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Trees of the Sun and the Moon:

Variety of the Motif with Special Reference to

The Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle and *Mandeville's Travels*

Yu Onuma

Since the time of Homer, the vast region of the Orient was a repository of wonders for the people of Europe, who recorded that many marvels and monsters were there. The major vehicle for the spread of such ideas was travel books. *The Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle* is one of these. Its origin is unclear; however, according to David J. A. Ross, it was a Greek product of late imperial times, and Dennis M. Kratz specifies the date of c. AD 200.⁽¹⁾ The Greek original was lost and the oldest extant version is in Latin, from which several vernacular texts, including those in Old and Middle English, have been derived. There are at least sixty-seven Latin MSS from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, of which 28 can be divided into four families.⁽²⁾ The main reason for this popularity may be the description of the marvels of the East. Some of these are cited in Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum historiale* in the thirteenth century, and via this in *Mandeville's Travels* in the fourteenth century. In spite of the fact that they are thus repeatedly used in popular medieval texts, the marvels in *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and their subsequent transformations have received little attention apart from the commentaries in the individual texts. Through an analysis of the textual differences among related texts and various versions of the same text, a difference in the function and theme of

each text will be investigated.

The OE version of *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* is extant in only one MS of around AD 1000: British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A. xv (the *Beowulf* MS). According to Stanley Rypins, this unique version is probably a copy of an earlier OE translation based in turn on a Latin version, neither of which now survive. Rypins printed the Latin version in Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 82 (twelfth century) as one of the possible Latin equivalents, but he himself calls the reader's attention to the fact that it is not the most probable source for the OE version.⁽³⁾ The ME version was written around the middle of the fifteenth century and is likewise extant in only one MS: Worcester, Cathedral Library MS F. 172. The source text of the ME version can be identified thanks to its over-literal translation of the original. It is a version represented by a sub-group of three twelfth-century MSS: Cambridge University Library MS Mm. 5. 29 (which, according to Vincent DiMarco and Leslie Perelman, is the most probable source); British Library MS Royal 15. C. vi; and MS Royal 12. C. iv.⁽⁴⁾

In all the versions, the climax is Alexander's encounter with the Trees of the Sun and the Moon in India, which foretell the future in greek and in Indian languages. The Tree of the Sun is male and the other is female. They are found beyond the habitat of dangerous beasts, surrounded by many balsam trees and the resin-eating inhabitants who live for several hundred years. These depictions in *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, which devotes to them roughly a quarter of the entire text, are the first reference to the trees, although there are several possible sources of inspiration for them; for example, the sacred spot of the sun and the moon described by Greek historian Ctesias of Cnidus (5–4th century BC), and the talking trees in Dodona.⁽⁵⁾ After *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, the trees came to appear frequently in medieval maps such as Ebstorf, Lam-

bert, Jerome; but especially in the Psalter world map (Fig. 1) — a small map only 9 cm across made in thirteenth-century England.⁽⁶⁾ At the top, which is the easternmost rim of the world, the Tree of the Sun is on the left and that of the Moon on the right. Frequent appearances in the medieval maps and the lengthy treatment in *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* suggest the importance of the trees in terms of the perception of the Orient in the Middle Ages.

There are various differences among the versions of *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, but the description of the third omen deserves close examination. The trees foretell the future three times in answer to Alexander's questions. The prophecies are not good ones for the King; they say in the first two responses that Alexander will be the Lord of the world, but that he will not return alive to Macedonia because, in the following year, an unexpected person will kill him in Babylon. As his third question, Alexander asks who will be his assassin, and how his mother and sisters will die. To this question, the Tree of the Sun answers:

L1: Si mortis tuae tibi insidiatorem prodidero, sublato eo facile instantia fata mutabis mihi que tres irascentur sorores, quod veridico oraculo earum pensa impedierim, Clotho Lachesis Atropos.⁽⁷⁾

OE: Gif ic þe þone ::::e gesecge þines feores yþelice þu ða wyrde oncyrrest & his hond befehst ac soð ic þe secge.⁽⁸⁾

ME: If thi Moder were thyn enemye I shuld shewe, and lightly at this instaunce made and in so moche away taken thou shalt be chaunged. fforsoth, to the I shal nat say ne telle, lest my .iii. susters bien wroth, that triewly I tel the oracle of theym, that is to say, Cloto, lachesis, and Atrophos.⁽⁹⁾

L2: Si matris tuae tuique insidiatorem prodidero, sublato eo facile instantia fata mutabis. Hec vero tibi non dicam ne mihi tres iras-

cantur sorores, quid vera dico oracula earum, id est Clothos, Lachesis, Atropos.⁽¹⁰⁾

After the quoted passage, the oracular trees answer the second half of Alexander's question: his mother Olympias will die miserably, although his sisters will live a happy life. On the other hand, because the trees are

Table 1: Third Oracle in *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*

	L1	OE	ME	L2
Beginning	'If reveal the ambusher of Alexander ('s death)'	'If tell ... (five letters missing) of Alexander's life'	'If Alexander's mother is his enemy'	'If reveal the ambusher of Alexander and his mother'
Action to the murderer	'Remove'	'Seize his hand'	'Take away'	'Remove'
Result	'Easily change the approaching fate'	'Easily change the fate'	'Easily at this instance Alexander (his fate?) shall be changed'	'Easily change the approaching fate'
The Fates	'Three sisters; Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos would be angry at the Tree of the Sun'		'Three sisters of the Tree of the Sun; that is Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos'	'Three sisters, i.e. Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos'
Reason of the anger of the Fates	'Entangle their allotment of the thread by truthful oracle'		'Tell the oracle of the Fates'	'Revealing the true oracles of the Fates'
Oracle		'But tell the truth'	'Neither say nor tell, lest the tree's three sisters should be wrathful'	'Not to tell, lest the three sisters should be angry at the Tree of the Sun'

afraid of angering the Fates, Alexander is prevented from obtaining the essential information for his survival. The oracular trees only reveal that he will be poisoned, but not by whom.

No mention is made of the goddesses in the OE version. At ‘.....’, space at least for three letters is followed by two unrecognisable letters in the MS (fol. 130v); yet context does not allow the entry of the word for the Fates there. The lost word is probably an equivalent for *insidiator* (ambusher). The omission of the three goddesses could simply be due to the translator’s confusion when confronting unfamiliar words, but it may also be explained by his overall sober attitude to the wonders. For example, he shortened the description of the wonders in the Indian royal palace, and after the Trees of the Sun and the Moon, significantly deleted the marvels in the last part of the tale (see pp. 6-7, 49-50). Another unique aspect of the OE version is the tree’s promise of telling the truth despite the fact that it may lead to the alteration of Alexander’s fate. The Latin version, as edited by W. Walther Boer, does not provide a corresponding phrase, so that the passage about telling the truth can be attributed to the translator. Together with the absence of the Fates, the assurance of revealing the truth changes the attitude of the Tree of the Sun from that of concealing the murderer in the original Latin, though in the end the trees do not answer Alexander’s question properly because they keep silent about the name of the assassin. The OE translator might have felt that the hesitation is not suitable for a context where the tree gives detailed information, such as about poisoning. For the same reason the goddesses, who are responsible for the tree’s hesitation, could have been left unmentioned.

To be logically consistent, the OE version makes another alteration. The explanation of the time of the omen is slightly different from other versions. The priest of the trees avers that the Tree of the Sun gives a prediction at the first light of the sun and the Tree of the Moon does so at the

same time at night. The possible Latin source for the OE is no exception: 'ad primos iubaris ortus' (to the first rising of the radiance) and 'noctis eadem tempora' (the same time at night).⁽¹¹⁾ Meanwhile, the OE version claims that the answer of the Tree of the Sun is bestowed 'æt þæm upgonge & eft æt setlgonge' (at the rising and again at setting) while the Tree of the Moon speaks 'gelice [. . .] on niht' (alike at night) (p. 41). In fact, in all the versions, while the Tree of the Sun gives a prediction at both sunset and sunrise, the Tree of the Moon only does so once. Yet only the OE version fully accounts for this beforehand. The ME version says: 'at the first bid-dyng and Risyng' (p. 139) and the list of variants in Boer's edition (p. 43) proves that 27 out of 28 Latin MSS belong to four families are unanimous in assigning the prophecy of the Tree of the Sun to the time of 'primus iubaris ortus', though there are some verbal differences. The one exceptional MS specifies the sunset prediction, but later in the tale the tree also gives a prophetic utterance at sunrise. Moreover, if 'primus iubaris ortus' could be interpreted as the first rising of the radiance at both sunset and sunrise, then the time of the Tree of the Moon's oracle would be inconsistent. If the Tree of the Sun gives two predictions per day, the same should be true of the Tree of the Moon because of the priest's statement that the time of its oracle corresponds with that of the Tree of the Sun. However, the night tree gives only one prediction. Therefore, in either case, the Latin and the ME versions contain a self-contradiction, whereas the OE translator pursues consistency.⁽¹²⁾

As regards the consistency of the description, the ME version is less logical; differences are often due to insufficient knowledge, especially that of Latin, on the part of the translator. First of all, the supposition that Alexander's mother is his enemy makes no sense in this context. Therefore, the root of the problem can probably be found in the Latin source. Cambridge University Library MS Mm. 5. 29 reads 'matris' instead of

'mortis' and the ME translator probably identified 'mother' with 'insidiator'. This is caused by either an ignorance of Latin inflections, or a lack of background knowledge, although Alexander's question about his mother might have baffled the translator. There is another inconsistency: the Tree of the Sun says the Fates are his sisters. This comes from the construing of 'mihi' with 'tres sorores'. Although this interpretation is possible, the verb *irascor* takes the dative, so that 'mihi' should naturally belong with the verb. The third difference is the flat refusal to reveal more information, though this is a word-for-word rendering of the passage in the Latin original. Thus the ME version seems to remain faithful to the original; rather, the translator tries to do so, but his apparent lack of skill resulted in paradoxical sentences that frustrate his original intention.

To sum up the characteristics of *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, it consists of two main components, namely, Alexander and the marvels. Although the ME version is full of questionable translations, it seemingly does not seek to change these two main points. In the OE version, we can sense the translator's intention more clearly; he was not highly interested in the marvels for their own sake, and the portrayal of Alexander the Great is of greater importance to him. This comes from the understanding that *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* is primarily a tale of Alexander. The Latin versions give equal importance to Alexander and the Eastern marvels, whereas the OE version emphasises the King. The sacred trees are introduced in order to tell Alexander his future. The OE translator tried to portray the marvels from the point of view of Alexander, especially in terms of their relationship to Alexander's fate.

Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum historiale* has another intention. Chapters 56 and 57 in the *Historiale* describe the trees '[e]x epistola Alexandri'.⁽¹³⁾ The overall endeavour of this encyclopaedic work being literally a mirror of the world allowed it to include almost all the information

found in *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*. Two episodes only are omitted. First, in *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, the King is informed by the old men of the existence of the trees (see ‘*Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem*’, p. 39), but the encounter with these men is not mentioned in the *Historiale*. This omission causes no inconsistency because their information is later repeated when Alexander reaches the sanctuary. Second, in *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, the King and his men go to the trees through a vast arid area full of snakes and beasts (see ‘*Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem*’, pp. 40-41). The *Historiale* omitted this episode, but we still know that the path is dangerous since the preceding accounts of the beasts and serpents in *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* are retained. These omissions do not reduce the amount of available information but rather avoid unnecessary repetition without damaging the flow of the narrative. *Speculum historiale* aims to narrate the history by depicting the life of Alexander the Great, and is primarily a compilation in which a large number of episodes about the King are juxtaposed, whether they concern a marvel or not. Alexander is merely a frame to contain these episodes.

The *Speculum historiale* is an important source for *Mandeville’s Travels*, which survives in a number of translations into several languages and numerous versions including the abridged and the metrical ones. Unabridged English versions do exist, among others, in British Library MS Cotton Titus C. xvi (early fifteenth century) and British Library MS Egerton 1982 (early fifteenth century). In these MSS, the description of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon stretches to two discontinuous chapters. As Table 2 indicates, the account in *Mandeville’s Travels* is less detailed than that in the *Speculum historiale*.

In *Mandeville’s Travels*, the sacred trees are first briefly mentioned in Chapter 7. It seems to be a kind of digression, because here the focus is on Cairo and balsam. Mandeville briefly refers to India in the context of a

Table 2: The Trees of the Sun and the Moon in *Speculum historiale* and *Mandeville's Travels* (Cotton and Egerton MSS)

	<i>Speculum historiale</i>	<i>Mandeville's Travels</i> (MS Cotton & MS Egerton)
Oracle	Death with some details, and the fate of Alexander's mother and sisters	Death
Place	India, beyond the vast arid area	Desert of India
Balsam	Growing of many balsams there	Growing of many balsams there
Path	Perilous passages with beasts and serpents	Perilous passages with beasts, dragons, and serpents
Local inhabitants	Keepers including gigantic priest Living for three hundred years and dressing in the skins of panthers and tigers Eating balsams and frankincense and drinking water from a brook flowing from a nearby mountain	Keepers who eat the balsam and fruit and live for four or five hundred years
Details of the trees	Speaking in Indian and Greek 100 feet in height and cypress-like Male (the Tree of the Sun) and female (the Tree of the Moon) Weeping at the solar and lunar eclipse	
Sanctuary	Requirements to enter and the surrounding wall No rain nor beast, bird, serpent	
Others	Determined time for oracle Prohibition of the sacrifice	

depiction of a field in Cairo where balsam trees grow:

Men seyn also that the bawme groweth in Ynde the More in that desert where Alysaundre spak to the trees of the sonne and of the mone, but I haue not seen it. For I haue not ben so fer abouen

vpward because that there ben to many perilouse passages.⁽¹⁴⁾

The Egerton version offers information that is not very different from the above.⁽¹⁵⁾ The tree-oracles are mentioned as mere accessories to the surrounding balsam trees. The compiler's aim in this chapter is to introduce the richness of Egypt and the way to distinguish good balsam resin from bad. However, the location of the trees — 'so fer abouen vpward' — can be noted. This phrase sounds cartographical rather than geographical, indicating that the trees are in the upper limit of the map (cf. Fig. 1), corresponding to the Eastern end of the world. This is an effective expression of the supreme remoteness of the location of the marvel.

On the other hand, Chapter 32 focuses on India. Mandeville comes to a large river in India beyond which is a desert. According to the inhabitants of the country, sacred trees are to be found there:

[W]ithinne tho desertes weren the trees of the sonne and of the mone that spaken to kyng Alisandre and warned him of his deth. And men seyn that the folk that kepen tho trees and eten of the frute and of the bawme that groweth there lyuen wel cccc. yeer or d. yeere be vertue of the frut and of the bawme. [. . .] But I trowe that an c.^m men of armes myghte not passen tho desertes safly for the gret multytude of wylde bestes and of grete dragouns and of grete serpentes that there ben, that slen and deuouren alle that comen aneyntes hem. (pp. 215-16)

The description here provides several pieces of information, but is still less detailed than the *Historiale* or *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*. Table 2 implies that the episode of prophecy is reflected in the warning of death in *Mandeville's Travels*, yet the sacred trees in *The Letter of Alexander to*

Aristotle tell not only of Alexander's death but also of the fate of his mother and sisters. Some omissions are also made in the account of the local inhabitants. Their life span is stretched to four or five hundred years, which may be due either to an erroneous transcription or to the intention to emphasise the miraculous side of the episode. A single instance of elaboration in *Mandeville's Travels* is the addition of dragons to the horrible creatures on the way, but this may be no more than a rhetorical expansion to accentuate the marvellous and perilous shade, since a dragon was thought to be a kind of serpent. In Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, MS français 2810 (*Livre des Merveilles*) (early fifteenth century), fol. 220, several dangerous animals including a dragon are depicted around the trees and Alexander (Fig. 2).

The comparison in Table 2 indicates that *Mandeville's Travels* prefers visual details in order to emphasise realism and increase the entertainment value. This tendency is also supported by the fact that he lengthened the list of gems — easy to visualise for medieval people — in the description of the golden vine in Great Khan's palace (see *Mandeville's Travels*, p. 157; *The Buke of John Maundevill*, p. 107). Moreover, in the Cotton version, the importance of 'seeing' is reinstated before the description of the Khan's land:

[S]um men wil not trow me [. . .] , natheles I schalle seye you a partye of him [Great Khan] and of his folk, after that I haue seen the manere and the ordynance fulle many a tyme. [. . .] Yif ony man hath ben in tho contrees beyonde, [. . .] he schalle here speke of him so meche merueylouse thing that he schalle not trowe it lightly. And treuly no more did I myself til I saugh it. [. . .] I wille not spare — for hem that knowe not ne beleue not but that that thei seen — for to telle you [. . .]. (emphasis added; p. 159)

To explain the unfamiliar Eastern world, the power of the eye is most effective in enhancing the verisimilitude. *Mandeville's Travels* is primarily a narrative of the journey to the Holy Land and the diverse countries thereabout, as the narrator says in the Prologue. It becomes important for the compiler to emphasise the firsthand knowledge through his eyes because his tale is in fact only a compilation of several texts written by others.

While visual details are indispensable to the exotic travel record, the compiler also needed to be selective. *Mandeville's Travels* had to introduce various lands of the East, and the amount of detail for each region becomes inevitably limited and selective. The figure of Alexander the Great — whose life and deeds are main topics in *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* along with the wonders of India — is now only one of the components of the description of the miraculous trees, and neither Alexander nor John Mandeville is the focus of attention. What is primary is the visual depiction, which stirs the reader's imagination and makes us believe that the author in fact saw each scene. While it could be said that this characteristic applies generally to *Mandeville's Travels*, subtler differences are visible among the ME versions. In the Egerton version, there are some differences concerning the account in Chapter 32, such as the replacement of 'I trowe' with 'as men talde vs' (p. 147). The supposedly original French version reads 'ieo [. . .] croy', so that the Cotton version gives a more literal rendering.⁽¹⁶⁾ The Egerton redactor might have wished to add an authority, avoiding the personal impression of the narrator. The Egerton redactor repeatedly digresses from the French version, whereas the Cotton version is a more or less word-for-word translation. For example, when they describe the fruits made of gems on golden vines in Khan's palace, the Egerton version enumerated gems in order, without repetitions, although it was not a faithful rendering of the French. Meanwhile, the Cotton version

presents items one after another, even if the same stone reappeared with a different name.

Hamelius, who edited the Cotton version, points out that it contains many mistranslations.⁽¹⁷⁾ In fact, the version gives a translation of individual words, which is not always correct; or may lead to the mistranslation of a sentence, as in ‘withinne tho desertes weren the trees of the sonne and of the mone that spaken to kyng Alisandre and warned him of his deth’ (p. 215; emphasis added). The corresponding phrase in the Egerton version is ‘in þase desertes er þe treesse of þe Sonne and þe Mone, whilk spakk till kyng Alisaunder and talde him of his deed’ (p. 147; emphasis added). The underlined words may present a slight discrepancy, but the Egerton version is more accurate. The original French version states that the Trees of the Sun and the Moon ‘parlerount au roy Alisaundre et li deuiseront sa mort’.⁽¹⁸⁾ The equivalent verb is *deviser* (to speak). Therefore, the sense of warning in the Cotton version results from the redactor’s interpretation of ‘deuiseront sa mort’. Although such a rendering may be natural since, in this sentence, ‘to speak’ is juxtaposed with ‘his death’, it becomes a misunderstanding in this context. As mentioned above, in *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, the trees simply answer the questions rather than consciously ‘warn’ of doom. Furthermore, when Alexander asks who will assassinate him, the oracular trees do not give an answer because of the fear that fate will be altered. They are afraid of the Fates and do not want Alexander to avoid his destined death. The OE version — which does not mention the Fates (nor fear either, consequently) — is exceptional, but even so, the prediction there cannot be considered to be a warning, as it does not provide essential information such as the name of the killer. *Speculum historiale*, the direct source for *Mandeville’s Travels*, states ‘[s]i mortis tuæ vt petis, insidiatorem tibi prodidero; facile instantia fata vitabis, mihi quoque tres sorores irascerentur, Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos’ (p. 133). The attitude of

the tree is the same as that in *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*. The oracular trees answer Alexander's questions because he asked; they have no intention of helping him to evade death. We can see that the Egerton version reveals a more correct interpretation and gives a superior text as far as this sentence about the sacred trees is concerned. The Cotton redactor appears to have lacked insight into the context of the sentence. Usually, the oracle telling how and when a man dies might be interpreted as advice about survival, yet in this case there is no active caution. Instead, only the predestined future is declared. The Cotton translator was ignorant of this background so that the accurate word deviser was inappropriately translated as 'warning'.

The Cotton version is, however, not alone in interpreting the sentence in this way. Ranulf Higden mentions Alexander's visit to the Trees of the Sun and the Moon in Book 3, Chapter 30 of *Polychronicon*, where he paraphrased Vincent of Beauvais. After the details of the trees, Higden introduces the prophecy that Alexander will be the Lord of the world but never return to his motherland. Consequently, the trees warn and advise: 'Unde et consuluerunt ei ut declinaret accedere ad Babylonem. Alioquin in ea, non ferro sed veneno, [. . .] deficeret.'⁽¹⁹⁾ This context presents a clear difference from that of *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, or even from its OE version, where there is no mention of unwillingness to reveal more. Here the revelation of destiny turns into a warning, and thus becomes actual advice to avoid doom. The oracle of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon is apt to be misunderstood.

These confusing trees are deleted in another version of *Mandeville's Travels*, which is in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS e Musaeo 116 and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson D. 99 (both written in the first half of the fifteenth century). The version is an abridged one and the Trees of the Sun and the Moon are among the episodes that were omitted. Con-

cerning Alexander's adventure in India, he preserves the account of the encounter with the virtuous heathens whose description is longer than that of the oracular trees in unabridged versions. The trees depicted briefly may have been regarded as unnecessary details, as the compiler took care to epitomise the entire narrative without damaging the flow of the story. M. C. Seymour claims that the Bodley version preserves wonders,⁽²⁰⁾ but the marvels which are present in *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* are almost totally ignored.

In the metrical version of *Mandeville's Travels* in Coventry, City Record Office MS (middle of the fifteenth century), a Christian interpretation appears in the place of the prediction of the pagan trees. It reminds us of the Last Judgement:

Godis wille forsoth hit nas
That he shuld noo ferthir pas
For that place is nere hande
The eende of the worlde, I vnderstande.
And so thei toolde hym certainly
Daie and tyme when he shuld dy.
He takith his bridelle and ayen roode
And no lengere þere he ne abode
But went into Greke there he was kinge
And þere he toke his last eendinge.⁽²¹⁾ (2575)

This version is derived from the French version, which is also the source of the Cotton and the Egerton versions. However, as far as the account of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon is concerned, it can be regarded as independent from the original since the redactor describes the trees freely at length (2556-84). The last two lines of the quotation are especially far from

either the original or a historical fact. As Seymour explains, the redactor of the metrical version often made personal alterations and omitted almost all details of the tale except what is concerned with the Holy Land and the marvellous fables.⁽²²⁾ The focus of the metrical version is on the juxtaposition of the Christian land and heathen marvels. It can be well recognised in the depiction of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon, through the unity between the holy being that controls destiny for the Christians and that for the pagans. The trees give predictions by Providence, and Alexander reverences the oracle.

The metrical version in fact reflects the tradition of Christianising the Trees of the Sun and the Moon in Alexander romances. They are confused with the 'Dry Tree' in the Christian legend, which stands in the East yet withered unnaturally due to original sin or the death of Christ. The *Wars of Alexander* (fifteenth century) mentions the bare tree with a phoenix, which is the symbol of Christ, on its bough as Alexander goes to meet the oracular trees (4978-93).⁽²³⁾ The bare tree is already seen in its source, that is, the twelfth- or thirteenth-century recension of *Historia de preliis*, which was translated into Latin from Greek in the tenth century by Archpresbyter Leo of Naples. It speaks of the tree with 'neque folia neque fructus' (neither leaves nor fruits), which could well be the Dry Tree.⁽²⁴⁾ In one of various legends involving the Dry Tree, Mary Lascelles says that the rood legends describe the tree in the earthly paradise, on whose top is seen the Son of God in the guise of a naked child.⁽²⁵⁾ This corresponds to the tree with a phoenix. There are two types of illustrations of this bare tree with the bird and the oracular trees: the one separately illustrated in two pictures and the one combined in one picture. The former is not problematic, but the latter (Fig. 3) may be confusing and might reflect the amalgamation of the Dry Tree with the Trees of the Sun and the Moon.⁽²⁶⁾ In *Kyng Alisaunder* (fourteenth century), the Dry Tree becomes identical to the Trees of the Sun and

the Moon:

pou shalt fynde trowes two —

S[ey]n[t]e[s] and hol[y] hij ben boo.

Here and in opere cuntrees alle

Arbre sek men done hem calle.⁽²⁷⁾ (6752; original square brackets)

The name of the Dry Tree ('Arbre sek') appears as a general term for both trees. The name of the Tree of the Sun is mentioned on line 6826 and the Tree of the Moon on line 6879. The latter two names appear to be used only to distinguish one tree from the other.

In addition to this, there is an illustration which reinforces the Christianisation of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon. The sun and the moon have a traditional connection with the Crucifixion. British Library MS Royal 20. A. v (late thirteenth century), fol. 61r shows the Trees of the Sun and the Moon with the head of Christ (Fig. 4), allowing themselves to be interpreted allegorically in relation to Christian doctrine.

The confusion with the Dry Tree can be found also in the book of Marco Polo, which is a popular travel record similar to *Mandeville's Travels* and written only a half-century earlier. The narrative gives a relatively long account of the episode in question. Polo mentions the Tree of the Sun in the description of Tonocain in Persia (north-east of Iran in today's geography), but there is no mention of the Tree of the Moon or the oracle:

[Tonocain] also contains an immense plain on which is found the ARBRE SOL, which we Christians call the *Arbre Sec*; [. . .]. It is a tall and thick tree, having the bark on one side green and the other white; and it produces a rough husk like that of a chestnut, but without anything in it. The wood is yellow like box, and very strong,

and there are no other trees near it nor within a hundred miles of it, except on one side, where you find trees within about ten miles' distance.⁽²⁸⁾

Although the sacred trees are traditionally located in India, Polo places the Tree of the Sun (*Arbre Sol*) in Persia. He then calls the tree *Arbre Sec* (dry tree). The realistic description here seems to suggest not the legendary tree but a real one. Henry Yule and Henri Cordier point out in their notes that Polo's passage suggests a big chinara, the Oriental plane-tree (I, 128-29). Polo may have tried to disclose the reality of these legendary trees.

The image of Polo's *Arbre Sol* is rather different from that of *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*. Paul Pelliot discusses how the *Arbre Sol* here is not the Tree of the Sun but the Lone Tree, and the phrase 'there are no other trees near it nor within a hundred miles of it, except on one side, where you find trees within about ten miles' distance' indicates the origin of the name.⁽²⁹⁾ Although this argument is persuasive, the Dry Tree does at least have some connection to Alexander romances because, in another chapter, Polo introduces it as 'in the direction of the *Arbre Sol*, which the Book of Alexander calls the *Arbre Sec*' (II, 466; original italics). We cannot specify which text is meant by 'the Book of Alexander', yet we have seen that there are some versions in which the bare tree in the East — possibly the Dry Tree — are to be found. Polo probably read one of these tales and confused the two kinds of trees appearing in succession, though, according to Rudolf Wittkower, he could not have seen the illustrated MSS of the Alexander romances, as Polo departed for the East earlier than the illustrated MSS began to circulate.⁽³⁰⁾ Furthermore, one contemporary world map, the Hereford map, indicates the presence of an 'Arbor balsami id est sicca' (balsam tree, that is Dry Tree).⁽³¹⁾ Plenty of balsam trees stand around the Trees of the Sun and the Moon in both *The Letter of Alexander to Aris-*

totle and *Mandeville's Travels*. Hence, it could be said that there are several causes for confusion between the Dry Tree and the Trees of the Sun and the Moon. In contrast to *Mandeville's Travels* and *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, Polo's account is mostly a genuine travel record which rationalised the traditional marvels here and elsewhere.⁽³²⁾ The depiction of the Arbre Sol is one such case.

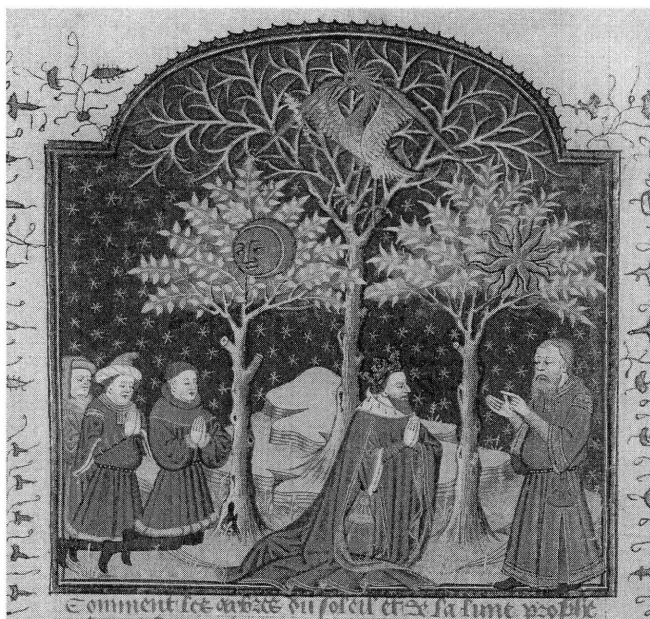
The description of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon differs in almost all of the versions of the episode. Each compiler or translator of the text had his own intention regarding the theme and function, and differences among the versions could reflect this. Some treat the tale as a travel record, others as a legend of a hero, and still others as a small encyclopaedia. In the case of *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, it is compiled with the twin intention of narrating an adventure of a hero and enumerating the wonders. It tries to pay equal attention to both Alexander the Great and the wonders of the East. In the OE version, which remains somewhat indifferent to the marvels and respects over-all consistency, the legend of a hero is what the translator wished to emphasise. He is more interested in relating Alexander's deeds than Indian wonders, omitting and editing some marvels. Meanwhile, *Mandeville's Travels* aims for a more objective account of the wonders for the Christian reader. It attaches importance to visual information, which can enhance the veracity of the heathen world. In addition, the redactor of the Egerton version tried to make the text more readable, while the Cotton version is more or less a literal translation. The first priority of the Bodley version is a skilful epitomization of the tale through the omission of brief descriptive passages, and the metrical version tried to replace overtly pagan matters with a Christian interpretation which the original French did not possess.

These variations in the description of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon indicate diversity in the supposed function of each work as envis-

aged by the editors. Therefore, these differences reflect not only the stemma of transmission, but also the diversity in the individual compilers' conception of their works. Their analysis also sheds light on how classical motifs, including the Trees of the Sun and the Moon, survived and earned popularity through the Middle Ages by transfiguration according to various narrative requirements. The inherited classical texts were embodied by what the medieval compilers and translators had in mind such as genres, intentions, and editorial plans.



Fig. 1: The Psalter world map, British Library MS Addit. 28681, fol. 9r (reproduced by permission of The British Library)



- above: Fig. 2: The Trees of the Sun and the Moon with Alexander and Beasts in *Mandeville's Travels*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS français 2810, fol. 220 (Cliché Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris)
- below: Fig. 3: Trees Combined in One Picture, British Library MS Royal 15. E. vi, fol. 18v (reproduced by permission of The British Library)



Fig. 4: Oracular Trees with Head of Christ, British Library MS Royal 20. A. v, fol. 61r (reproduced by permission of The British Library)

Notes

- * This is a revised version of a paper read at the 18th annual meeting of the Eastern Division of the Japan Society for Medieval English Studies, held at Tokyo Woman's [sic] Christian University on 29 June 2002. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Takami Matsuda of Keio University for his invaluable help and advice. Grateful acknowledgement is also made to Professor John Scahill of Keio University, and Mr David Hathaway, who read a typescript of the earlier version and helped to polish my English.
- (1) David J. A. Ross, *Alexander Historiatus: A Guide to Medieval Illustrated Alexander Literature*, 2nd edn, Athenäums Monografien Altertumswissenschaft: Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie, 186 (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1988), p. 28; and *The Romances of Alexander*, trans. with introd. by Dennis M. Kratz, Garland Library of Medieval Literature, Ser. B, 64 (New York: Garland, 1991), p. xxix.
 - (2) '*Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem*' *ad codicum fidem edidit et commentario critico instruxit*, ed. by W. Walther Boer, Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie, 50 (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1973), pp. vi-xxxii.
 - (3) *Three Old English Prose Texts in MS. Cotton Vitellius A xv*, ed. with introd. and glossarial index by Stanley Rypins, EETS, OS, 161 (London: Oxford University Press, 1924; repr. New York: Kraus, 1971), p. xxxvii.
 - (4) *The Middle English 'Letter of Alexander to Aristotle'*, ed. by Vincent

- DiMarco and Leslie Perelman, *Costerus: Essays in English and American Language and Literature*, NS, 13 (Amsterdam: Radopi, 1978), pp. 29-31.
- (5) Lloyd L. Gunderson, *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle about India*, *Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie*, 110 (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1980), pp. 111-13. Ctesias describes the cult of the sun and the moon, and the trees as tall as cypress bearing fragrant resin, in his ethnographical document *Indica* ('Ἰνδικαί', in *Ctésias: 'la Perse', 'l'Inde'; les sommaires de Photius*, ed. by R. Henry, Collection Lebègue, 7th Ser., 84 (Brussels: Office de Publicité, 1947), pp. 61-86 (pp. 66, 83-84)). In *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus, Io arrives at the talking oak trees at Dodona (829-32). Citing H. W. Parke's argument, Gunderson states that the plural 'trees' is exceptional (p. 113). Furthermore, Diodorus of Sicily describes the Temple of Ammon, where Alexander is given an assurance of sovereignty over the world by the god. The spring called the Spring of the Sun is located nearby in the desert, and, like the sacred spot of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon, the sanctuary has large trees and inhabitants (xvii. 49-51).
 - (6) John Kirtland Wright, *The Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades: A Study in the History of Medieval Science and Tradition in Western Europe*, American Geographical Society Research Ser., 15 (New York: American Geographical Society, 1925), p. 468.
 - (7) L1 is a Latin version edited by W. Walther Boer ('*Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem*', p. 50). In this case, Boer's edition and Oxford, C. C. C. MS 82 include an identical text, so that only the former critical edition with its list of the variants from 28 MSS divided into four families is cited here. Further references to this edition are given in the text. 'If I reveal your slayer to you, by removing him you will easily change the approaching fate and the three sisters, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, will be angry at me because by truthful oracle I entangled their allotment of the thread' (my translation). Another translation is in Gunderson, p. 154. In the following discussion, translations of Latin and OE quotations are mine unless otherwise stated.
 - (8) Original italics, *Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle*, in *Three Old English Prose Texts*, pp. 1-50 (pp. 47-48): 'If I tell something (five letters missing) of your life to you, you would easily change the fate and seize his hand but I will tell you the truth.' There is another translation in Donald Davidson and A. P. Campbell, '*The Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle: The Old English Version Turned into Modern English*', *Humanities Association Bulletin*, 23 (1972), 3-16 (p. 16). Further references to the OE version are given

in the text.

- (9) Thomas Hahn, 'The Middle English *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*: Introduction, Text, Sources, and Commentary', *Mediaeval Studies*, 41 (1979), 106-60 (p. 143). *The Middle English 'Letter of Alexander to Aristotle'*, pp. 104, 106 offers a slightly different text, which reads 'in so moche a wey' instead of 'in so moche away'. Hahn's reading seems preferable, because it is based on the Latin word 'sublato'. Further references to the ME version are given in the text.
- (10) *The Middle English 'Letter of Alexander to Aristotle'*, pp. 103, 105. L2 is a Latin version in Cambridge University Library MS Mm. 5. 29.
- (11) Original italics. *Epistola Alexandri*, in *Three Old English Prose Texts*, pp. 79-100 (p. 94).
- (12) The OE version's multiplication of the oracular time of the Tree of the Sun may have some connections to the description in the Greek Alexander Romance by Pseudo-Callisthenes (III.17) and its Latin translation by Julius Valerius (III.25), in which each tree is supposed to give a prediction three times: at the sun's rising, its zenith, and at the setting of the sun or the moon (*Res gestae Alexandri Macedonis: Translatae ex 'Aesopo Graeco'; accedunt 'Collatio Alexandri cum Dindimo, rege Bragmanorum, per litteras facta' et 'Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem, magistrum suum, de itinere suo et de situ Indiae'*, ed. by Bernardus Kuebler (Leipzig, 1888), p.113; and, Julius Valerius Alexander Polemius, *Historia Alexandri Magni (Pseudo-Callisthenes): Volumen I; Recensio Vetsuta*, ed. by Guilelmus Kroll (Berlin: Weidmannsche, 1926), p. 133).
- (13) Vincentius Bellovacensis, *Speculum quadruplex; sive, Speculum maius, Speculum historiale* (Douai, 1624; repr. Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1965), p. 132. Further references to the *Speculum historiale* are given in the text.
- (14) Emphasis added. *Mandeville's Travels*, ed. by M. C. Seymour (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 36. Further references to the Cotton version are given in the text.
- (15) See *The Buke of John Maundevill: Being the Travels of Sir John Mandeville, Knight, 1322-56; A Hitherto Unpublished English Version from the Unique Copy (Egerton MS. 1982) in the British Museum; Edited Together with the French Text, Notes, and an Introduction*, ed. by George F. Warner (Westminster, 1889), p. 26. Further references to the Egerton version are given in the text.

- (16) *The Buke of John Maundevill*, p. 147.
- (17) *Mandeville's Travels: Translated from the French of Jean d'Outremeuse*, ed. by P. Hamelius, EETS, OS, 153-54, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul, 1919; Humphrey Milford, 1923), II: *Introduction and Notes*, 17.
- (18) *The Buke of John Maundevill*, p. 147; emphasis added.
- (19) 'Polychronicon' *Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis: Together with the English Translations of John Trevisa and of an Unknown Writer of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Joseph Rawson Lumby, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi scriptores; or Chronicles and Memories of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages* (Rolls Ser.), 41, 9 vols (London, 1865-86; repr. [New York(?): Kraus, 1964), IV (1872; repr. 1964), 4. Translation: And whence they counselled him to avoid entering Babylon. Otherwise there, not by sword but by venom, he would be lost.
- (20) 'A Medieval Redactor at Work', *Notes and Queries*, 206 (1961), 169-71 (pp. 170-71).
- (21) *The Metrical Version of 'Mandeville's Travels': From the Unique Manuscript in the Coventry Corporation Record Office*, ed. by M. C. Seymour, EETS, OS, 269 (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 68-69.
- (22) *The Metrical Version*, pp. xix-xx.
- (23) 'The Wars of Alexander': *An Alliterative Romance Translated Chiefly from the 'Historia Alexandri Magni de preliis'*, ed. by Walter W. Skeat, EETS, ES, 47 (London, 1886; repr. Millwood, NY: Kraus, 1975), p. 254.
- (24) *Die 'Historia de preliis Alexandri Magni': Rezension J'*, ed. by Karl Steffens, *Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie*, 73 (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1975), p. 156. Rudolf Wittkower treated it as the Dry Tree ('Marco Polo and the Pictorial Tradition of the Marvels of the East', in *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*, *Collected Essays of Rudolf Wittkower*, 3 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977), pp. 75-92 (p. 89)). Gunderson claims that though the oldest recension of this translation does not describe the Trees of the Sun and the Moon, the tree without fruit or leaf means these prophetic trees (p. 40).
- (25) 'Alexander and the Earthly Paradise in Mediæval English Writings', *Medium Ævum*, 5 (1936), 31-47, 79-104, 173-88 (p. 176).
- (26) Fig. 3 is from British Library MS Royal 15. E. vi (middle of the fifteenth century), fol. 18v.
- (27) *Kyng Alisaunder*, ed. by G. V. Smithers, EETS, OS, 227, 237, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1952-57), I: Text, 359, 361.
- (28) *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian, Concerning the Kingdoms and*

Marvels of the East, ed. by Henry Yule and Henri Cordier, 3rd edn, 2 vols (London: Murray, 1903; repr. [3 vols bound in 2] St. Helier: Armorica; Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1975), I, 127-8; original italics. Further references to Marco Polo are given in the text.

- (29) *Notes on Marco Polo*, 2 vols (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1959-63), I, 627-37.
- (30) Wittkower, pp. 86-88.
- (31) Wright, p. 468.
- (32) For example, he denies the legend that the unicorn can be captured by a virgin (II, 285).