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Abstract

This issue of postmedieval explores the role of laughter and humor in medievalism. The medieval period has long provided a fund of images and ideas that have been vital to defining 'the modern.' From the earliest parodies of medieval chivalry, through to the scatological humor of contemporary internet medievalism, it is clear that as long as there has been medievalism, people have indulged in medievalist laughter. Comic engagement with the Middle Ages has had a vital role in the postmedieval imaginary, and thus warrants serious attention, but to date it has not received sustained analysis. The work that has appeared on comic medievalist texts has not yet led to the development of a critical language to understand the 'affective-historical' responses these texts generate. The essays in this issue take steps toward the development of that language.

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Medievalist Laughter

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This issue of *Postmedieval* explores the role of laughter and humor in medievalism. The medieval period has long provided a fund of images and ideas that have been vital to defining 'the modern.' From the earliest parodies of medieval chivalry, through to the scatological humor of contemporary internet medievalism, it is clear that as long as there has been medievalism, people have indulged in medievalist laughter. Comic engagement with the Middle Ages has had a vital role in the postmedieval imaginary, and thus warrants serious attention, but to date it has not received sustained analysis. The work that has appeared on comic medievalist texts has not yet led to the development of a critical language to understand the 'affective-historical' responses these texts generate. The essays in this issue will take steps toward the development of that language.

Ranging from anonymous verse of the sixteenth century, across the 'adolescent' prurience of eighteenth-century theatre and verse, and the often overlooked humor of Walter Scott, and arriving at late twentieth and twenty-first-century televisual, cinematic, and internet culture, this issue addresses a range of key questions, including: when did the Middle Ages become an object of laughter, and why? What registers of medievalist humor can be identified, and what do they 'do' to, and with, the medieval past? How does laughter engage with temporal and historical sensibilities? Does medievalist humor laugh mostly at the past, or does it use the past to laugh at the present? Challenging truisms about humor as an inherently subversive phenomenon, these essays together explore the affective and cultural

complexity of laughing at the Middle Ages. Taken together, they demonstrate comic medievalism's capacity to both query and reify historical periodization, as well as its tendency to preserve cherished notions of the Middle Ages even as it appears to question them.

This issue's appeal to laughter as a heuristic bridge between the medieval and the modern has a striking early precedent. In his 1946 article 'Mediaeval Laughter,' J. S. P. Tatlock sets out to counter Louis Cazamian's contention in *The Development of English Humor* that the 'mental complexity' underlying modern humor was 'not very widely diffused' before the Renaissance. Having related accounts from Walter Map's *De nugis curialium* of witty banter between Henry II and St Hugh of Lincoln, as well as Map's own scandalous joke about monks lying down on boys, Tatlock digresses briefly from his historical argument to assert, *contra* Cazamian:

> Any highly civilized and cultivated modern will recognize in these conversations and the laughter [...] the presence of people essentially like himself, responding to quick-wittedness and perception precisely as he would respond. At the very least this will tend to humanize the middle ages for moderns, which sometimes is needed [...] by laughing together we can erase the traces of divergence or failure of sympathy (Tatlock, 1946, 289-90).[1]

Tatlock's excursus is noteworthy for its argument that looking at the Middle Ages through the lens of shared laughter affords a sympathetic, 'humanizing' illumination of medieval people. It shows that even in one the earliest forays into understanding medieval humor, laughter was regarded as a phenomenon that is historically specific yet also universally human and hence trans-historical, capable of destabilizing historical demarcations.

The idea of laughter's human universality is far from exclusive to Tatlock. While the contention from Aristotle onward that laughter is *uniquely* human has not gone undisputed by ethologists, the consensus that it is nevertheless *universally* human has made it the focus of investigation across the social and human sciences. Its complexity as a human behavior, and its intimate (though not exclusive) relationship to the cultural phenomena of humor and comedy, has led anthropologists, linguists, psychologists, psycho-biologists, cognitive scientists, philosophers, and cultural theorists to apply themselves to the questions of its origins, its symptoms, its manifestations, its purposes, and its effects.

Despite these comprehensive efforts, laughter remains one of the most elusive of phenomena. A key aspect of its resistance to analytical containment is its composite nature as a physiological reflex that nevertheless marks what Simon Critchley calls 'the distance of human culture from animal life' (Critchley, 2001, 28). Physically involuntary, human laughter is also rich with existential apprehension and, in most cases, responsive to social expectations and values. To take a simple example, our laughter at seeing an Academy Award recipient tripping onstage is spontaneous, but is also existential in that we bear amused witness to the human will being thwarted by contingency, and social in that we enjoy the spectacle of inversion as the exalted quite literally fall before our eyes. Those who have sought to define what is distinctive about human laughter have repeatedly seen it as a property of humans' capacity to reflect on their experiences and objectify themselves. William Hazlitt's opening claim in *On Wit and Humour* (1819) that humans laugh because they are 'the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be' (Hazlitt, 1845, 2) receives later philosophical elaboration in Helmuth Plessner's persuasive argument that laughter is a central means by which humans experience and express their 'eccentric positionality,' that is their awareness of the relativity of their own subjectivity. For Plessner, humans break into laughter at such 'unanswerable' but non-

threatening phenomena as paradox, ambiguity, ambivalence and the multiplicity of meaning, because these expose, and demand recognition of, the breach between humans' subjective and objective experience. These phenomena are most frequently encountered in the form of jokes, humor, and comic texts, but also in embarrassment (Plessner, 1970, 138-42; see also Prusak 2006).

These arguments about laughter as a reflective practice can be extrapolated beyond the behavior of the individual, to encompass its broader operation within the social field. It is a truism among sociologists of humor that what a society collectively laughs at discloses its aspirations, norms, and boundaries, and is vital to the formation of its identity (Davies, 1998; Billig, 2005; Lockyer and Pickering 2005). There has been a strong focus over the last two decades on the ethics of humor as an instrument of social tolerance or exclusion, with humor scholars attempting to calibrate the social dynamics between the subject (or 'teller') of the comic text, its object, and its audience, in an attempt to identify the line between humor and offense. There is broad consensus that humor and the laughter it elicits operate diversely within the social field: they can be expressions of social norms, or, conversely, function as reflexive meditations on those norms. Whatever the intention, however, the exercise of humor, and the response to it via laughter, are both reflective practices in so far as they lay bare the rich, though often fraught, intersubjective nature of social experience. Humor and laughter are, from this perspective, inherently ethical practices which can have direct and even urgent ramifications for the coherent functioning of the social body.

One aspect of this social operation that is overlooked in the scholarly and philosophical literature is the ways human societies use laughter to reflect on the specifically historical dimension of their 'eccentric positionality.' To date, almost no scholarship has dealt with this question, with the exception of Hannu Salmi's recent edited collection *Historical Comedy on Screen* (2011), which is nevertheless more focused on cinema than on historical

humor as an existential symptom or practice. Yet despite this oversight, it is plausible to extrapolate from Plessner and his followers (who include Critchley) that registering the passage of time, and one's place within it, is vital to recognizing the temporal and historical relativity of one's own existence, world-view and beliefs. Following the logic of Plessner's account, a natural corollary to this recognition is amusement: both the past and the present become mutually relative and hence equally risible. Laughing at the past, then, becomes an index of a later society's historical self-understanding as well as of its perception of the relationship of the present to the past.

As the essays in this issue show, the idea of laughter arising out of a sense of historical relativity is a particularly fertile one for considering medievalist humor and the laughter it solicits from its audiences. It explains, for instance, why comparatively little comic medievalism has engaged in straightforward ridicule of the Middle Ages, or has had recourse to what humor scholars call 'superiority' humor, a notion derived from Thomas Hobbes's notorious statement that 'the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance' (Hobbes, 1928, 32). Given the medieval period has elicited numerous serious representations of it as ideologically retrograde, superstitious, technophobic – in sum, the antithesis of progress one might expect to find a dominant strain of superiority comedy in which these 'backward' qualities are the target of modern mockery. Such a portrayal of a risibly static Middle Ages is the historical counterpart to the ridiculous human formulated by Henri Bergson in his hugely influential treatise *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Just as Bergson's risible human invites laughter because his behavior is driven by rigidity, habit and 'a certain mechanical inelasticity' that marks his failure to adapt to his surroundings (Bergson, 1914, 10), so too the image of a rigidly

tradition-bound Middle Ages would seem to invite ridicule for its failure to engage with the necessity of progress: to draw out the historicist inflection in Hobbes's statement, the ridiculousness of the Middle Ages would appear to be simultaneously that of 'others' and of '[our]selves past.' But in fact this variety of comic medievalism is surprisingly uncommon. Even the apparently paradigmatic example of medievalist 'superiority' humor, Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, is complicated by the fact that it enfolds a critique of modernity into its portrayal of the hard-headed Hank Morgan's attempts to modernize the change-averse Arthurian world. On the surface Hank's tale of his time at Arthur's court ridicules the superstitious credulity of the premoderns, and the oppressive hierarchies of feudalism; in this respect is aligned with Twain's well-known desire to expose the ugly truth of Feudalism to those among his Southern contemporaries whose Scottian fantasies about medieval culture bolstered, in his view, their support of slavery. However, the instability of Hank's characterization means that the novel is also satirizing American technological triumphalism and its failure to recognise the violence of industry or the inequities generated by capitalistic entrepreneurial meritocracy. Twain's sense of the historical relativity of his own age, of the costs of both nostalgia and of unbridled 'progress,' prevents him from limiting his book to simple mockery of the Middle Ages.

Similarly, Stephen Knight's discussion of Enlightenment medievalism in this issue reveals that well before Twain's novel, getting laughs out of the Middle Ages, or more specifically out of medieval sexual vulgarity, could be used to more complex ends than simple derision. Examining a cluster of comic medievalist texts produced by Swift, Pope, and Voltaire, he uncovers in them an intricate dynamic of ridicule and recuperation. Although the Middle Ages are without doubt represented as coarse and obscene – in Voltaire's case, scurrilously so each of these writers is drawn to what this era makes possible for them to write; in other words, 'the medieval extends a space for sexual licence.' While Knight signals

that the sexuality to which the appropriated Middle Ages gives expression is troublingly male and adolescent, it should nevertheless be acknowledged that reworking medieval materials opened up a discursive space for 'both contemporary comment and personal licence -- two forms of resistance to eighteenth- century modernity [and] contemporary mores.' The liberatory potential of the medieval means that mockery never establishes a firm foothold.

In one of his most memorable but contested statements, Bergson claims that laughter requires 'something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart' (Bergson, 1914, 5). The distinguishing tone of humor that is driven by an acknowledgement of modernity's 'eccentric positionality,' however, rather than by an untroubled affirmation of its supersession of the past, is one of sympathy. This is the case even with comic texts exploring recent Shocks of the New: the madcap virtuosity of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), for instance, is never less than genial toward its workers dehumanized by their assembly line existence, while Jacques Tati's *Play Time* (1967) is famous for the tender absurdism of its depiction of Monsieur Hulot's bewildered encounters with impersonal modernity. The fact that the titles of both films draw attention to time, and to modernity as one stage in a larger temporal continuum, relativizes the Now and exposes it to reflective examination. But sympathy is also the tenor of much medievalist humor. On the same theme of technology, 'Medieval Helpdesk,' the beloved Norwegian television skit that I discuss in my essay within, playfully draws a parallel between medieval and twenty-first-century information technologies in a way that encourages the audience to identify with the befuddled monk Brother Ansgar as he grapples with that intimidating new information platform, the book. Although this skit superficially appears to be mocking medieval people for their quaint fear of the humble book, in fact its main, highly sympathetic, point is that the transition to new technologies is inherently disorienting, and that no matter how up-to-date we moderns think ourselves, contact with the New can leave one feeling thoroughly 'medieval,' unmoored by constant

change. Kim Wilkins' essay shows that in the case of comic medievalist internet memes, a shared sympathy for the medieval in turn fosters networks of sympathy or 'affinity spaces' (many of them geek-inflected). In these spaces, 'produsers' of these often densely allusive memes delight not only in exploring the extremely 'adaptogenic' nature of the Middle Ages within digital culture, but also in belonging to a community whose members' specialized knowledge of the medieval and of medievalism means they are in on the joke.

A Plesner-esque laughing recognition of historical positionality is detectable in much comic medievalism, in the fact that so much of it features a knowing, 'meta' level that either alludes to, or makes parodic use of, the tropes by which the Middle Ages have been represented in later cultures. David Matthews develops this point in his essay when he argues that an essential element of the black comedy in the famous 'Bring out your dead' scene in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is its exaggerated play on conventional modern representation of a shit- and mud-splattered Middle Ages. Even as early as such seventeenth-century texts as Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and (possibly influenced by Cervantes) Fletcher and Beaumont's civic play *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, with their déclassé, self-appointed modern knights, it is clear that a key object of their satire is how medieval chivalry has come to be understood and adapted in their own time. This humorous commentary on the forms of medievalist representation has continued across the ensuing centuries: nineteenth century Britain, a scene of rampant parody, spawned a comic theatrical culture that not only, as Richard Schoch has shown, compulsively lampooned Shakespeare's portrayals of medieval history in his tragedies and chronicle plays (Schoch, 2002), but also produced a swarm of operettas and burlesques based on the medievalist novels of, among others, Walter Scott and Victor Hugo. It is this contamination of the serious and the parodic that Richard Burt has amusingly called 'Schmedievalism' (Burt, 2007). Victorian satiric newspapers, in particular the London *Punch*, repeatedly caricatured not the Middle Ages themselves but,

rather, the Victorian Middle Ages, in particular the Aesthetic movement's fetishizing of an idealized medieval world. A witty example of this is a cartoon by Edward Tennyson Reed published on 17 March 1894, drawn in the style of an orientalist woodcut and punningly entitled 'Japanese Fan de Siècle Illustration by Mortarturio Whiskersly.' The cartoon's yoking together of 'Mortarturio' and 'Whiskersly' creates an absurd amalgam in which Pre-Raphaelite Arthurianism is linked to an infantalized version of the name of Aubrey Beardsley, the artist synonymous with Art Nouveau and Decadent art, whose style is unmistakably imitated in the cartoon. This densely-packed image reveals a comically reflexive awareness of the 'positional' nature of the many layers of mediation through which the medieval has become meaningful in a later age, and whose interests are reflected in these mediations.

Andrew Lynch also elaborates on this theme in his essay in this issue on Walter Scott's use of 'amusement' in his representations of medieval Catholicism in *The Monastery* and *The Abbott*. According to Lynch, although Scott conforms to the Scottish historiographic imperative of representing the 'overthrow and continued defeat of a medieval Catholicism widely seen as tyrannical, licentious, ignorant, and superstitious,' he nevertheless introduces a strategy of 'amusement' in narrating this past, taking pleasure in drawing out 'the lively personal and party interests involved in the [historical] story-making business.' This strategy is expressed through Scott's slightly mischievous attribution of historical knowledge to 'fallible individuals and partial documents rather than to revealed absolute truth.' This 'amuses' the reader because it introduces an array of 'crossed and counter sympathies, ironies, false notes of apparent support, and confrontations with absurd or unpleasant aspects of the [Protestant] cause.' While Lynch emphasizes that these novels should not be seen as blithe relativism in the vein of postmodern 'faction,' we should not underestimate the

boldness of Scott's decision to bring this kind of humor to the cherished topic of Catholicism's demise.

As these memes demonstrate, creators of comic medievalist texts, like their more serious counterparts, regularly turn to the Middle Ages because they believe it can be mobilized to comment on, and even offer alternatives to, a range of contemporary problems. To further finesse the tenses of Hazlitt's formulation, medievalist satire emerges out of, and attempts to address, the 'gap between what is and what should be' by offering a comic take on what *was*. When, to take a famous example, Italian playwright Dario Fo turned in the late 1960s to the Middle Ages to create his satiric play cycle *Mistero Buffo* (The Comic Mysteries), it was because, he claimed, medieval performance offered vital but neglected precedents for modern dissident satirists, both in its content (its satires of feudal-ecclesiastical oppression gave him, he argued, a displaced platform for satirizing corruption and violence in contemporary Italy) and in the figure of the itinerant *giullare*, on whose subversively farcical performances Fo explicitly modelled his own (see D'Arcens, 2012). Unlike Fo's commitment to historical revival, other satiric usages, such as Twain's satire in *Connecticut Yankee* of post-Scottian medievalism and its ideological ramifications, are entirely imaginative in their recreation of a fictional Middle Ages. As satire these two texts differ also in that Fo offers his neglected Middle Ages for exemplary purposes, while Twain's Arthurian world moves between being offered as demystifying contrast and cautionary parallel to the modern. Both types of satiric medievalism, however, traffic heavily in contemporary perceptions of medieval social, religious, and personal mores in order to provoke critical responses to abuses, hypocrisies, and vanities in postmedieval societies.

Plessner's notion that laughter is a response to such 'unanswerable' existential conundra as paradox and polysemy corresponds readily to the pleasure in anachronism that lies at the heart of a great deal of comic medievalism. With its deliberately playful confusion

of temporality (the modern in the medieval, the medieval in the modern, the medieval as modern, the modern as medieval), anachronism is, as I discuss in my essay in this issue, a supple historicized form of what humor theorists describe as incongruity humor, a comic category developed out of Arthur Schopenhauer's formulation of *Inkongruenz* (Schopenhauer, 1989, 59). Critchley's statement that the laughter elicited by incongruity humor is 'produced by the experience of a felt incongruity between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place in the joke' (Critchley, 2002, 3) can readily be adapted to describe the comic effect produced by the countless medievalist texts that make use of anachronism. In some cases, such as the medievalist memes discussed by Wilkins, anachronism goes hand in hand with the amusing incongruity of the medieval thriving within digital technology, and the anarchic blend of the 'serious' and the historical with 'low' culture (in one case, the Bayeux Tapestry intersects with the schlock film *Snakes on a Plane*). In other comic representations of the Middle Ages, however, anachronism can overwhelm other, more obvious, forms of incongruity: in *A Connecticut Rabbit in the Court of King Arthur*, the 1977 Loony Tunes TV reworking of the concept from Twain's novel, the fact that Hank Morgan is now an animated rabbit strikes the viewer as less incongruous than the cartoon's use of the then brand-new discourse of 'animal liberation' (Peter Singer had published his seminal book of that name only two years earlier) to explain Bugs/Hank's manufacture of suits of armor to protect hunted animals. The character's anachronistic response to the medieval aristocracy's fondness for blood sports is effective in its creation of a comic dissonance that is central to its satiric allusion to the continuation of animal cruelty into the present. This playful collapsing of time into a single story and mise-en-scène is typical of comic medievalism's challenge to periodization. Defying the division of the 'modern' from the 'pre-modern,' and its dissociation of the medieval from any qualities

deemed (often problematically) 'modern,' these anachronistic texts instead portray, to comic effect, medieval pasts infected by asynchrony and co-temporality with the modern.

Not all comic medievalism challenges periodization and satirizes the assumptions of modernity, however. Other texts, and their reception, are invested in reinforcing the separation of the modern from the medieval, and in reifying postmedieval ideas about the Middle Ages. Revisiting Plessner's formulation, these texts serve as reminders – and sociologists of humor make this point repeatedly that although laughter might be the expression of an amused encounter with ambiguity, polysemy, or the relativity of one's own subjectivity, in some cases of comic medievalism this encounter has provoke a reactive desire to restore certainty and to perceive a modern historical perspective as absolute. While the ribaldry of the eighteenth-century texts discussed by Knight may have thumbed their nose at Enlightenment decorousness, they nevertheless solidified that century's association of the medieval with the crude and obscene. Matthews's account of the sixteenth-century fabliau The *Iest of Dane Hew of Leicester*, which features the circulating corpse of a lecherous monk, offers an interestingly complex case. While the text itself laughs uneasily at the Middle Ages not as a distant past but as 'a spectral past that will not die,' presenting a troubling continuum in periodization between Protestant England and recently revenant Catholicism, its later scholarly reception has refused this continuum. Instead, because of its 'rudeness and raggedness,' scholars have opted to treat this text, printed c.1560, as a medieval tale that has been revived for the purposes of laughing at that period, thereby assuming that medievalist humor must be premised on a rupture between the medieval and the (early) modern. Conversely, according to Brantley Bryant's essay, while popular online reception of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* has playfully rescripted the trilogy's high serious moments, the films themselves are more ambivalent about the propriety of humor as a register for medievalist fantasy. For although the films begin by using visual and verbal comedy, this levity gradually diminishes, Bryant

argues, replaced by a darker mood that reiterates and consolidates martial ideals of medieval masculine heroism. This transition away from laughter to heroic seriousness is not just a shift in tenor, moreover, but, as an act of representation, 'restrict[s] the possibility of imagining carnivalesque, contestatory, or vibrantly diverse manifestations of the medieval,' in favor of a fantasy Middle Ages that is stable and knowable – and resolutely unfunny. As Gandalf might say, 'one does not simply laugh' when it comes to the Middle Ages.'

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[1] Tatlock is responding to the 1930 version of Cazamian's study, which would be developed into the longer, and better-known study of 1952.