote and of the strangest persons and places that could be conceived. The casual use of the name of Prester John also indicates the playwright's confidence that his audience would appreciate the reference without additional explanation. Elizabethan audiences must, therefore, have been familiar with the Legend of Prester John, with the name and with the stories of his improbable kingdoms. The only source which could have supplied this knowledge to so many people is Mandeville's Travels. It does not seem necessary to go beyond Mandeville for Shakespeare's source. He may have known Portuguese and may have read the various Portuguese accounts of their embassies to the Abyssinian Prester John. However, no internal examination of his plays reveals his knowledge of that language. The conjecture that he was conversant in Portuguese seems unnecessary in view of the availability of Mandeville--to Shakespeare and to his audience.

Parallels between the Prester John material and the work of Chaucer and Spenser seem to indicate some familiarity with the Legend. The similarity of many of the details in Chaucer with the Letter of Prester John indicates that the Legend had survived for three hundred years and that Chaucer must have had some knowledge of the associated myths. Spenser in the sixteenth century

used Chaucer as source and may have, in addition, known of the Legend through Mandeville's Travels. In the latter book there appears for the first time in English mention by name of the fabulous priest-king. Survival and spread of the Legend through the Travels has been suggested as the most probable source for much of Shakespeare's Orientalism both for his mention of Prester John and also for his assurance of audience appreciation. Reference to the name only does not constitute the extent of the uses of the Legend, for Mandeville and Shakespeare make the only direct references discovered through the sixteenth century. It is predicated that the Legend of Prester John formed a part of the picturesque surface of the Orient that was adapted to the general ignorance of the English mind as to Eastern life. Use of the various aspects of the Legend helped to provide literary creations with a background that was remote and strange. Explanations of the persistence of the Legend would seem to depend upon the appeal of this quality of unknownness to English writers and their audiences.

CHAPTER IV

"OF THE LINEAGE OF JUDAH"

Until the end of the sixteenth century, there was relatively little material concerning Prester John and the legends associated with his name available to the average Englishman. Neither the Latin journals of Rubruquis, Plano Carpini, and other missionary explorers of Asia nor the Italian account of Marco Polo's travels seem to have existed in early English translations. Copies of the fabulous Letter of Prester John may have been in England as early as the last decade of the fourteenth century and may have been read by Chaucer and his contemporaries. Chaucer, at least, seems to have had some acquaintance with the Letter. The Travels of Sir John Mandeville appeared in 1499, but this book contained only those stories of Prester John connected with Cathay, the Orient, and the Indies. Very little seems to have been known in England of the existence in Africa of the Christian king who could very well be the priest-king of the legends. The Portuguese had begun the search for the Prester John in Africa early in the fifteenth century, but it was not until 1494 that an ambassador of the Portuguese king reached the Christian court of the Abyssinian ruler and hailed him as the Prester John. The journal accounts of the Portuguese missions to Abyssinia were not translated into English and made available to English writers until

the end of the sixteenth century. The early journals almost without exception refer to the ruling king of Abyssinia as the Prester John, and they contain varied descriptions of the history, the court, and the character of the African Christian kings. Confirming the vague rumors of the existence of Christian kings in Africa, the journals were factual accounts and not the exaggerated reports of the Letter and Mandeville. From the records of the Portuguese explorations have come the stories of the African Prester John on which several English writers seem to have drawn for material.

These records and those of the early missionary explorers in Asia were made available to English writers through the collections and publications of Richard Hakluyt and Samuel Purchas. Although Richard Hakluyt's main work was with the voyages of the British seamen, his deep interest in extending the geographical knowledge of the world led him to obtain and publish many other manuscripts, including the journals of Rubruquis, Joannes de Plano Carpini, and Friar Odoric. His manuscripts were inherited and added to by Samuel Purchas, who published an almost complete record of ancient and modern exploration in two massive works, Purchas his Pilgrimage, 1613, and Purchas his Pilgrimes, 1625. The Pilgrimage is a compilation of much miscellaneous material gleaned from talks with sailors and other wanderers and from manuscripts which Purchas had seen. The Pilgrimes

the end of the sixteenth century. The early journals almost without exception refer to the ruling king of Portugal as the "master lord," and they contain very few descriptions of the country, the court, and the character of the African Christian kings. Confirming the vague rumors of the existence of Christian kings in Africa, the journals were readily accepted and not the exaggerated reports of the letter and Tamayo-Vila. From the records of the Portuguese explorations have come the stories of the African Prester John on which several English writers began to draw for material.

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contains the abridgement of Father Francisco Alvarez's Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia, 1520-1527, the account of Joao Bermudez's embassy, the report of Joao de Castro, and the first book of Marco Polo's Travels. These two works of Purchas were the repositories for the African Prester John material on which English writers such as Johnson, Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge and others may have drawn.

London born and an Oxford scholar, Richard Hakluyt dedicated his life to the study of English exploration. He read in Greek, Latin, Italian, English, Spanish, and Portuguese as many of the extant travel records as he could obtain. His first book, 1582, contained the accounts of the "Divers Voyages Touching The Discoverie of America." Seven years later appeared the first folio edition of The Principall Navigations, Traffiques, Voiages, and Discoveries of the English Nation,[1] which was revised completely in the 1599-1600 publication. In addition to the manuscripts which he published himself, Hakluyt caused to be printed many other works of compilation: treatises on Russia, on Asiatic Russia, on Virginia, and on Brazil, and much incidental information. Those works which are his directly or which he sponsored could have enlightened any Englishman on almost any country where Englishmen or other western Europeans had yet been.[2]

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[1] "Richard Hakluyt and the English Voyages," The Golden Hind (Roy Lamson and Hallett Smith, editors; New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1942), p. 728.

[2] George Bruner Parks, Richard Hakluyt and the English Voyages (New York: American Geographical Society, 1930), p. 184.

If a significant new work appeared abroad, Hakluyt had it and translated it himself or had it translated for him. The notes and translations may have remained unpublished, but the information which they contained helped make him the best informed man on world travel in the period.[3] Copies of the Latin manuscripts and the translations into English of the travels of Rubruquis and Plano Carpini appear in Volume I of 1599-1600 edition of the Principall Navigations. A translation of Friar Odoric was published in Volume IV of the same work. These accounts contain much of the material dealing with the Asiatic Prester John and the wealth of his fabulous kingdoms. Since Hakluyt was very faithful to his sources and was judicious in editing,[4] his folios preserve almost intact the reports of explorations made by the men who had participated in the journeys. He compiled the archives of historic travel and left to his successor, Samuel Purchas, an almost complete account of world geography.

Hakluyt did not write a history; Samuel Purchas did, a history of travel to satisfy the amateur reader.[5] Falling heir to the notes and translated manuscripts left unpublished at Hakluyt's death in 1616, Purchas completed the account of world

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[3] Ibid., p. 113.

[4] "Richard Hakluyt," op. cit., p. 728.

[5] Parks, op. cit., pp. 181-182.

exploration in Purchas His Pilgrimes. Published in 1625, this work bears in the complete title a tribute to Purchas's master: "Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas his Pilgrimes, Contayning a History of the World, in Sea Voyages, and lande Travells, by Englishmen and others."[6] A rough count has been made that indicates the Hakluyt material used by Purchas comprises something like two-fifths of the Pilgrimes.[7] Purchas did excessive editing of those manuscripts which he inherited from Hakluyt and of the ones he obtained independently. To represent Hakluyt's volumes he summarized the English voyages up to 1600. His favorite editorial word was "tedious," and when a manuscript seemed to him to be tedious, he abridged it or even omitted it entirely.[8] The result seems to have been a more concise book than Hakluyt would have produced, one that would appeal much more to the common reader than Hakluyt's collection of complete manuscripts in the closest possible form to their originals. Probably because of the popular tone, Purchas's books have been more widely read for entertainment than Hakluyt's

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[6] Samuel Purchas, Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrimes, Vol I (Glasgow, Scotland: James MacLehose and Sons, 1905), p. xxv.

[7] Parks, op. cit., p. 227.

[8] Ibid., p. 229.

more scholarly work.

Purchas's statement of his professed purpose in publishing his gigantic work appears in his introduction to Volume I.

> My genius delights rather in by-wayes than highwayes, and hath therein by Tracts and Tractates of Travellers made Causies and High-wayes, every where disposing these Pilgrime-Guides, that men without feare may travell to and over the most uncouth Countries of the World: and there by shewed with others Eyes, the Rarities of Nature, and of such things also as are not against Nature, but either above it, as Miracles, or beside the ordinarie course of it, in the extraordinary Wonders, which Gods Providence hath therin effected according to his good and just pleasure.[9]

He divides the world into those parts which were known to the ancient writers and those parts which had become known to more modern writers. Of his twenty volumes, the first ten deal with the old world, and the last ten with the more recently discovered portions. Volumes I, II, VI and VII contain most of the African Prester John material on which later writers seem to have drawn. "Antiquities and Generalities"[10] are observed in the first volume, and "universall Circumnavigations (all knowne in that kind)"[11] are in

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[9] Purchas, op. cit., Vol. I, p. xlii.

[10] Ibid., p. xlv.

[11] Loc. cit.

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[9] Purchas, op. cit., Vol. I, p. xiii.

[10] Ibid., p. xiv.

[11] Loc. cit.

the second volume. Africa is covered in the sixth and seventh volumes, the sixth "handling the Northerne parts, whatsoever of Africa is not termed Aethiopia, and the seventh the Aethiopian part."[12] Those of the manuscript sources which Purchas obtained from Hakluyt seem credited as faithfully as Purchas promises:

> As for Master Hakluyts many years Collections, and what stocke I received from him in written Papers, in the Table of Authours you shall find: whom I will thus farre honour, that though it be but Materials, and that many Bookes have not one Chapter in that kind, yet that stocke encouraged me to use my endevours in and for the rest.[13]

A condensed version of the "Travels of William de Rubruquis to the East" appears in Volume XI of Purchas his Pilgrimes; the account of the embassy of Dom João Bermudez, in Volume VII; and the Alvarez Narrative, in Volumes VI and VII. These chapters are credited to Hakluyt by the initial "H" in the tables of contents. The publication of Marco Polo's first book of voyages, the very short Latin summary of Mandeville, and the abbreviated translation of Dom João de Castro appear to be original research with Purchas because these chapters are not accompanied by the initial which credits other material to Hakluyt. These works are the most important ones which contain any reference to the Prester John Legend in Africa.

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[12] Loc. cit.

[13] Ibid., p. xli.

For Samuel Purchas, amateur geographer and editor, the real Prester John was the king sought in Asia during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In spite of the repeated use of the title in connection with Abyssinian kings that occurs in the journals he edited, Purchas makes several notations to ensure that his readers will realize that it is an error to ascribe that title to the African rulers. In his editing of "Master Brerewoods Enquiries of the Religious Professed in the World," Purchas reports a Prester John similar to the one in Marco Polo's Travels. The parentheses enclose Purchas's editorial remarks.

> About four hundred yeares ago the King of Tenduc whom the histories of those times name Presbyter Johannes a Christian, but a Nestorian Prince, ruled far and wide in the Northeast part of Asia. . .(It was the Prince of that Kingdome which is rightfully and usually, by the ancienter Historians named Presbyter John, howsoever the mistaking fantasies of many, have transported it out of Asia into Africke.)[14]

Again, in the same account Purchas repeats his belief:

> The Habassines or mid-land Ethiopians are Jacobites. And their King (whom by error we call Prester John) is sundry times in Histories termed the Prince of the Jacobites.[15]

In a footnote in his abridgement of the Alvarez Narrative, Purchas says that both the unknown translator and Father Alvarez call the king of Abyssinia "Prete or Priest John, following the

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[14] Ibid., pp. 310-311.

[15] Ibid., p. 375.

vulgar errour, growing from the relations of a Priest John in Asia, and by ignorance applied to this Negus of Ethiopia."[16] Negus appears to have been the Abyssinian term for king.

In a chapter in Volume VII dealing with the "Description of the Countries, and the severall Regions, Religions, and Abassine Opinions," Purchas provides his explanation for what he terms the error in applying the title to the Abyssinian kings.

> That part of Aethiopia, which is under or neere to Egypt, is called Abassia, namely, so much as is, or in more flourishing Estate of that Empire, hath beene subject to the Negus; called Priest John, by errour of Covilamus [Pero da Covilhã], followed by other Portugals in the first discoverie, applying by misconceit through some like occurrents the Relations in M. Polo and others touching Presbyter John, in the North-east parts of Asia, (therefore called a Priest because he had the Crosse, as the Westerne Archbishops used, carryed before him) unto this King; the Abassines also in Europe, willing by names of neerer sound to confirme that fancie, tending as they supposed, to the credit of their Prince.[17]

The initial "H," identifying the source in Hakluyt's manuscripts, does not appear with this chapter, nor does Purchas give any other source for his statements. For these reasons the chapter appears to be Purchas's own compilation and to contain his independently created opinions on the subject of the location of Prester John and his kingdom.

In spite of these editorial statements on the existence

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[16] Purchas, op. cit., Vol. VI, p. 518n.

[17] Purchas, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 401.

of Prester John in Asia, some English writers seem to have accepted and used the material associated with the Prester John of Africa in the Portuguese journals which were published in the Pilgrimes. The most extensive use of African Prester John material in Purchas seems to be in Samuel Johnson's philosophical novel, Rasselas. Parallels exist between the Purchas abridgement of the Alvarez Narrative and the setting of Rasselas which indicate a very probable use of the Portuguese journal as Johnson's source for his description of Happy Valley. Purchas obtained his copy of the Narrative from the Hakluyt collection and did not know the translator. His edition of the manuscript is the only English translation known to have been available to Johnson, and the only subsequent translation was done in 1881 by Lord Stanley of Alderley for the Hakluyt Society.[18] Although he did not use it, Johnson knew the name of Prester John from his 1735 translation from the French of Lobo's A Voyage to Abyssinia. Slight mention of Prester John occurs in this translation, but there is no mention of any valley such as Johnson uses as the setting for the first part of Rasselas. According to the translation of Lobo's Voyage, the empire of Abyssinia

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[18] Father Francisco Alvarez, Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia, 1520-1527, Hakluyt Society Publications, Series I, Vol. 64 (Lord Stanley of Alderley, translator and editor; London: Hakluyt Society, 1881).

> is known by the name of the kingdom of Prester-John. For the Portuguese having heard such wonderful relations of an ancient and famous Christian state called by that name, in the Indies, imagined it could be none but this of Aethiopia. . . .It has therefore passed for the kingdom of Prester-John since the time that it was discovered by the Portuguese in the reign of King John the Second.[19]

Lobo gives only the name of the province of Amhara,[20] in which the Alvarez Narrative in Purchas locates the valley Johnson may have copied.

It would also seem that Johnson was familiar with Volumes VI and VII of Purchas his Pilgrimes. He may have read these volumes at an early date. Prior to his matriculation at Oxford in 1728, Johnson spent two years at home, probably learning his father's business of bookselling. His reading was sufficiently wide to give him a fine Latin and a fair Greek background.[21] Among the many books available to Johnson in his father's shop could have been Purchas his Pilgrimes. It was a popular history of travel, a collection of such unusual bits of information as might have appealed to the young Johnson. However, regardless of the definite time at which he read the

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[19] Father Jerome Lobo, A Voyage to Abyssinia (Samuel Johnson, translator; New York: Cassell and Company, 1893), p. 68.

[20] Ibid., p. 71.

[21] Leslie Stephen, "Life of Johnson," Introduction to The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia (New York: A. L. Burt Company, n.d.), pp. 10-11.

book, Johnson seems to have had some knowledge of it by 1759. In that year the death of his mother forced him to earn money immediately, and he wrote Rasselas in the evenings of a single week.[22]

The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia deals with the theme of the vanity of human desires. The story begins in the Happy Valley in which the royal princes of Abyssinia are confined. They are totally secluded from the outside world, but everything they want or that can be devised for their comfort and interest is provided. They are not allowed to leave the valley, and guards and gates surround the entrances to the Valley to ensure their obedience. Rasselas, one of the princes, becomes discontented and wishes to leave the Valley in order that he may explore the outside world. With Nekayah, his sister; Imlac, an ancient philosopher who acts as guide and mentor; and Pekuah, favorite maid of Nekayah, Rasselas tunnels out of the Valley through one of the enclosing mountains. The actual traveling of the group does not take them farther than Cairo, but they meet philosophers, statesmen, young men of the world, hermits, Arab bandits, and people of all the classes of life. Their discussions of what they have seen and of what they think of the world comprise most of the book. The story ends with their resolve to return to Happy Valley.[23] Other than the incident of

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[22] Ibid., p. 62.

[23] Samuel Johnson, The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia (New York: A. L. Burt Company, n.d.), pp. 175-349.

book, Johnson seems to have had some knowledge of it by 1750. In that year the death of his mother forced him to earn money immediately, and he wrote *Rasselas* in the evenings of a single week.[22]

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[22] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

[23] Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (New York: A. L. Burt Company, n.d.), pp. 170-172.

the escape, the plot and theme seem to bear no relation to the African Prester John material, but the setting of the opening chapters in Happy Valley parallels certain paragraphs of the Narrative. Comparison of the passages indicates that Johnson may have derived the idea of the Happy Valley, its physical description, and the escape of a royal prince from the material given in Purchas.[24]

Johnson explains the confining of the royal princes in the following manner:

> According to the custom which has descended from age to age among the monarchs of the torrid zone, Rasselas was confined in a private palace, with the other sons and daughters of Abyssinian royalty, till the order of succession should call him to the throne. . . Here the sons and daughters of Abyssinia lived only to known the soft vicissitudes of pleasure and repose, attended by all that were skillful to delight, and gratified with whatever the senses can enjoy.[25]

The source for Johnson's explanation may lie in Purchas's paragraphs:

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[24] Martha Pike Conant has examined the Lobo translation in reference both to Rasselas and also to "Seged, Lord of Ethiopia." The latter work is apparently an earlier draft of Rasselas which appeared in the Rambler. Dr. Conant feels that "Happy Valley is depicted in the most general terms; it might be any valley anywhere." Cf. Martha Pike Conant, The Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), p. 151. Her sources, however, do not include the Alvarez Narrative in any translation.

[25] Johnson, op. cit., pp. 175, 179.

> The aforesaid Valley, reacheth unto a most huge Mountaine, whereon the Sonnes of Prete Janni are continually kept, as it were in prison. And. . .it was revealed unto him /an early king of Abyssinia/ that if he desired to keepe his Realme in quiet and obedience, he should shut up his Sonnes. . .in a Mountain, and suffer none of them to come abroad, saving him which he would have to be his Successour, and that this order should alwaies be observed. . .They informed me. . .of the abundance of victuals and apparell which they had. . .And besides the great revenues which belong unto them he /the Prester John/ sendeth them much Gold, cloth of Silke, and fine clothes, and much Salt, which runneth for currant money in these Kingdomes.[26]

Johnson describes the valley in which Rasselas and the other royal princes are confined as:

> a spacious valley in the kingdom of Amhara, surrounded on every side by mountains, of which the summits overhang the middle part. The only passage by which it could be entered was a cavern that passed under a rock. . .The outlet of the cavern was concealed by a thick wood, and the mouth which opened into the valley was closed with gates of iron forged by the artificers of ancient days.[27]

In Purchas, the several descriptions of the valley given by Father Alvarez seem very similar to Johnson.

> . . .This Mountaine is exceeding steepe, round about from the top to the bottome, so that it seemeth to be a wall that riseth upright, and to a man that looketh upward, the sky seemeth to rest upon it. It hath onely three entrances or gates, and no more, whereby a man may ascend up to it.[28]

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[26] Purchas, op. cit., Vol. VII, pp. 77, 84, 87.

[27] Johnson, op. cit., pp. 175-176.

[28] Purchas, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 77.

> . . .He led me to shew me the way whereby they goe up into the Mountaine and Rockes, which were rent on every side, and there stood a verie high gate, which is kept shut, within the which is a very great Garrison of Souldiers.[29]
> . . .There is also a Valley betweene two Mountaines, which is very strong, so that by no meanes a man can goe out of the same, because the passage is closed up with exceeding strong gates, and in this Valley which is very great, and hath many Townes and Dwellings in it, they keepe those which are of the Bloud-Royall.[30]
> . . .The Mountaine where the Sonnes of the Prete are kept. . .was all ragged on every side, which stretcheth so farre toward the River Nilus, that we could not discerne the end thereof, and it was so high, that the Mountaine where we were, seemed to bee under the foot thereof.[31]

From the marked resemblance in the quoted passages, the Happy Valley in which Rasselas lived appears to have been inspired by Alvarez's factual report of the imprisonment of the Abyssinian royal princes. The Portuguese Narrative may also be the source for the escape of the fictitious Rasselas from the Valley. The Narrative reports that:

> during the time of our abode in this Country, a Brother of the Prete, of sixteene yeares of age, fled out of the Mountaine. . .It was given out through all the Court, that this young man fled, thinking to escape away with the Portugals.[32]

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[29] Ibid., p. 79.

[30] Ibid., p. 80.

[31] Ibid., p. 87.

[32] Ibid., p. 82.

. . . He had no to show me the way whereby they can go into the Mountains and Rocks, which were rent on every side, and there stood a very high gate, which is kept shut, within the which is a very great Dragon of Adulions.[29]

. . . There is also a Valley between two Mountains, which is very strong, so that by no means a man can get out of the same, because the passage is closed up with exceeding strong gates, and in this Valley, which is very great, are such many Jewels and beautiful in it, they know them, which are of the Blood-Royal.

. . . The Mountains where the Lodges of the Trees are kept. . . are all ragged on every side, which stretches so forth toward the River Nilus, that no could see discerns the end thereof, and it was so high, that the Mountains where we were, seemed to be under the foot thereof.[30]

From the marked resemblances in the quoted passages, the Happy Valley in which Rasselas lived appears to have been inspired by Alvarez's factual report of the imprisonment of the Abyssinian royal princes. The fortuneses narrative may also be the source for the escape of the Fortitude-bound on Upper the Valley. The narrative reports that:

During the time of our abode in this Country, a Brother of the Prete, of straunge years of age, fled out of the Mountains. . . It was a very hot thunder all the Court, that this young man fled, thinking to escape away with the Fortunes.[31]

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[29] Ibid., p. 79.

[30] Ibid., p. 80.

[31] Ibid., p. 97.

[32] Ibid., p. 98.

Rasselas is twenty-six years of age and wishes to escape from Happy Valley in order that he might see the world.[33]

In the chapters following the abridgement of the Alvarez Narrative, Purchas prints a translation of Don John Bermudez's embassy to Abyssinia in which the following description occurs, giving Amara as the location of the prison valley. Johnson also places his Happy Valley in Amara.

> The custome is, that all the male children of the Kings, except the Heires, as soone as they be brought up, they send them presently to a very great Rocke, which stands in the Province of Amara, and there they passe all their life.[34]

In Volume VII, in which Alvarez and Bermudez appear, is an abbreviated version of "A Rutter of Don John of Castro, of the Voyage which the Portugals made from India to Zoez." This chapter seems to be based on a manuscript in Purchas's possession which he condensed. It contains a brief mention of treasure which may be the source for the treasure Johnson describes as hidden in the columns of the royal palace in the Happy Valley by a long line of kings.[35]

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[33] Johnson, op. cit., p. 185.

[34] Purchas, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 358.

[35] Johnson, op. cit., p. 178.

> The King of Zeila obtayning so great a victorie, travelled by great journeyes toward the Mountaine, where the Treasure was of the Kings of Abexi. . .they entred. . .and gained the Mountaine, where was taken the greatest Treasure, that unto this day we know together in the compasse of the whole Earth.[36]

As long as the kings of Abyssinia were called by the title of Prester John, the custom of imprisoning their sons in Amara seems to have been observed. Designation of the kings as the Prester Johns and this imprisonment custom are curiously linked together. As the title gradually dropped from common usage, the imprisonment of the royal sons seems to have ceased. Both the title and the custom became part of the African Legend. Abyssinia returned to isolation after the expulsion of the Jesuit priests in 1634,[37] and only reports and journals were left to remind the world that once the Portuguese had sought and had found the Prester Johns in Africa. A Voyage to Abyssinia is Father Lobo's account of this last missionary endeavor. Nowhere in the book is the name of Prester John used as a title, nor is there any mention of the imprisonment tradition. Both customs seem to have disappeared by 1625. In the latter part of the eighteenth century James Bruce sought the source of the Nile River and referred in his very popular Travels to the king, not to the Prester John. In Purchas

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[36] Purchas, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 254.

[37] Cf. Elaine Sanceau, The Land of Prester John (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), pp. 217-223.

The King of Sofala obtained so great a victory, travelled by great journeys towards the Countries where the Treasures are of the Kings of Sofala. They entered . . and gained the Countries, where are taken the greatest Treasures, that here this day we know together in the Kingdoms of the world Earth.[30]

As long as the kings of Ophenia were called by the title of Prester John, the myths of impersonating their sons in Asia seems to have been observed. Designation of the kings as the Prester John and this impersonation action are curiously linked together. As the title gradually dropped from common usage, the impersonation of the royal name seems to have ceased. Both the title and the myths become part of the African legend. Ophenia returned to isolation after the expulsion of the Jesuit priests in 1624.[31] and only reports and journals were left to remind the world that once the Portuguese had sought and had found the Prester John in Africa. A Voyage to Abyssinia is Father Lobo's account of this last missionary endeavor. Whether in the end the name of Prester John used as a title, was in there any question of the impersonation actually on. Both customs seem to have disappeared by 1820. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, James Bruce sought the source of the Nile River and referred in his very popular Travels to the King, not to the Prester John. In Tropica

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[30] Purchas, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 284.

[31] Cf. Alaine Renaux, The Land of Prester John (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), pp. 217-224.

there is a definite identification by name of the "hill of Amara" as the location of the prison for the sons of the Prester Johns. In Bruce there is only a description of a mountain similar to this hill as the one "whereon the king's sons were formerly imprisoned."[38] It would seem that the prison mountain tradition is an intrinsic part of the African strain of the Legend of Prester John. Writers using this tradition, knowingly or not, are still helping to perpetuate a part of that Legend.

Johnson does not use the title of Prester John, but he seems to have utilized a part of the factual material associated with the name as it was used in Abyssinia. It is possible that he could have learned of the custom of imprisoning the sons of Abyssinian kings from another, and unknown, source. It does not, however, seem probable that another source than Purchas would provide as close parallels as do the passages in the abridgement of the Alvarez Narrative. The incident of the escape from the valley, on which the slender plot of Rasselas depends for genesis, seems further to indicate the Narrative as source. Whether the Bermudez and de Castro accounts contributed the name of Amara and the detail of the stored treasure is debatable. Marginal notes by Purchas to the chapters of the Narrative do mention a

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[38] Quoted from James Bruce, Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile, III, p. 255, in John Livingston Lowes, Road to Xanadu (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927), p. 375.

province of Amara. The phrase, "the hill, by some called Amara,"[39] occurs in the margin by the first account of the imprisonment of the royal princes. The same chapter, which deals with the Abyssinian customs of succession, contains another mention of "the Kingdome of Amara."[40] Johnson need not have read those other journals which follow the Narrative in Volume VII to have learned the particular place name he used; the Alvarez could have provided it. The detail of the stored treasure does not seem to have any direct parallels in the Narrative, although the kings of Abyssinia are several times reported to be very wealthy.

The rapidity with which Samuel Johnson wrote Rasselas would seem to preclude any research beyond the knowledge he incidentally possessed. The phenomenal memory commonly attributed to Doctor Johnson was probably sufficient to recall the outlines of Happy Valley. If he had a copy of Purchas, a very brief perusal would give him all the other details he would need to set the stage for Rasselas. Such a perusal of Purchas seems very likely, because details are too closely similar to be the result of memory alone or of independent creation.

The tradition of imprisoning royal sons, which belongs to the African strain of the Prester John Legend, has been

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[39] Purchas, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 77.

[40] Ibid., p. 80.

utilized by other writers than Johnson. Although he seems to have made the most extended use of this tradition, Milton, Wordsworth, and Coleridge have references that indicate a possible slight relationship. As with Johnson, the primary source for these references seems to lie in the Purchas material.

Professor Lane Cooper[41] has pointed out the parallels between a few lines in Book Four of Milton's Paradise Lost and the chapter "Of the Hill Amara" in Purchas his Pilgrimage. Milton warns that "where Abassin kings their issue guard,/ Mount Amara. . ./. . .under the Ethiop line/. . .enclosed with shining rock"[42] is not the true Paradise of Eden. This short passage, according to the Cooper study, is drawn directly from the Pilgrimage.[43] It might also have been influenced by passages similar to those quoted previously from the Pilgrimes in reference to Samuel Johnson. If Milton can be assumed to have read the first book by Purchas, and such an assumption seems logical in view of the marked resemblance of the passages quoted in Cooper's essay, he very probably had also read the more complete and more interesting later book. Both Johnson, the novelist, and Milton, the poet, were intrigued by the idea of the valley prison for the sons of the Prester Johns, kings of Abyssinia. Milton's further use of

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[41] Lane Cooper, "The Abyssinian Paradise in Coleridge and Milton," Modern Philology, 3 (January, 1906), 327-332.

[42] John Milton, "Paradise Lost," Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Milton (Modern Library edition; New York: Random House, n. d.), p. 174.

[43] Cf. Cooper, op. cit., pp. 329, 330.

Purchas's descriptions of the mountains enclosing this valley for his own description of the eastern approach to Paradise is also discussed by Doctor Cooper.[44] Milton's indebtedness to the Prester John material is admittedly slight, even including the reference to "the story of Cambuscan" in "Il Penseroso;" but there seems to be reason to believe that he used some of the factual material about sixteenth century Prester Johns reported by Portuguese explorers and preserved through the industry of Hakluyt and Purchas.

A similar slight reference to the African strain of the Prester John Legend may occur in Wordsworth's Prelude. These lines appear in Book VI:

> And Come', thou, a treasure whom the earth
> Keeps to herself, confined as in a depth
> of Abyssinian privacy. . .[45]

The poet is describing the scenery in the Italian Alps on the way to Locarno's Lake. The phrase, "Abyssinian privacy," may refer only to the isolation of that country from the rest of the world. There exists the possibility, however, that Wordsworth was referring to the imprisonment tradition associated with the sons of the Abyssinian kings. The question of Wordsworth's source for the phrase remains the same with either interpretation. Wordsworth undoubtedly had read Milton; his source could lie in Milton's lines on the Abassin kings.

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[44] Ibid., pp. 330-331.

[45] William Wordsworth, "Prelude," Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth (Student's Cambridge Edition; New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1904), lines 660-662, p. 167.

In his study of Coleridge,[46] John Livingston Lowes indicates some relationship between these lines and Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." There does not seem to be any reason why a similar relationship could not exist between Milton and Wordsworth. The latter may have, in addition, been familiar with the two books of Purchas. Coleridge knew the books, and knew them during the period of his intimacy with Wordsworth. Familiarity with Purchas would account for any reference to Abyssinia, either to the isolation of the country itself or to the isolation of the royal princes. If the latter interpretation has any validity, Wordsworth also forms part of the long line of English writers who have utilized some aspects of the Prester John Legend.

In the Lowes study to which reference has already been made, Coleridge's familiarity with Milton is pointed out. Doctor Lowes has shown that the lines from Milton describing Mount Amara must have been included among the numerous images crowding the poet's mind as he fell asleep. Lowes's study also shows that Coleridge had knowledge of the same chapter in Purchas, "Of the hill Amara," that seems to have stimulated Milton. In Bruce's Travels Doctor Lowes discovered the names of the Abola and the Astaboras, two rivers near the source of the Nile. The name of Mount Amara "--merged with the name of the river that flowed

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[46] Lowes, op. cit., pp. 374-375.

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[46] Lowes, op. cit., pp. 374-376.

by the Mountains of the Moon--was drawn into that concourse of impressions"[47] out of which came Coleridge's Abyssinian maiden who sang of Mount Abora. In both Milton and Purchas Mount Amara is mentioned only as the hill wherein the Abyssinian kings imprisoned their sons. The sole importance of the place name appears to lie in its identification as the location of the prison for the sons of the Prester Johns. As such, the name of Mount Amara is part of the imprisonment tradition of the African strain of the Prester John Legend. The merging of Mount Amara with the names of the two rivers seems to be the extent of Coleridge's use of the Prester John material. But from the Lowes study it would seem that the poet's very knowledge of the name did contribute, however slightly, to the images in "Kubla Khan." And because Mount Amara is an intrinsic part of the imprisonment tradition of the African Legend of Prester John, it would appear that that Legend made a small contribution to the poem.

Small or extensive, any use of material associated with the Legend of Prester John as it existed in Africa would seem to depend ultimately upon the collecting, translating, and editing of Samuel Purchas and Richard Hakluyt. Through the interest in world exploration of these two clergymen, the knowledge of the African Prester Johns was made available to English writers. Hakluyt obtained and had

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[47] Ibid., p. 376.

by the Mountains of the Moon--was Dunsa into that conjuncture of impressions[47] out of which came Coleridge's Abyssinian maiden song of Mount Abora. In both Kitten and Dunsa Mount Amara is mentioned only as the hill whereon the Abyssinian king imprisoned their sons. The main importance of the Nile name appears to lie in its identification as the location of the prison for the sons of the Prester John. As such, the name of Mount Amara is part of the imprisonment tradition of the African origin of the Prester John legend. The wording of Mount Amara in the Kubla Khan passage seems to be the extent of Lightfoot's use of the Prester John material. But from the loose study it would seem that the poet's very knowledge of the name did contribute, however slightly, to the image in "Kubla Khan," and because Mount Amara is an intrinsic part of the imprisonment tradition of the African legend of Prester John, it would appear that legend made a small contribution to the poem.

Small or extensive, any use of material associated with the legend of Prester John as it existed in Africa would seem to depend ultimately upon the collecting, translating, and editing of Portuguese and Spanish dispatches. Through the interest in world exploration of these two countries, the knowledge of the African Prester John was made available to English readers. Material obtained was had

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[47] Ibid., p. 275.

translated the Portuguese narratives which Purchas edited and printed in popular and interesting form. Upon these narratives Johnson, Milton, Wordsworth, and Coleridge may have drawn in some part. Purchas's own opinions on the identity of Prester John do not seem to have had any influence on these particular writers. It is the description of the disposal of the royal princes of Abyssinia in the Alvarez Narrative which seems to have drawn their attention. Johnson appears to have made an extensive use of the description in setting the story of Rasselas in a valley greatly similar to the valley in Mount Amara mentioned in Purchas. Milton's use, while not so extensive, seems to be as specific a reference to the Narrative as Johnson's. In the work of both writers the influence of Prester John appears to exist only in relation to the traditional report of the royal sons. A definite relationship seems to exist between this tradition and the application of the title of Prester John to the kings of Abyssinia. The two incidents seem to occur simultaneously; the actual imprisoning of the sons seems to be stopped at about the same time that the title is no longer used with the Abyssinian kings. Any relation to the imprisonment, however, would seem to indicate a use of the African strain of the Legend. Such a relationship may be present in the lines from Wordsworth's Prelude. And the use by Coleridge of the place-name "Abora" would seem to have as one of its indirect sources the same tradition. All four writers appear to have depended directly

or indirectly upon the Purchas material. Use of the imprisonment tradition, which is a part of the Legend of Prester John, may not have been deliberate. Such references, slight though they may be, would still serve to perpetuate that strain of the Legend of Prester John which had its start in the record of the Portuguese attempts to find a Christian king in Africa.

CHAPTER V

"THE HERITAGE OF JOHN"

Many of the stories and fables that comprise the Legend of Prester John have been used in the works of English writers for at least six hundred years. As it has developed through use in English literature, the Legend has two strains, one of Asiatic origin and the other of African origin. Details of magnificence, great wealth, strange forms of life, and untold power, which comprise the earlier strain of the Legend, came into the ken of writers from the reports, verbal and written, of Asiatic explorers. The location of Prester John in Africa and the traditions of Abyssinian royalty, the major contributions of the later African strain of the Legend, were made known largely through translations of Portuguese journals. Although considerable use seems to have been made of the materials in these two strains of the Legend, the name itself of Prester John has occurred infrequently in the literature examined in previous chapters. Only Mandeville, Purchas, and Shakespeare make direct mention of the title. Despite this infrequency of use of the name, it has survived, with associated stories, into the modern era. Since 1880 Alfred Noyes, T. S. Eliot, John Buchan, Donn Byrne, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson have made use of the Prester John material. Familiar

details of the Legend from both strains--such as the combined religious and secular connotations of the title, the descriptions of wealth and power, and the location in Africa--are all present in the works of these modern writers. In addition to their contributions to the persistence of the Legend, Noyes and Buchan seem to have combined the materials of the two separate strains. Through their merging of its African and Asiatic parts, the Legend of Prester John thus becomes one unified story.

Heretofore, mention of Prester John or of any myth connected with his name by Asiatic or African accounts has been used primarily as a technique to instill something of the romance of the unknown into a creative work. Shakespeare's use through Benedick of Prester John[1] is typical of the power of suggestion which the very name contains. The exotic background created by Chaucer,[2] seemingly out of material of the Legend, reveals the suggestive power of the details of the Legend. However, in the modern writers to be examined, particularly in Noyes and Buchan, the Legend of Prester John seems to take on added significance. Prior to these writers Prester John has indicated the impossible, the fantastic, and the remote--three qualities which can be dreamed about but seldom achieved in actual life. But to the singing seamen

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[1] Supra, Chapter III, p. 58.

[2] Supra, Chapter III, pp. 38-42.

details of the legend from both ethnic--such as the medieval religious and secular conceptions of the Grail, the descriptions of Smith and Prewitt, and the Jacobin Grail--are all present in the works of these modern authors. It is likely to their contributions to the popularizers of the legend, Jessie and Brown seem to have combined the material of the two popular events. Through their reworking of the Grimm and Celtic parts, the legend of Prester John thus becomes one unified story.

Therefore, anything or Prester John or of any myth connected with his name by poetic or literary associations has been used primarily as a technique to instill some sense of the wonders of the unknown into a creative work. Shakespeare's use through Gonzalo of Prester John[1] is typical of the power of suggestion which the very name possesses. The epithet Shakespeare applied by Caliban,[2] meaning not of material of the legend, reveals the suggestive power of the details of the legend. Scottish, in the modern writers to be examined, particularly in Hope and Buchan, the legend of Prester John origin to take on equal significance. Prior to these writers Prester John has indicated the legendary, the fantastic, and the romantic--three qualities which can be traced about two-million existed in modern life. But in the Grail, modern

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[1] Shaw, Chapter III, p. 82.

[2] Shaw, Chapter III, pp. 80-82.

of Noyes's poem and to the natives of Buchan's Transvaal Prester John is synonymous with possible achievement. The name symbolizes the possibility of attaining the dreams of wealth, power, and perpetual happiness which seem to be embodied in the Legend of Prester John. The seamen find and lose their dream; the African natives find and lose their dream also. In both stories the dream seems to be symbolized by Prester John.

From the 1625 publication of Purchas his Pilgrimes, which contains the name of Prester John in the translations of Latin and Portuguese manuscripts, until the appearance around 1880 of Tennyson's "Columbus," no mention of the name of Prester John has been found in the works of a major English writer. The name has probably been helped to remain alive through Shakespeare, Mandeville, Purchas, and the publications of the old manuscripts by the Hakluyt Society of London. Tennyson may have derived the name of Prester John from these works or perhaps directly from the article "Who Was Prester John?" that appeared in April 24, 1880, in All The Year Round.[3] Although it is a resume slanted in tone for a popular magazine, the article contains accurate information on some of the Asiatic materials of the Legend.

In Tennyson's poem "Columbus" the double connotation of

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[3] Supra, Chapter I, p. 4.

the title of Prester John is utilized to give force to an image. "Columbus" is a dramatic monologue in which Christopher Columbus speaks to an unknown visitor. Columbus has been returned to Spain from Hispaniola in the chains of disgrace. Enemies at the Spanish court have succeeded in having him stripped of his power and imprisoned. Meditating on his services to the Spanish crown and on the poor rewards he has received for those services, Columbus compares the treatment he is being accorded with the treatment that is heretic, guilty of great sacrileges, might expect.

> Gold? I had brought your princes gold enough
> If left alone! Being but a Genovese,
> I am handled worse than had I been a Moor,
> And breach'd the belting wall of Cambalu,
> And given the Great Khan's palaces to the Moor,
> Or clutch'd the sacred crown of Prester John,
> And cast it to the Moor.[4]

To be a Moor or to have any connection with Moors would be heresy. Columbus attributes his unjust punishment to his foreign nationality and feels that he is being treated worse than a Moor. He could understand his imprisonment and his chains if he had committed acts comparable to ravishing the palace of the Great Khan and giving its wealth to the Moors or to seizing the sacred crown of Prester John. Both acts would be sacrilegious, but even they would not merit treatment such as his. The forcible removal of the

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[4] Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Columbus," The Poetic and Dramtic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson (Cambridge Edition; New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1898), II, 104-110, p. 477.

the title of Prester John is utilized to give force to an image. "Columbus" is a dramatic monologue in which Christopher Columbus speaks to an unknown listener. Columbus has been returned to Spain from Hispaniola in the chains of disgrace. Persons at the Spanish court have succeeded in having his struggle of his power and imprisoned. Recalling on his services to the Spanish crown and on the poor reward he has received for these services, Columbus compares the treatment he is being accorded with the treatment that is heretic, guilty of great sacrilege, might expect.

> Golden! I had brought your princess gold enough
> If left alone! Being but a Genoese,
> I am handled worse than had I been a Moor,
> And branded the heinous mail of Genoese,
> And given the Great Khan's palace to the Moor,
> Or slaughtered the sacred crown of Prester John,
> And sent it to the Moor.[4]

To be a Moor or to have any connection with Moors would be heresy. Columbus attributes his natural punishment to his foreign nationality and feels that he is being treated worse than a Moor. He could understand his imprisonment and his chains if he had committed acts comparable to ravishing the palace of the Great Khan and giving its wealth to the Moors or to seizing the sacred crown of Prester John. Both acts would be sacrilegious, but even they would not merit treatment such as his. The dramatic revival of the

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[4] Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Columbus," The Poetic and Dramatic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson (Cambridge Edition; New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1898), II, 107-110, p. 477.

Catholic Pope's miter would not seem to be as heinous a crime as seizing the crown of the great priest-king. According to the legends Prester John is served by bishops and popes. Having as his servants ranking members of the Catholic hierarchy would seem to make Prester John the most powerful spiritual ruler on earth. Violation of such a ruler would be worthy of any punishment. Of course, such an act would be impossible. The complaint of Columbus is given weight by the comparison; he is being treated as if he had committed the impossible, symbolized in the name of Prester John.

In the sense that anything fantastic is also impossible, Eliot's use of Prester John is similar to Tennyson's. In "Conversation Galante" Eliot uses the legendary name in a metaphysical conceit. As an intellectual simile describing the moon, the reference is fantastic, as the poet indicates in the lines:

> I observe: "Our sentimental friend, the moon!
> Or possibly (fantastic, I confess)
> It may be Prester John's balloon
> Or an old battered lantern hung aloft
> To light poor travelers to their distress."
> She then: "How you digress!"[5]

The poem is a dialogue in which a man speaks in unconnected and apparently meaningless phrases to which a woman answers in a few, short, very practical words. From the title the poem can be under-

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[5] T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems of T. S. Eliot, 1909-1935 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), p. 38.

Gabriela Pope's mother could not bear to be an heiress, a crime as heinous as raising the crown of the great palace-king. Accordingly, he is sent Pirate John to marry by bishops and popes. Having as his advisers ruling masters of the Catholic Hierarchy would seem to make Pirate John the most powerful political leader of his day. Violation of such a ruler would be worthy of any punishment. Of course, such an act would be impossible. The compliant of Princess is given weight by the conjecture; he is being treated as if he had violated the law punishing, symbolized in the myth of Pandora John.

In the opera this opposing theme is also expressed, Pirot's use of Pirate John to shelter in Gabriela. In "Conversation Galante" Pirot uses his imaginary name in a metaphysical concept. As an intellectual child-searching the moon, he returns to Kabbalah, as the poet listens in the poem:

I observe; "Our mortal Infant, the moon
Or possibly (Kabbalah, I confess)
It may be Pirate John's balloon
Or an old withered Indian Hunt-moon
To light poor travelers to their dinner."
She chant "How you digress!"

The poem is a dialogue in which a man speaks in unexpected and apparently meaningless phrases to which a woman answers in a few short, very practical words. Thus the title the poem can be under-

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T. S. Pirot, Collected Poems of T. S. Pirot, 1909-1939 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), p. 24.

stood to mean a gallant conversation, the polite words addressed a woman by a man. They seem to have as little meaning as most of the polite conversations in society between members of the opposite sex. The man seems trying to entertain the woman with remarks on the moon and the night, which culminate in a rather meaningless compliment to womanhood.

The phrase "Prester John's balloon" is Eliot's own invention, and "he was at that time rather pleased with it. He certainly thinks it unlikely that any legends of Prester John included any references to aeronautics."[6] Eliot "is under the impression that he first heard of Prester John in childhood, presumably through some children's book or story which he has now forgotten completely."[7] At least the title has survived for Eliot with perhaps a hazy recollection of the myths associated with the name.

With the name of Prester John, Eliot seems to refer to the remote and to the unattainable, both actual qualities of the moon. From classical times the moon has been used as an image of the goddess Diana, an unattainable ideal. Although the balloon is anachronistic, one of Eliot's characteristically original metaphors, it does not interrupt the image. Like the moon Prester John seems remote from the reality of life, and like the moon Prester John is unattainable.

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[6] Letter from T. S. Eliot, February 2, 1949. See Appendix A.

[7] Letter from T. S. Eliot, March 9, 1949. See Appendix A.

One other slight use of the name of Prester John serves to illustrate the partial separation of the Legend from its sources which seems to have occurred in the modern era. Messer Marco Polo[8] by Donn Byrne appeared in 1921. Although based on the Travels of Marco Polo the book is essentially a love story of Marco and little Golden Bells, daughter of Kublai Khan. Marco Polo's father and uncle ask him to accompany them on their second trip to Cathay to answer the Khan's questions about Christianity. A sea captain in Venice has told Marco about Golden Bells, and he has fallen in love with her. Undertaking the trip to Cathay gladly, Marco reaches the Court, but he is unable to impress the courtiers. Only Golden Bells listens to what he has to say about the Christian religion. Realizing he has failed as a missionary, he tells the princess he must leave. But, he says,

> "I will stop at the court of Prester John, and he will send a bishop surely or some great cardinal to baptize you and to teach you the rest [of the Christian religion]."[9]

Byrne's reference to Prester John is another indication of the persistence in the modern era of the idea of the power reputedly held by the legendary figure. More clearly expressed than in the lines from Tennyson, the idea of great spiritual power can be seen in the statement that Prester John would surely send a bishop or

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[8] Donn Byrne, Messer Marco Polo (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1921).

[9] Ibid., p. 122.

a great cardinal to baptize the one little girl. A ruler who can send Catholic princes on such an errand must wield tremendous power.

In his descriptions of the countries through which Marco Polo's party passes on its journey to Cathay, Byrne is almost completely faithful to his source. His addition of the love interest forms the plot of his novel. He contradicts his source in the Travels when he has Marco Polo speak of a living Prester John. The priest-king of that name whom Polo identifies in the Travels died around 1203.[10] Byrne is a gifted story-teller, reputed to possess the ability to weave spontaneous stories out of details picked up from unrelated sources. His violation of chronology appears to be the first time an author has deliberately varied any of the Prester John material used from a specific source. Use of the Legend before has not seemed to contradict a source. When reference to time or to location was intended, the author has followed his general knowledge or a specific source. Details from either the Asiatic or African strain have been used at the discretion of a writer, but each man seems, undoubtedly not deliberately, to use details peculiar to only one of the strains. Both Tennyson and Eliot seem to follow chiefly the earlier Asiatic tradition. Neither appears

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[10] Supra, Chapter II, p. 18.

to have had any specific source. Byrne's deliberate anachronism is indicative of the generalized treatment that has been given the materials in the Legend of Prester John. By having Marco Polo refer to a living Prester John, Byrne has helped divorce the Legend from its sources and make it general knowledge. The merging of the two strains of the Legend, which will be illustrated in the work of Noyes and Buchan, has further served to give Prester John to the realm of popular imagination. As the fables of the Legend enter the general fund of story materials, the Legend itself enters the stream of general cultural knowledge.

In Alfred Noyes's "Forty Singing Seamen," copyrighted in 1906, the first merging of the two strains of the Legend of Prester John seems to have occurred. The exotic details connected with the Asiatic material are definitely assigned an African location. Noyes seems to have made use of all the available material for his colorful ballad. Among the possible sources for the poem are Latin and English manuscripts of the Letter of Prester John in the Cambridge University Library[11] and the Latin manuscript in the Bodleian Library at Oxford,[12] the university at

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[11] John Livingstone Lowes, "The Squire's Tale and the Land of Prester John," Washington University Series, Series IV, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Allyn Abbott Young, editor; St. Louis, Missouri: Washington University Press, October, 1913), note 51, p. 14.

[12] Lynn Thorndike, A History of Magic and Experimental Science, Vol. II (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923), note 2, p. 240.

which Noyes received his education. From one of these manuscripts undoubtedly comes the intriguing quotation in fifteenth century English which begins the poem:

> In our lands be Beeres and Lyons of dyvers colours as ye redd, grene, black, and white. And in our land be also unicornes and these Unicornes slee many Lyons. . . .Also there dare no man make a lye in our lande, for if he dyde he sholde incontynent be sleyn.[13]

Two definite clues point toward the location of the poem in Africa. The singing seamen go "across the seas of Wonderland to Mogadore"[14] to reach the palace of Prester John. Mogadore actually is a seaport on the Atlantic coast of Morocco, in North Africa. The wide discrepancy from the usual Abyssinian location can probably be attributed to poetic license preferring the rhythm or assonance of "Mogadore" to another name. The black skin color of the Prester John whom the seamen find is another indication of the African setting of the poem.[15] They see a figure,

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[13] Alfred Noyes, "Forty Singing Seamen," Collected Poems in One Volume (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1930), p. 14.

[14] Loc. cit.

[15] No mention of color is made by the writers whose work is examined in preceding chapters, nor do available translations of the manuscripts of Asiatic exploration mention the skin color of the Prester John. Since the Portuguese narratives describe actual kings of Abyssinia, they do contain references to light brown or black skin color.

Tall and black as any nigger,
Like the devil--only bigger--drawing near us with a
frown!
CHO.--Like the devil--but much bigger--and he wore a
golden drown![16]

Many of the rich details which are associated with the Asiatic strain of the Legend are placed in this African setting, which is the major tradition of the African strain. The great wealth of the priest-king is referred to in descriptions of the palace and garden.

But we crossed a plain of poppies, and we came upon a
fountain
Not of water, but of jewels, like a spray of leaping
fire;
And behind it, in an emerald glade, beneath a golden
mountain
There stood a crystal palace, for a sailor to admire;[17]
. . . . . .
Now the door was one great diamond and the hall a
hollow ruby--
Big as Beachy Head, my lads, nay bigger by a half![18]
. . . . . .
We walked into an opal like a sunset-colored cloud--
"My dining-room," he says, . . .[19]

An interesting feature of the palace of Prester John, as it is described by some manuscripts of the Letter, may be referred to in "Forty Singing Seamen"; this is perhaps the first time this detail

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[16] Noyes, op. cit., p. 15.

[17] Ibid., p. 14.

[18] Ibid., p. 15.

[19] Loc. cit.

from the Asiatic strain has been used. No matter how hungry one may be upon entering the palace, he always comes out feeling as full as if he had partaken of a sumptuous banquet.[20] Noyes's poem gives special mention to a banquet spread for the seamen "by the fingers of a hidden fairy crowd."[21]

> We was trying to look thinner,
> Which was hard, because our dinner
> Must ha' made us very tempting to a cat o' high
> degree! [22]

In the garden of Prester John lives the Phoenix, and beyond the garden in a magic forest is the Fountain of Youth, "a little silver river,/And whosoever drinks of it, his youth shall never die!"[23] The forty singing seamen are prevented from reaching the Fountain by several varicolored beasts: a crimson leopard, a sea-green lion, and a red and yellow unicorn.[24] The vast wealth, the palace, the Phoenix, the Fountain of Youth, and the strange beasts are all exotic details that seem to have entered the Legend of Prester John from Asiatic sources. The location of Prester John in Africa is drawn from the African strain.

The rich imagery of the poem, the chanting cadence of the

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[20] Thorndike, op. cit., p. 243.

[21] Noyes, op. cit., p. 15.

[22] Ibid., p. 16.

[23] Ibid., p. 15.

[24] Ibid., p. 16.

lines, and its fascinating story of the visit to Prester John of forty English seamen have combined to make Noyes's poem a perennial favorite. Its importance to the Legend of Prester John goes beyond this popularity, however. To the seamen of the poem Prester John seems to be a symbol of their dreams: a jeweled fountain, a crystal palace, and an emerald glade to admire; enough grog to drown in and nectar, the unknown beverage of the gods, to drink also; music all about them; sumptuous food served by invisible waiters; and a river that guarantees them perpetual youth. The palace and garden hold everything imaginable to make the forty men forget they "were only singing seamen from the dirt of London-town."[25] The only magic pleasure which seems to refer them back to reality is the nectar that "seemed to vanish half regretful/As if we wasn't good enough to take such vittles down."[26] Simple seamen though they are, they are gladly welcomed by Prester John, "Well, if ye don't mind being haunted,/Faith you're welcome to my palace; I'm the famous Prester John!"[27] Prester John, then, seems for these seamen to be synonymous with the fulfillment of their wildest dreams. Although they can enjoy the pleasures, they must eventually return to reality. They seek

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[25] Ibid., p. 14.

[26] Loc. cit.

[27] Ibid., p. 15.

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[58] Ibid., p. 14.

[59] Loc. cit.

[60] Ibid., p. 15.

the Fountain of Youth which would grant immortality, but they are frightened away by the strange beasts that roam in the forest. Back to London-town they sail, wondering,

> If the visions that we saw was caused by--here again we pondered--
> A tipple in a vision forty thousand years ago.
> Could the grog we dreamt we swallowed
> Make us dream of all that followed?[28]

Perhaps; but their visions of wonderful dreams were made possible when they found Prester John.

A blending of the materials in the Legend of Prester John, similar to the blending in Noyes's poem, forms much of the plot of John Buchan's Prester John. Published in 1910, the book is an excellent adventure story. It is set in the Transvaal, South Africa, and tells the story of young David Crawfurd. Crawfurd goes from Scotland to Blaauwildebeestefontein to be an assistant storekeeper of a trading post. He learns of a planned native uprising to be led by the Reverend John Laputa. Laputa, a well educated and well known Negro, pretends to be a missionary to the African veldt natives. Actually, he teaches them that he is the incarnated spirit of Prester John. Laputa organizes the natives and would have precipitated a costly war to regain the independence of Africa had not David Crawfurd frustrated the plans. The key to Laputa's uprising lies in a mammoth ruby necklace, a fetich

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[28] Ibid., p. 16.

the fountain of Youth which would grant immortality, but they are frightened away by the strange beasts that roam in the forest. Back to London--then they sail, wondering.

If the visions that we see are guided by--
prudence--
A tipple in a village dotty dreaming years ago,
Could the grog as dreams we swallowed
Make us dream of all that followed?[29]

Perhaps; but their visions of wonderful dreams were quite possible when they found Prester John.

A blending of the materials in the legend of Prester John, similar to the blending in Joyce's prose, forms some of the plot of John Buchan's Prester John. Published in 1910, the book is an excellent adventure story. It is set in the Transvaal, South Africa, and tells the story of young David Crawford. Crawford goes from Scotland to Kimberley--which is to be an exciting stopover of a trading post. He learns of a diamond mining vision to be led by the Reverend John Lapsley. Lapsley, a well educated and well known Negro, pretends to be a revolutionary and an African veldt native. Actually, he teaches them that he is the incarnated spirit of Prester John. Events suggesting the vision and equip have precipitated a society not to regain the independence of Africa but with David Crawford involved and plans. The key to Lapsley's exciting life is a magnetic rhythm-machine, a Zulu

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[29] Ibid., p. 19.

supposedly descended from the first Prester John, who had been a great conqueror. Possession of the necklace is essential to Laputa because the natives will not follow a leader who does not have it. Crawfurd obtains and hides this necklace. In forcing the boy to return it, Laputa is trapped by the militia and police in the hidden cave shrine of the natives. There, wearing the necklace, he leaps into an abyss, through which runs an underground river similar to Coleridge's sacred Alph. Crawfurd is left the possessor of all the money and gems which the native tribes had collected for years for use in the rebellion. He returns to Scotland a rich man, and Africa settles back into its submission to British rule.[29]

The novel is another interesting cohesion of the two strains of the Legend. Buchan must have known of the Asiatic Prester John as well as of the stories of the Negus of Abyssinia. From the Asiatic material he seems to have obtained the idea that the Prester John was a mighty conqueror and the possessor of fabulous gems like the ruby necklace. From the African material he took the setting in Africa and the discovery of the kingdom by the Portuguese. Both strains contain the idea of a Christian king and the double connotation of the title. Much of the material Buchan uses seems to be of his own invention.

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[29] John Buchan, Prester John (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938).

One would assume the novelist's familiarity with as many of the records dealing with both Asiatic and African rulers as he could obtain. The importance of his use of the Prester John material lies in the mosaic into which he weaves the two strains of the Legend.

Direct connection of the novel with the legends of Prester John occurs through the story of the background of the native uprising, which is told Crawfurd by Captain Arcoll, Chief Intelligence Officer to the natives.

> "Did you ever hear of Prester John?" [Arcoll speaks.]
> "The man that lived in Central Asia?" I asked, with a reminiscence of a story book I had as a boy.
> "No, no," said Mr. Wardlaw, "he means the king of Abyssinia in the fifteenth century. . . .He was a Christian, and the Portuguese sent expedition after expedition to find him, but they never got there."
> [Arcoll continues.] "There is no doubt that he was a great conqueror. Under him and his successors the empire of Ethiopia extended far south of Abyssinia away down to the Great Lakes. . . .The centre of authority began to shift southward, and the warrior tribes moved in that direction."
> . . . . . .
> "The thing to remember is that all these little empires thought themselves the successors of Prester John. . . . They all looked back to a great king in the north, whom they called by about twenty different names. They had forgotten all about his Christianity, but they remembered that he was a conqueror."[30]

With the memory of this great king there also descended the ruby necklace, the fetich which is always in the hands of the tribe which for the moment holds the leadership. As the incarnated

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[30] Ibid., pp. 94-95.

spirit of Prester John, Laputa is to wear this necklace and to lead the African race to conquest and empire.[31] Arcoll's story seems to be the Legend of Prester John as it was envisaged and recorded by John Buchan.

Other plot details which seem traceable to the two strains of the Legend are diamond smuggling, the description of the ruby necklace, and references to the Queen of Sheba. Laputa's rebellious activities are traced through diamond smuggling, and much of the wealth collected by the tribes for use in the war is in diamonds. The diamonds may prosaically enough have been the products of the famed South African mines; such jewels could have nothing to do with the legendary aspects of the Prester John tale. It may be coincidental, but Mandeville does report that the best of diamonds are to be found in that India over which Prester John is the legendary emperor.[32] Diamonds are almost always included in the list of precious stones supposed to be in the possession of the Asiatic Prester John.

The ruby fetich, which the natives call the Great Snake, is supposed to be the necklet of Prester John. There are fifty-five rubies in it, ranging from the size of a pigeon's egg to that of a thumbnail. The stones are oval and are engraved.[33]

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[31] Ibid., p. 100.

[32] Supra, Chapter III, p. 49.

[33] Buchan, op. cit., p. 138.

spirit of Prester John, length is to make this musician and to lead the African free to conquest and rule."[34] Arnolli's story seems to be the legend of Prester John as it was carried and recorded by John Hanna.

Other plot details which seem traceable to the oriental of the legend are diamond smuggling, the description of the city Abadiego, and references to the Jews of Abadie. Imperial rebellious activities are traced through diamond smuggling, and even of the wealth collected by the tribes for use in the war in diamonds. The diamonds may presumably equally have been the produce of that South African mineral such jewels would have nothing to do with the legendary exploits of the Prester John cycle. Perhaps coincidental, but Mustapilla does report that the best of diamonds are to be found in that India over which Prester John is the legendary sovereign.[35] Diamonds are almost always included in the list of precious stones supposed to be in the possession of the Asiatic Prester John.

The city Abadie, which the natives call the Great Sahara, is supposed to be the capital of Prester John. There are strange rites within it, resembling the rite of a priestess and so that of a thousand. The actors are evil and are slaughtered.[36]

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[34] Ibid., p. 120.

[35] Burton, Chapter III, p. 6.

[36] Burton, op. cit., p. 120.

Possession of this necklace inculcates the spirit of the Prester John in Laputa, or so he and the natives believe. Buchan may have discovered some source for the idea in Mandeville, with which he was probably familiar. Mandeville describes an island called Nacumera, which has no connection per se with Prester John. However, the king of this country wears about his neck a ruby that is a foot long and about four inches wide. When the king is chosen, he takes this ruby and rides through the capital city. "And that ruby he shall bear always about his neck, for if he had not that ruby upon him men would not hold him for king."[34] This myth is the type of story connected with the Asiatic Prester John. It is possible that Buchan selected such details as this ruby necklace from Mandeville to incorporate into his novel. The Great Snake necklace is the most important single thread in the plot of Prester John. Crawfurd's theft of the necklace and the Portuguese trader's attempt to kill Laputa to obtain it cause the collapse of Laputa's plans and the suicide of this modern Prester John.

Buchan also appears to have had some knowledge of the connection of the Queen of Sheba with the Abyssinian strain of the Legend. Several times throughout the novel mention of Sheba's

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[34] Sir John Mandeville, Travels of Sir John Mandeville (Library of English Classics; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905), pp. 130-131.

possession of this medallion insulates the spirit of the Prester John in legend, or so he and the native believe. Bulmer may discovered poor source for the idea in Mandeville, who which he was probably familiar. Mandeville describes an island within Hamamera, which has no connection nor is with Prester John. However, the King of this country wears about his neck a ruby that is a foot long and about four inches wide. When the king is chosen, he takes this ruby and rubs it on the neighbor's eye. "And that ruby he shall bear always about his neck, for if he had any that they upon his non could not hold his eye wide." This myth is the type of story popular with medieval romance. It is possible that Bulmer selected such details as this ruby medallion from Mandeville to incorporate into his novel.

The Greek Ruby medallion is the most important single thread in the plot of Prester John. Dryden's rivalry of the medallion and the Portuguese trader's attempt to kill Prester to obtain it cause the collapse of Dryden's plans and the suicide of this modern Prester John.

Bulmer also appears to have had some knowledge of the connection of the Queen of Sheba with the Abyssinian origin of the legend. Several times throughout his novel mention of Sheba

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34 Sir John Mandeville, Travels of Sir John Mandeville (Library of English Classics; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905), pp. 130-132.

queen occurs in conjunction with Laputa, supposed heir of Prester John. The ritual by which the chiefs swear allegiance to Laputa is witnessed and described by Crawford. The chant accompanying the ritual "must have come straight from Prester John or Sheba's queen, or whoever ruled in Africa when time was young."[35] Another reference to Sheba and her jewels occurs at Laputa's death. His body is swept away by the underground river that flows through the chasm into which he has jumped. "Far from human quest, he sleeps his last sleep and perchance on a fragment of bone washed into a crevice of rock there may hang the jewels that once gleamed in Sheba's hair."[36] One of the few romantic legends attached to the Abyssinian Prester Johns is that of the son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. This son was termed Belul Gian after a precious ring given him by Solomon.[37] Although there is no direct connection in Buchan's novel with the story of Solomon's son, the references connecting Sheba with the rubies provide some reason to believe that Buchan may have known of this tradition of the origin of the Abyssinian royal line.

Buchan very specifically explains the connotation of both

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[35] Buchan, op. cit., p. 135.

[36] Ibid., p. 242.

[37] Cf. ante, Chapter II, p. 29.

religious and secular power implied in the title of Prester John. The ancient priest speaks as he crowns Laputa:

> "I seal thee, "said the voice, "priest and king of God's people."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "Priest and king of God's people," said the voice again, "I call thee to the inheritance of John. Priest and king was he, king of kings, lord of hosts, master of the earth. When he ascended on high he left to his son the sacred Snake, the ark of his valour, to be God's dower and pledge to the people whom He has chosen."[38]

Laputa answers that he will be only the priest until he is victorious in his conquest. He is a Christian priest, a detail that follows both strains of the Legend of Prester John. He does not pray in front of the tribesmen in pagan rites; he uses Biblical phrases and the God of Israel.[39] He is preserving the idea of religious power inherent in the name of Prester John. After his conquest of Africa, he plans to assume the temporal power that also accompanies the title.

In Noyes's poem Prester John provides the seamen with material fulfillment of their dreams of opulent leisure. In Buchan's novel Prester John, incarnate in Laputa, provides the native chiefs with the promise of the fulfillment of their dreams of independence and the supremacy of their race in Africa. The natives believe that an heir of the legendary Prester John will

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[38] Buchan, op. cit., pp. 136-137.

[39] Ibid., p. 139.

restore the dominance of the black race in Africa. They think they find him in Laputa, who promises to regain for them the heritage of Prester John. Laputa and the ruby fetich symbolize the possible realization of these dreams of the African chieftains. But these dreams, like those of the seamen, are not sustained; with Laputa's death and the disappearance of the necklace of Prester John, the dream of reestablishing the legendary kingdom of the great king disappears also.

Through Tennyson and Eliot the title of Prester John has been continued into the present day. Tennyson utilizes the religious power symbolized in the title. Eliot refers to the remoteness of Prester John. Byrne's violation of the chronology of his source seems to help separate the Legend from specific time and place. It also indicates that the Legend is part of the story-teller's vast reservoir of information, to be used in any manner the writer wishes. In Noyes and in Buchan the Legend of Prester John becomes a unified whole, details from both strains being woven into a rich and picturesque mosaic. In the work of the last two authors Prester John seems to have become more than merely a source for a story or for a poetic image. Closely connected with the seamen's dreams of a near-paradise and with dreams of the African natives for a golden age of empire, Prester John appears as a symbol. In at least these two fictitious works the symbol of Prester John seems to mean the innermost wishes of

man for the realization on earth of his dreams. By the merging of the various materials of the Legend, a unity also seems to have been given the Legend. Prester John lives today as a Christian king of untold wealth and power who rules a land of wonderous peoples and animals somewhere beyond the horizons of exploration.

CHAPTER VI

"MAGIC IN THE DISTANCE"

Although eight hundred years have passed since the Bishop of Gabala's report of the John who was fighting the Medes and Persians, knowledge of that John is still current. Through the centuries many stories have become attached to the name of Prester John, stories uncovered by early missionary explorers in Asia and Africa or imagined by mariners and travelers. Originally Prester John was a Christian king ruling an Asiatic country. Then he became the Christian king of an Abyssinian kingdom in Africa. Today he is still a Christian king, but his kingdom exists only in the minds of men. Once the kingdom of Prester John was composed only of exaggerated and unnatural wonders or of African natives. In the modern extension of the legend, Prester John's empire is composed of anything that represents an unfulfilled dream, and the land itself seems to have become a symbol for a place wherein all dreams may be realized.

The appearance about 1165 of the spurious Letter of Prester John, describing the wonderful countries under his scepter, interested Pope Alexander III in sending an ambassador to discover the court of this supposedly great Christian king. The Pope,

CHAPTER VI

"HAMLET IN THE WILDERNESS"

Although eight hundred years have passed since the death of Sabain's report of the Tom who was fighting the Prince of Ferulam, knowledge of that Tom is still current. Although contemporary many stories have become attached to the name of Prester John, stories concerned by scholarly anachronism with events in Asia and Africa or inspired by mariners and travellers. Originally Prester John was a Christian king ruling an Asiatic country. Then he became the Christian king of an Ethiopian kingdom in Africa. Today he is still a Christian king, but his kingdom exists only in the minds of men. Thus the kingdom of Prester John was conceived only of exaggerated and romanticised wonders or of African motives. In the modern extension of the legend, Prester John's empire is composed of everything that represents an unfulfilled desire, and the land itself seems to have become a symbol for a place wherein all dreams may be realised.

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like the other monarchs of western Europe, was extremely concerned with forming an alliance, both for commercial purposes and also for military assistance against the Mohammedans. The rise of the various Mohammedan nations had not only closed the Holy Sepulcher to Christian pilgrims, but it had also blocked the terminals of the trade routes from the Orient. It was hoped that if alliances with Prester John could be established, he would be willing to help the Crusaders. About 1245 another ambassador, Friar Joannes de Plano Carpini, was sent to Asia as missionary to the Tartars. Neither Plano Carpini nor William de Rubruquis, the missionary who followed him, were able to locate the kingdom of Prester John. However, their journals do tell of such a king and give the stories that were current in the eastern regions through which the two friars passed. Succeeding missionaries and travelers to the Orient, such as Marco Polo, John of Monte Corvino, and Friar Odoric, continued the search for the famous priest-king. Several possible identifications were advanced by these men, none of which satisfied the available descriptions which seemed to be drawn largely from the Letter of Prester John. Copies of the Letter had continued to circulate in European countries throughout the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. The original Prester John appears most reasonably explained as a composite of details drawn from the conversions to Christianity of several Asiatic chieftains who were known to be great conquerors.

From almost its earliest appearance in the twelfth century, the name of Prester John as connoted both temporal and spiritual power. Prester is probably a corruption of presbyter, the title assigned the ruling elders of early Christian congregations. The legendary monarch was usually considered a follower of Nestorian Christianity, a sect that had spread widely throughout Central and Eastern Asia by the tenth century. Several names of Asiatic chieftains have been suggested that could have been corrupted into the John of the mythical title. It seems, also, to have been customary for Asiatic chiefs to assume a Christian name after baptism; one such chief may have taken the name John in a manner similar to that related in Mandeville's account of the origin of Prester John. One other possible contribution to the mysterious origin of the name comes from the African strain of the Legend. The son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba was supposedly called Malech Gian Belul. Through corruptions in spelling and pronunciation, this name could become precious or Prester John. No clues were discovered which would indicate the extent to which the Abyssinian kings themselves used the title. If Prester John were used by Abyssinian monarchs before the Portuguese arbitrarily assigned it to them, it was probably just a title and not the name of a specific ruler.

Journals of the early explorers have become important

From almost its earliest appearance in the English country, the name of Prester John has conferred both temporal and spiritual power. Prester is probably a corruption of *presbyter*, the title assigned the ruling clergy of early Christian congregations. The legendary monarch was usually considered a follower of Eastern Christianity, a sect that had spread widely throughout Central and Eastern Asia by the tenth century. Several names of Asiatic chieftains have been suggested that could have been corrupted into the *John* of the mystical title. It seems, also, to have been customary for Asiatic chiefs to assume a Christian name after baptism; one man could may have taken the name John in a manner similar to that related in Mandeville's account of the origin of Prester John. One other possible contribution to the mysterious origin of the name comes from the African circle of the legend. The king of Ethiopia and the queen of Sheba was supposedly called *Makeda Gim Kolal*. Through corruptions in spelling and pronunciation, this name could become previous as Prester John. No clues were discovered which would indicate the extent to which the Abyssinian kings themselves used the title. If Prester John was born by Abyssinian monarchs before the Portuguese arbitrarily assigned it to them, it was probably just a title and not the name of a specific ruler.

Journals of the early explorers have become important

in the growth of the Legend of Prester John because the several possible identifications they contain give credence to the idea that such a monarch ruled in Asia. Marco Polo's identification seems to have been generally accepted by his contemporaries and by his immediate successors. One of the most paradoxical details in the early years of the Legend is the persistence of belief in a living Prester John, although even Polo reports him dead. Western Europeans were both commercially and religiously minded, and the idea of a Christian monarch who might be of aid against the eastern Mohammedans was too appealing for them to abandon. They wanted to find such a king, and their persistent demand produced a supply of possible Prester Johns. There seem to have been few reports of mighty Asiatic conquerors that were not connected for a while at least with the name of Prester John.

Despite the greater emphasis given to the possibility of the existence of the fabulous king in Asia, belief in the location of the kingdom in Africa was also current during the medieval ages. Visitors to Jerusalem had met Abyssinian pilgrims and travelers from Abyssinia were in Aragon as early as 1327. Reports from these people and from slaves and traders had spread the information that there were Christians in northern Africa. It was well known that a Coptic Church had arisen in Alexandria and had moved southward during the first centuries after the death of Christ. The Portuguese began the diligent search to reach the

king of these African Christians because of combined motives of religious zeal and commercial interests. The influence of the Crusades had continued into the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and even the Portuguese capture of Ceuta in northern Africa, in 1415 can be attributed in part to the continuation of the crusading spirit. Successive explorations, led chiefly during the fifteenth century by Prince Henry of Portugal, attempted to establish new trade routes to the rich lands of the Orient and to locate the Prester John for furtherance of military and commercial expansion.

As these explorations pushed farther and farther down the coasts of Africa, medieval concepts of geography became considerably clarified. Before the widespread exploration that began in Asia in the thirteenth century, the concepts of Asia and Africa had been very vague. India was generally considered to include the largest part of Asia and the northeastern corner of Africa as well. Since Prester John was popularly believed to reign somewhere in India and since Abyssinia was considered part of India by many early geographers, the direct transfer to Africa of the search for the monarch was greatly facilitated. India was more carefully defined by the Asiatic explorations but Prester John was not located. The search was merely shifted to those parts of India in Africa which had not yet been thoroughly explored.

In 1485 John II of Portugal was granted a Papal Bull for

another crusade in Africa. About the same time there appeared at the Portuguese Court an embassy from Benin in northern Africa. This embassy strongly reaffirmed the existence of an African king who professed some form of Christianity. The Papal Bull and this definite report contributed to the King's decision to send out two parties to make contact with the African ruler. Pero da Covilhã reached the Abyssinian court in 1494 and established contact with a monarch who, in the eyes of the Portuguese at least, could conceivably be the Prester John of the legends. The report of the first important Portuguese embassy, 1520-1527, established the African strain of the Prester John legend as it has been used in English literature. Father Francisco Alvarez, the priest who accompanied the embassy, wrote the report, a factual description of the country, the kings, and the traditions. His Narrative seems to have provided most of the African material used by subsequent English writers.

From the journal accounts of the exploration in both Asia and Africa have come the two strains into which the Legend of Prester John seems to have been divided in its literary use. The Asiatic strain contains the exotic and mysterious details which have appealed to some of the romantic writers of English literature. This strain includes the Fountain of Youth, the misformed peoples and heterogeneous animals, the healing herbs and plants, the strange stones imparting invisibility and other

another crusade in Africa. About the same time there appeared at the Portuguese Court an embassy from Benin in northern Africa. This embassy strongly reaffirmed the existence of an African king who professed some form of Christianity. The Papal Bull and this definite report contributed to the King's decision to send out two parties to make contact with the African ruler. Pero de Covilhã reached the Abyssinian court in 1494 and established contact with a monarch who, in the eyes of the Portuguese at least, could convincingly be the Prester John of the legends. The report of the first important Portuguese embassy, 1520-1527, established the African origin of the Prester John legend as it has been used in English literature. Either Francisco Alvares, the priest who accompanied the embassy, wrote the report, a factual description of the country, the king, and the traditions. His narrative seems to have provided most of the African material used by subsequent English writers.

From the journal accounts of the exploration in both Asia and Africa have come the two strains into which the legend of Prester John seems to have been divided in its literary use. The Asiatic strain contains the exotic and marvelous details which have appealed to some of the romantic writers of English literature. This strain includes the Fountain of Youth, the misformed peoples and heterogeneous animals, the healing herbs and plants, the strange stones imparting invisibility and other

magic, mountains in which lay heaps of gold, and rivers in which flowed streams of precious jewels. The Asiatic strain also contributed the utopian qualities to the Legend, for the Letter of Prester John boasts of the absence from the kingdom of lying, stealing, and poverty. From the factual Portuguese accounts, such as that written by Father Alvarez, have come the materials that comprise the African strain of the Legend. These details are slight in comparison to the wealth of imaginative descriptions with which the Asiatic strain abounds. However, the African strain locates the kingdom in a definite place and traces the lineage of the Abyssinian kings to the Queen of Sheba and Solomon. The only other African contribution to the Legend used by English writers is the tradition of imprisoning all the royal princes except the heir. These princes were kept in a valley in the Abyssinian province of Amara. The tradition had a short-lived appeal and is connected in some way with the designation of the Abyssinian kings as Prester Johns. The imprisonment custom seems to have been in effect for about as long as the legendary title was affixed to the names of the kings, and both customs appear to have fallen into disuse at about the same time.

The African strain of the Legend did not assume importance until the fifteenth century, when the Portuguese explorations became known. Early references to the Legend of Prester John received most emphasis in popular thought during the thirteenth

and fourteenth centuries. Until the publication in 1499 of Mandeville's Travels, the stories and descriptions which comprise this early Asiatic strain seem to have been kept alive by oral reports and by the Letter of Prester John, numerous versions of which circulated in Latin and in the vernacular of a few tongues through most European countries. Chaucer, in the last of the fourteenth century, seems to have made extended use of these Asiatic materials to form a romantic background for one of his Canterbury Tales. In the sixteenth century Spenser may have drawn on the same materials to complete part of this Chaucerian tale. The Travels of Sir John Mandeville is the most important work in the early development of the Legend, for it is a repository of most of the fables connected with the name of Prester John by the end of the fifteenth century. Many subsequent writers seem to have used the Travels as the source for their own knowledge about the priest-king and for the descriptive details which they use. Mandeville's book was probably very popular. While it purports to be a record of actual travels, it is in reality a collection of beautiful fabrications and exaggerations based on current stories. It was, however, translated into the English vernacular in 1499, in a style which has a popular appeal. Shakespeare may have drawn on Mandeville for his oriental references and, in all probability, did derive the name of Prester John and the extent of his power and kingdom from that book. In Shakespeare's

play Much Ado About Nothing the mention of Prester John receives a slightly different emphasis than that found in the preceding authors. Reference to the priest-king seems to connote the impossible, because Prester John was at such a great distance and of such importance as to be nearly unapproachable.

The repository for most of the materials in the African strain of the Legend of Prester John seems to be Purchas his Pilgrimage, 1613, and Purchas his Pilgrimes, 1625. These two works contain translated and edited accounts of the explorations of the known world, drawn from copies of the original manuscripts. In part Samuel Purchas drew on the unpublished collection of his more scientific predecessor, Richard Hakluyt, and in part he used manuscripts he had obtained himself. Among the accounts published were those of the early Asiatic explorers and, more important, those of the Portuguese explorers in Africa. The Narrative of Father Francisco Alvarez, translated and considerably condensed by Purchas's treatment, seems to have been the source for Milton, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. These poets may have drawn their references to the imprisonment tradition from material in Purchas. Johnson seems to make a more complete use of this Alvarez material in Rasselas. The Happy Valley in which Johnson confines his hero bears a close resemblance to the prison valley Purchas describes from Alvarez. Although the emphasis of these writers appears to have been only

on the imprisonment tradition, they did help to perpetuate the idea of the African location of the kingdom of the mythical ruler.

A very interesting parallel is discernible between the historical development of the Legend of Prester John and the development of its use in English literature. Until the fifteenth century, at least, the Asiatic strain of the Legend seems to have predominated in historical concepts and in the popular mind. In the literature examined, reference to the romantic Asiatic materials also predominated until Milton's use in the seventeenth century of the imprisonment tradition of the African strain. After the Portuguese explorations had resulted in the location of a Christian monarch in northern Africa, the African strain of the Legend received more credence than the earlier belief in an Asiatic location. A similar transfer of emphasis seems to have occurred in English literary use of the Legend. No references that seem to derive from the Asiatic sources were found from 1625 to 1880. Purchas's editorial comments in 1625 support the Asiatic location, but no other writers in the seventeenth, eighteenth, or in most of the nineteenth centuries were discovered to have made similar comments. It would appear that it was necessary for both strains to be exploited separately in popular imagination and in literature before an amalgamation could occur. Historical concepts gradually recognized that

there was no actual Prester John. Long before the Jesuits withdrew from Abyssinia in 1634, the western world had ceased to denote the kings of that country as the Prester Johns. Popular belief maintained the idea of an African location, however, while it also kept the romance of the Asiatic traditions.

Modern literary use of the Legend of Prester John seems to have followed much the same final steps in development as are revealed by the history of the search for the kingdom. Tennyson and Eliot appear to refer to the Asiatic Prester John, but their references are not direct and give the name a nebulous and undefined quality. Use of the name separated from any direct connection with a particular strain is perhaps indicative of a similar generalization in popular concept that served to create a unified Legend from the two strains. Byrne's violation of specific source in Marco Polo further serves to divorce the Legend from any definite strain and to make it part of the general stock-in-trade of the story-teller. In Noyes and Buchan the merging of the two strains seems to have taken place unmistakably. All the richness and excitement of the Asiatic details are combined with a location in Africa. The profusion of precious stones out of which Noyes has built the palace of Prester John, the weird animals, and the Fountain of Youth are all familiar details of the Asiatic strain which are assigned a location somewhere in Africa. Buchan utilizes much the same technique in

merging the two strains. His Prester John is an African Negro with whom are associated stories of mighty conquest and fabulous jewels.

In the work of Noyes and Buchan the Legend of Prester John seems to achieve the highest point of development. To the singing seamen of Noyes's poem and to the natives of Buchan's novel, Prester John is a symbol. The name is associated with whatever they wanted most from life. To the seamen Prester John means leisure, music, sumptuous foods, beautiful surroundings, and forgetfulness of their origin in London slums. To the natives of the Transvaal Prester John represents freedom from white dominance, independence, and a return of the power once held by their ancestors. When the seamen leave the palace of Prester John and when Buchan's Prester John dies, the dreams embodied in the image of the great king are lost. The seamen remember they are only simple seamen who must return to the dirt of London, and the natives withdraw reluctantly from their great alliance and return to their individual camps.

If the Legend of Prester John in literature has received a final extension into symbolism, it is possible that the Legend has had a similar culmination in the popular imagination. Since its appearance in western Europe in the twelfth century, the name of Prester John has born the double connotation of temporal and spiritual power. Buchan places greater emphasis on this

aspect of the Legend than does Noyes. Prester John in both the famous Letter and in Buchan's novel is the king of kings, the lord of hosts. This description approximates the power which the religion of Christianity has assigned to God. The double connotation persists as the Legend has persisted, even though no historical figure could be found who fulfilled the qualifications of the Legend. In view of the possible extension of the kingdom of Prester John into a symbol, the persistence of the double function of the name may have considerable significance. There seems to be something more than just the romance of the unknown that would keep an imaginary name alive for eight hundred years. If the Legend were to have a meaning basic to the needs of humanity, the persistence could be explained. Such a meaning may be provided in the near deification of the priest-king and in the symbolic use of his kingdom to mean the land in which dreams come true. Much the same symbolization seems to have occurred within the Legend of King Arthur. In the company of supernatural persons Arthur disappears into Avalon, there to be restored to health and to reappear in the hour of England's greatest need. Almost a saint, Arthur has come to symbolize all that is good and great in a king, just as Prester John may have come to symbolize an extension of the powers of God to an earthly image. Even the kingdom of Prester John partakes of some qualities of Heaven: in neither kingdom is there lying, stealing, or poverty; but in both kingdoms

wishes impossible of fulfillment on earth will be realized, and there is perpetual youth. The Land of Prester John seems to be a Christian Valhalla to which man may go--in his dreams at least.

In real life dreams do not seem to be capable of full realization, but in dream worlds, such as the kingdom of Prester John may be, dreams are realized. The palace of Prester John was in essence heaven on earth to the singing seamen, the answer to their failure to achieve their dreams in actual life. They could not in actuality forget they were from the dirt of London, but they could dream and forget. Buchan's African natives could not achieve their dreams of self-rule, either. They could, however, see those dreams embodied in the figure of a man who was to them Prester John. As long as they had the image of Prester John, the possibility remained of their dreams coming true. When that image was destroyed, their dreams were also destroyed. Man seems unable to attain the actual realization of his innermost wishes, but he can continue dreaming about those wishes. As far as the Legend of Prester John is concerned, man has been dreaming for eight hundred years. The dreams seem to require a definite concept, and among such concepts--the Blessed Isles, Valhalla, Avalon--the land of Prester John seems to take its place. If Prester John actually has become such a symbol for man, then the Legend has persisted, not because a few Englishmen decided they could write better stories by using a few fantastic

details, but because those Englishmen wanted to capture something of the idea that perhaps it was helpful to man to have a dream place in which his wishes could come true. English writers, such as Buchan and Noyes, may have seen the advantages of inviting men into a land where for a time dreams were realized. The process is a vicarious one; it consists of watching the dreams of others find realization and of feeling that perhaps ours also may someday come true. But escape seems to be basic to man, and if he wants to escape, literature is the most commonly used method that is not in itself harmful.

As purely escape literature the fables of the Legend of Prester John belong, as has been indicated, not to a place or to a person, but to the imaginations of men. Since something of the child's love of the marvelous seems to persist in all people, the chief reason for the popularity of the Legend of Prester John may lie very simply in its romantic appeal to the imagination. In view of this reason it seems odd that there was a comparative lack of interest in the purely imaginative Asiatic strain of the Legend during the very period of English literature in which similar materials did receive emphasis. For two hundred and fifty years, 1625-1880, only the less colorful African strain of the Legend was found in English literature. Dominant interest in classical sources may explain the absence of Asiatic materials for the 1625-1750 period, but no reasonable explanation can be

offered for the failure of Pre-Romantic and Romantic writers to utilize these materials. Although the sense of the remote and the wonderful pervades this strain of the Legend, it evidently did not appeal to Coleridge, Wordsworth, and their contemporaries. From Coleridge's use of Purchas as source material, it does seem probable that he at least knew the name of Prester John. It may very well be that the Asiatic stories connected with the name by other writers were simply not known until their rediscovery and use by Tennyson around 1880. A similar treatment of the Legend of Prester John seems evident today; many people of different educational levels recognize the name of Prester John but know nothing of the imaginative materials of the Legend or its possible symbolism. To them and perhaps to English authors from 1625-1880, Prester John may be only a part of the nebulous realm of fantasy to which also belong the Flying Dutchman, the man in the moon, and the castles in Spain. As such, the Legend of Prester John would seem to lack the interest and significance which the imaginative stories impart.

However, to those who know of the Legend, it may be one of the many symbols which stand in the minds of man for the attainment of dreams. Something of man's search for Cathay, for the land which is always richer and more wonderful than even he dreams it is going to be, seems to be embodied in the search for Prester John, both in literature and in actuality. Since

Earth has been covered fairly thoroughly, the next step in the search for this adult Land of Never-Never may be the moon, or a planet, or the stars. Man keeps hunting for such a land and continues dreaming in literature of finding it. Somewhere there is a kingdom ruled by a Christian king, since that is the religion of the culture in which the Legend of Prester John has persisted, and in this kingdom all of man's wishes that are not violations of his other beliefs can come true. Somewhere beyond the distant horizons lives Prester John--in imagination, in literature, or in reality.

> "The centuries go by, but Prester John endures for ever
> With his music in the mountains and his magic on the sky!
> While <u>your</u> hearts are growing colder,
> While your world is growing older,
> There's a magic in the distance, where the sea-line meets the sky."
> CHO.--It shall call to singing seamen till the fount o' song is dry![1]

Every man is to some extent a singing seaman. The magic of Prester John has existed and will probably continue to exist as long as there are men left to sing or to dream about it.

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[1] Alfred Noyes, "Forty Singing Seamen," <u>Collected Poems in One Volume</u> (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1939), pp. 15-16.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

PHOTOSTATS OF LETTERS

1. Letter from T. S. Eliot, dated February 2, 1949, received by the writer

2. Letter from T. S. Eliot, dated March 9, 1949, received by the writer

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2nd February 1949.

Miss Marjorie T. Delzell,
The University of New Mexico,
Albuquerque,
U. S. A.

Dear Miss Delzell,

Thank you for your letter of January 27th which Mr. Eliot has asked me to answer. Mr. Eliot was under the impression at the time he wrote the poem that Prester John's balloon was his own invention, and that he was at that time rather pleased with it. He certainly thinks it unlikely that any legends of Prester John included any references to aeronautics.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Bland (Mrs.)

Secretary to Mr. T.S. Eliot

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9th March 1949.

Mrs. Marjorie T. Delzell,
116 South Cedar,
Albuquerque, N. Mexico,
U. S. A.

Dear Mrs. Delzell,

In reply to your letter of February 24th Mr. Eliot is under the impression that he first heard of Prester John in childhood, presumably through some children's book or story which he has now forgotten completely.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Bland
Secretary to Mr. T.S. Eliot

APPENDIX B

SOME OF THE VERSIONS OF THE NAME OF PRESTER JOHN

Corruptions

Asiatic in Origin

Gurkhan -- Kurkhan -- Yurkhan -- Yochana or Johannes John. (Eleventh century, approximately)

Malek Juchana -- King John. (the Ung Khan of the Keraits)

Malek Yuhanna -- King John. (the Unc or Wang Khan of the Keraits, reported by Bar Hebraeus. Thirteenth century)

African in Origin

Belul-Gian or "precious stone"
Gian pronounced zjon -- John (Latin, Johannes)
Belul translated precious (Latin, preciosus) -- presbyter or prester
Johannes preciousus -- Prester John

Variations

Prete-Guan - reported by Maimonides in thirteenth century history
Presbiter Iohn - reported by Joannes de Plano Carpini in thirteenth century
King Iohn - reported by William de Rubruquis in thirteenth century.
Prestre Johan - reported by Friar Jordanus in Wonders of the East in fourteenth century.
Prester John - reported by Duarte Barbosa in fifteenth century.
Priest John, Prete John, and Prete Janni (Gianni) - all used by Samuel Purchas in seventeenth century.

APPENDIX C

SKETCH MAP OF THIRTEENTH CENTURY GEOGRAPHY OF THE WORLD[1]

Showing the possible locations of several Asiatic and African Prester Johns.

1. Tenduc - province ruled by King George, descendant of Prester John. (Marco Polo)

2. Naimani - tribe to which belonged the shepherd prince who became King John of Karakatai. (Rubruquis)

3. Karakatai - great empire over which the shepherd John was supposed to rule. (Rubruquis)

4. Greater India - unexplored division of India in which Joannes de Plano Carpini located the kingdom of Prester John.

5. Merkrits - apparently synonymous with Crit or Kerait; the tribe over which ruled Vut Khan, the Prester John of Marco Polo, Monte Corvino, and other early Asiatic explorers.

6. Amara - province in Abyssinia, Africa, in which the sons of the African Prester Johns were imprisoned.

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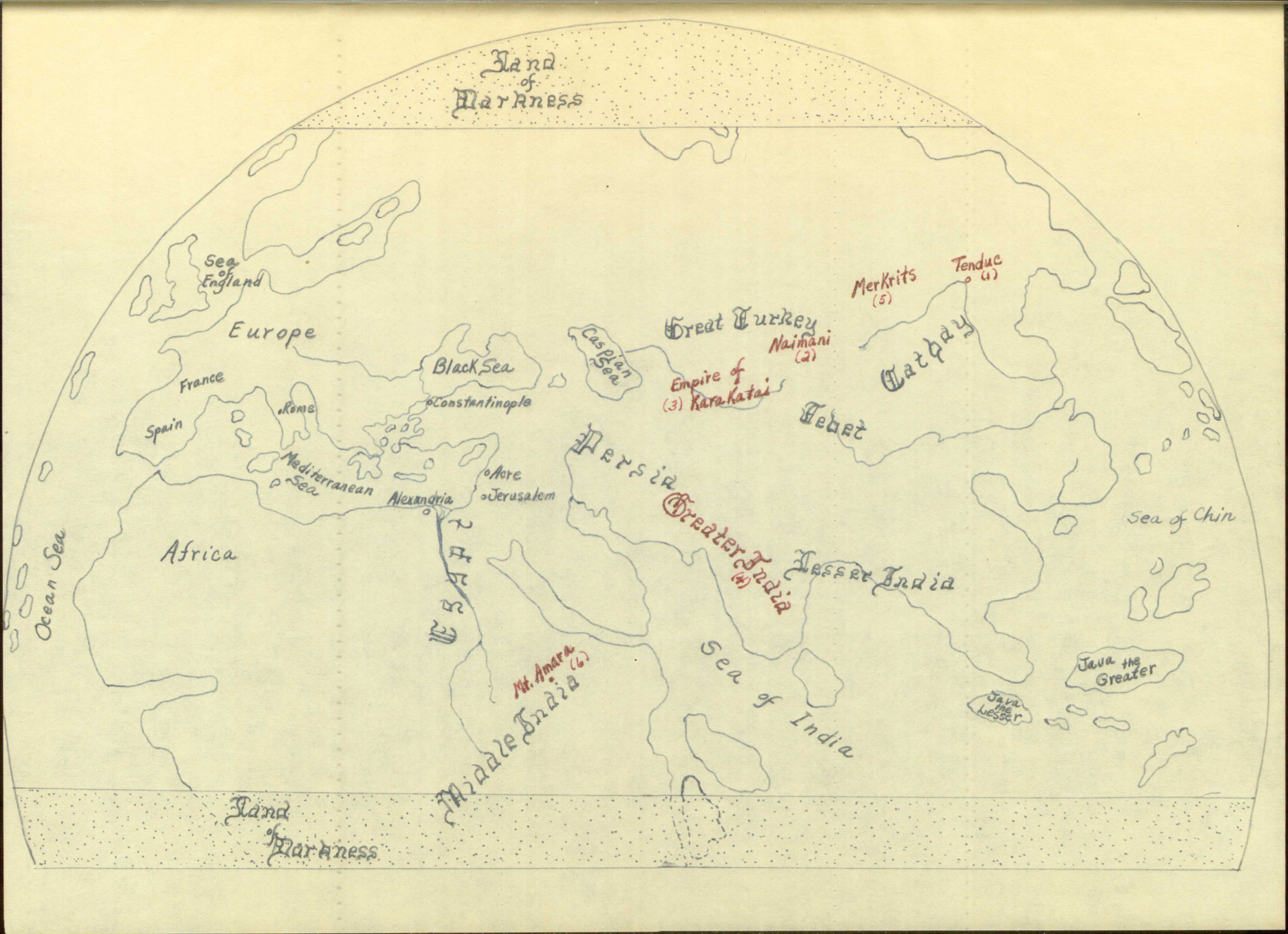
[1] Outline of map traced from "Probable View of Marco Polo's Own Geography," Book of Ser Marco Polo, Vol. 1, edited by Yule and Cordier, facing p. 108.


Land of Darkness
Sea of England
Europe
France
Spain
Rome
Black Sea
Constantinople
Caspian Sea
Great Turkey
Naimani (2)
Merkrits (5)
Tenduc (1)
Cathay
Empire of (3) Kara Katai
Tibet
Persia
Greater India (4)
Lesser India
Sea of Chin
Mediterranean Sea
Alexandria
Acre
Jerusalem
Africa
Ocean Sea
Nile
Mt. Amara (6)
Middle India
Sea of India
Java the Greater
Java the Lesser
Land of Darkness