

PART I
The Middle Ages



CHAPTER ONE

The Idea of a Middle Ages

EDWARD D. ENGLISH AND CAROL LANSING

Understandings of the European Middle Ages have long been shaped by the old master narrative, in contradictory ways. The name itself was, of course, coined first by Renaissance humanists to characterize what they saw as a long stagnant, barbaric period between the cultural flowering of Antiquity and its rebirth in fourteenth-century Italy.¹ The idea was taken up by Enlightenment *philosophes*, who saw the period as one of superstitious ignorance. The term medieval is still commonly used to evoke savage barbarity; medieval scholars were amused when in Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction* Ving Rhames turned on his former torturers and threatened to "get medieval" on them.²

"Medieval" continues to be associated with backwardness, darkness, indiscriminate violence. Bruce Holsinger has recently analyzed the ways in which politicians and pundits in a bizarre twist of Orientalism use the term to characterize Islamic opponents like al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In 2006, Donald Rumsfeld, then US Secretary of Defense, said of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: "He personified the dark, sadistic and medieval vision of the future – of beheadings, suicide bombings, and indiscriminate killings."³ Some professional medievalists have echoed this approach, faintly, when they argue that the Middle Ages are best understood in terms of The Other or the grotesque.⁴

Other views of the medieval were also driven by ideology. Crucially, many of the great source collections were created in the eighteenth century by professional religious who sought to demonstrate the rationality of medieval religion while protecting the property and reputation of their contemporary Church.⁵ The emphases in those collections have profoundly shaped the field of medieval history: orderly edited sources attract the most study. Popular culture has had a variety of influences as well. With the opening of travel to a wider number of people from the mid-nineteenth century, Anglophone travelers and expatriates created a huge literature describing, for example, medieval and early Renaissance Italy, especially the city states, often with an emphasis on the oppressive hands of a retrogressive Catholicism.⁶ The same period – even in the United States, founded as separate from the evils of the old European regimes – saw a romantic fascination with medieval culture and architecture.⁷

The Middle Ages were popular with pre-Civil War southern aristocrats worried about honor and chivalry.⁸ Movies throughout the twentieth century brought a variety of ideas about what was medieval to popular culture. This was done complete with knights riding by the occasional telephone pole and enriched by the use of a faux dialect called “speaking medieval.”⁹

Political regimes in the twentieth century recognized the value of the medieval past as a tool to legitimate themselves and also to encourage tourism. Mussolini in Italy did not just promote the cult of imperial Rome but also co-opted the Italian Middle Ages and Renaissance in spectacles and schemes to “restore” buildings and piazzas.¹⁰ In contemporary Italy, one political party claims legitimation from the medieval past by holding rallies attended by men dressed as “Lombard Knights.”¹¹ The Middle Ages turned up again as part of the “Culture Wars” of the 1990s when the attack of the newly elected congress led by Newt Gingrich on the funding of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) included ridicule of medieval projects. An NEH-funded program on teaching ways in which medieval people understood sex and gender directed by Edward English, one of this volume’s editors, came under attack. Besides a plain old-fashioned anti-intellectualism, these Republican members of Congress were uncomfortable with ideas that such concepts as sexuality and gender might have history that should be discussed in colleges and universities.¹²

The discipline of medieval history was shaped in part by responses to these caricatures. Twentieth-century professional medievalists in part responded with an emphasis on the ways in which the modern world originated in the Middle Ages. Colin Morris argued for a twelfth-century “discovery of the individual.”¹³ Joseph Strayer’s 1970 *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* is an influential example. Strayer promoted parliamentary systems and constitutional democracy, in response to the world wars and totalitarianism. It is, of course, correct that many aspects of the modern world ultimately derive from the European Middle Ages, including institutions such as universities and the Catholic Church. However, one effect of this approach has been to privilege the historical winners, aspects of medieval Europe that became important in later centuries, above all the nation state. To give a favorite example, arguably the liveliest cultural innovation in the thirteenth century was Mediterranean, centered on Frederick II’s polyglot court and administration in Palermo. Frederick’s response to papal pressure to go on Crusade was to travel to Jerusalem and hammer out a diplomatic solution, an effort that won him a papal excommunication. Sicily and the Italian south in later centuries suffered a long slide into overtaxed poverty and marginality. Textbook narratives therefore focus not on medieval Palermo, with its Muslim and Jewish bureaucrats and Arabic-speaking monarch, but on the historical winners, Paris and London.

What would the European Middle Ages look like without this contradictory intellectual baggage? The project is, of course, an impossibility: the questions of scholars are always informed by their experience. Our past is in the present. Still, some dramatic scholarship has recovered aspects of medieval culture that have simply been left out. To give an example that is not reflected in this volume, the field of medieval English literature has recently been shaken up by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, who is mapping “the French of England”: late medieval English elites kept writing in French, producing a large volume of literature that has been little studied because

specialists focus on the winner, Middle English. More generally, much recent medieval scholarship has been devoted to the effort to identify and then strip away received intellectual categories and seek a fresh understanding of medieval culture and society. That approach is reflected in most of the chapters in this volume, on topics such as reform, the Crusades, the family, Romanesque and Gothic architecture. R. I. Moore even sketches an approach to a genuinely comparative world history that would set aside European exceptionalism. Ironically, medieval nevertheless often still appears as both other and origins of modern.

Notes

- 1 Two excellent recent studies of ideas about the Middle Ages are Arnold, *What is Medieval History?* and Bull, *Thinking Medieval*.
- 2 Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, esp. "Getting Medieval: Pulp Fiction, Foucault, and the Use of the Past," pp. 183–206; for ideas about contemporary critical theory, especially French, and medievalism, see Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition*.
- 3 Quoted by Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror*, p. 1.
- 4 Freedman and Spiegel, "Medievalism Old and New."
- 5 Damico and Zavadil, eds, *Medieval Scholarship*; see the biographies of Bolland, Mabillon, Muratori, Waitz, and Delisle; Knowles, "Jean Mabillon"; Knowles, "The Bollandists" and "The Maurists" in *Great Historical Enterprises*; much of this came together in Edward Gibbon's work; see Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*.
- 6 See the essays in Law and Østermark-Johnson, eds, *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*. Much of this had to do with a romantic nostalgia for a lost past that was much better, a kind of medieval dreamland inherited from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Walter Scott, John Ruskin, and François-René de Chateaubriand.
- 7 See, e.g., Fleming, "Picturesque History and the Medieval."
- 8 Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*.
- 9 Among a number of books on the Middle Ages in the movies, see Aberth, *A Knight at the Movies*; the "Middle Ages" also lives on in computer games.
- 10 Lazzaro and Crum, eds, *Donatello among the Blackshirts*, and essays in Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*, esp. ch. 3, "Urban Politics: The Fascist Rediscovery of Medieval Arezzo," pp. 107–43.
- 11 For the contemporary party called the Lombard League in Italy, see Coleman, "The Lombard League: Myth and History."
- 12 For a view into the culture wars of the 1990s see a summary of the discussion in the US House of Representatives attacking the National Endowment for the Humanities sponsorship of the Summer Institute on teaching about Sex and Gender in the Middle Ages in Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, pp. 173–82.
- 13 Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual*.

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