



# Medieval Feminist Forum

A Journal of Gender and Sexuality

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## REVIEWS

*Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, edited by Andrew Albin, Mary C. Erler, Thomas O'Donnell, Nicholas L. Paul, and Nina Rowe. Fordham Series in Medieval Studies. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019. Pp. 308; 33 b/w ill., 1 b/w map., 1 b/w table. ISBN: 9780823285563.

This is an important volume. Opening with, “There’s no such thing as the Middle Ages and there never was,” this collection of essays proceeds to dismantle misperceptions of the European Middle Ages as ethnically and religiously homogeneous; embroiled in a relentless “clash of civilization”; or in line with the same sexual mores of modern conservatism (1). In short, the multiple authors offer a collection of examples, tools, and methodologies with which to counter dangerous weaponizations of the European Middle Ages.

After an introduction by David Perry, the book is divided into three parts—Stories, Origins, and #Hashtags—and concludes with two teaching appendices which organize the preceding essays by discipline and theme, respectively. In part I, Stories, seven essays discuss the Middle Ages as “an object of storytelling and fantasy” (9), probing the dissonance between modern medieval storytelling and the stories medieval peoples told in their own texts, images, and objects. Sandy Bardsley draws attention to a shared class bias in modern medievalism and academic research, demonstrating how both medieval-renaissance fairs and medieval scholarship focus on the nobility, discussing the peasantry only insofar as they exist through the perspective of the former. Katherine Anne Wilson focuses on another overlooked medieval community: the laborers (rather than the artists) behind medieval

artworks, asking readers to approach medieval art not just as symbols of elite status and power, but also as evidence of economic uncertainty and networks of diverse laborers.

The next few essays challenge interpretations of the crusades as a strictly Muslim–Christian clash of civilizations (Nicholas L. Paul); unpack the modern fascist and white supremacist deployment of medieval tales of Jewish “ritual murder/blood libel” (Magda Teter); and underscore the flexibility and diversity (rather than the sensationalized stasis and homogeneity) of Islamic law (Fred M. Donner). W. Mark Ormrod’s essay brings us back to recuperating the stories of overlooked medieval communities, describing the immigrant population of late medieval England through the records of the “alien subsidy” of 1440. Finally, Cord J. Whitaker’s “The Middle Ages in the Harlem Renaissance” stands out in demonstrating that, rather than a space exclusively of white supremacy, modern medievalism can also be a radical space of racial justice. For the early twentieth-century Black scholar-artist Jessie Redmon Fauset, a chivalrous and romantic medievalism became a discursive space to claim her identity as a Black woman.

Part II, *Origins*, explores how “western nations, communities, and persons” use the Middle Ages as a discursive tool of modern cultural orientation and self-narration (91). Thomas Jefferson’s *Quran*, upheld by American public figures as a symbol of American ecumenicalism, is instead revealed by Ryan Szpiech to follow in the medieval tradition of polemical translations ultimately meant to refute and denounce Islam. Lauren Mancía and Elizabeth M. Tyler similarly explore the theme of origins through texts. Mancía challenges a conservative American pundit’s idealization of Latin monasticism through a close reading of *The Rule of St. Benedict*, while Tyler disrupts notions of a trans-historical homogeneous “Englishness” through an examination of how the Old English poem, “The Battle of Brunanburh,” celebrates internal diversity and foreign connectivity.

Sarah M. Guérin and Pamela A. Patton address the question of origins through objects. Drawing attention to the ethics of ivory, Guérin writes that while modern efforts to halt the exploitative ivory trade through widespread bans are well intentioned, they do historical damage by effacing “an important material trace of the African continent’s involvement in world history in the Middle Ages” (145). Patton asks

readers to distinguish between race and racist thinking in a medieval context, arguing that though skin color was not equated with race, the negative attributes commonly associated with dark skin (e.g., sinfulness, social inferiority) made dark skin color “an implement of racist thinking” (163).

William J. Diebold then looks at the intersection of medievalism, fascism, and art, explaining how the Nazis lauded Romanesque art as “quintessentially German,” and renovated the Gothic (i.e., French) church of St. Servatius, Quedlinburg to make it a “more useful Nazi building” (111). Finally, Stephennie Mulder and David A. Wacks deconstruct the modern Anglo-North American and European values attached to the terms “Middle East” and “the West,” respectively. Against pundits who describe the Middle East as “medieval”—shorthand for being embroiled in constant war and sectarian fighting—Mulder argues that the evidence of medieval architecture, specifically the Mashhad al-Husayn, demonstrates a long history of cooperation between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims in the Middle East. In his essay, Wacks underscores the medieval and early modern Muslim and Jewish cultural contributions to modern (Catholic) Spain, challenging nationalist historiographies that disassociate “Eastern/foreign” peoples and cultures from their “Western”/homogeneous narratives.

Part III, #Hashtags, tackles the medievalisms which enter social media as information bites, hot takes, and hashtags (192). The essays collectively discuss sexuality, whiteness, physical violence, and heresy. Marian Bleeke demonstrates how alt-right macros and medieval marginalia—while similar communicative technologies—perform different socio-political commentary. While alt-right macros draw on medieval imagery to uphold strict definitions of masculinity and femininity, medieval marginalia (e.g., nuns and penis trees) challenge gender constructions by depicting female sexual agency. Andrew Reeves, examining viral interpretations of James Brundage’s flow chart of medieval sexuality, invites us to question a seemingly familiar conservative sexuality by underscoring how the medieval sexual-moral hierarchy diverges from today’s conservative mores; medieval masturbation, for example, was a graver sin than same-sex relations.

Next, Maggie M. Williams and Helen Young examine whiteness and medievalism. Williams traces the process whereby Irish-Americans

and Celtic crosses became white (or symbols of whiteness), while Young roots modern expectations of a white Middle Ages in an eighteenth-century European search for a pan-European heritage. Closely related to questions of white identity formation, Will Cerbone and Adam M. Bishop explore the modern emphasis on physical violence vis-à-vis the Vikings and the crusades, respectively. Finally, J. Patrick Hornbeck II, having recounted a Twitter fight in which one person accused another of heresy, explores the violent social consequences of medieval accusations of heresy, concluding that still today the rhetoric of heresy “most certainly remain[s] inflammatory” (274). The book concludes with an afterword by Geraldine Heng, who summarizes the efforts of the present volume as forging a more “ethically responsible, and intersubjective relationship with the past” (278).

Without doubt, the essays in this volume are unique and thought provoking. There is just one area in which I think *Whose Middle Ages?* could have done more to achieve its stated goals. I would have liked to see the book push further beyond the framework of “Western Civilization.” A note after appendix II states the book’s aim is to address “critical questions around how we use the medieval past to construct and think about ‘the West’” (300), but the undefined and repeated use of such terms as “the West,” or the “modern Western world” (sometimes in scare-quotes, other times not) only reifies the hegemonic discursive construct that the book was seeking to deconstruct in the first place. To unpack and challenge the weaponization of the European Middle Ages by Anglo-North American and European countries requires a corollary effort, I think, of unpacking and criticizing what we mean by the modern “West.”

In sum, this collection of essays is to be lauded for its interdisciplinarity, accessibility, and political timeliness. *Whose Middle Ages?* does important work to situate medievalism not as peripheral to Medieval Studies, but rather as central, and indeed foundational, to the field. Whether that medievalism is the discourse of eighteenth-century Europeans or memes on Twitter, both, in this book, are meaningful source bases for the study of the European Middle Ages.

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