



Medieval Literature as an Archive of Human Experiences: The Middle Ages as a Depository of Human Knowledge, Wisdom, Happiness, and Suffering

ALBRECHT CLASSEN

University Distinguished Professor, Department of German Studies,
University of Arizona, U.S.A.

Abstract

It ought to be an ongoing effort by all scholars/researchers to question the validity, legitimacy, and purposes of their own discipline because we live in an ever-changing world and must regularly reflect upon our academic self-justification. This also applies to the field of Medieval Studies that faces considerable difficulties and challenges today with declining numbers of students enrolling in respective classes and lacking support by university administrators. This study begins with a general consideration on where we are today in terms of justifying the humanities at large, that is, of the study of literature particularly, and hence of medieval literature. Then this paper focuses on two universal themes, tolerance and then love. While love has always been associated with the courtly world since the twelfth century, toleration and even tolerance do not seem to fit within the medieval context. However, the discussion of both phenomena can be utilized as a particularly effective catalyst for further investigations of medieval culture and literature within the framework of modern and postmodern responses to the Middle Ages. The exploration of this theme as it emerged already at that time offers intriguing opportunities to make the study of medieval literature relevant and important for us today, as does the examination of the love discourse through a historical lens.



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Introduction

Theoretical Reflections

There would not be any serious scholarship in whatever field of research if it did not question

its own positions from time to time and revisit the fundamental issues at stake in theoretical and practical terms. Our entire legitimacy depends on the ability and willingness to explain in straightforward

CONTACT Albrecht Classen ✉ aclassen@arizona.edu 📍 University Distinguished Professor, Department of German Studies
University of Arizona, U.S.A.



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and transparent terms what we investigate, why we pursue those investigations, and what the larger purpose might be either in philosophical or in scientific terms. After all, every generation of new students and scholars rattles, or should rattle at least, the cage of the canon, of the established norms and rules, and challenge us to revisit the foundations of the discipline. Otherwise, new research ultimately can no longer thrive. New theories and methodologies shed new light on the corpus of available texts or documents and can thus help to re-energize the study of pre-modern narratives or images. After all, the archives are waiting for us to discover the discourse in the past and to identify the connectors between that age and us today. Following, I will reflect on the challenges Medieval Studies face today and illustrate with some examples how a methodologically smart and conceptually innovative approach to the Middle Ages and the early modern age can support, energize, and strengthen that academic field in the twenty-first century.

The Ideological Struggles Within the Humanities

The student revolution of the late 1960s both in North America and in Europe was very scary and earth-shattering for the academic community, above all, but it forced traditional scholarship to wake up again and so made it to reflect much more on its own foundations than before. Major reforms in teaching and in the conceptualization of (medieval) literature were the consequence, and we continue to thrive on those until today, drawing readily from contemporary critical theory and innovative methodological approaches (e.g., New Philology, Gender Studies, Ecocriticism, etc.).

Those battle cries from within are, undoubtedly, highly valuable incentives and catalysts to move research forward and to be as self-critical as possible. After all, most academic departments today are the result of long-term historical processes and have been contested from early on by society that might regard one research area or another as “unnecessary” or ideologically suspect. The medieval university looked very differently compared to the modern one. The needs of society for advanced learning change in the course of time, although the basic human values never do. What matters, however, pertains to how those learning goals can or should be achieved by what means. Those who would prefer

to stay within their ivory tower have not realized that all education is, ultimately, paid for by society, so it is our responsibility to communicate with society about what we are and why we exist and for whom.

The medieval European university, for instance, knew nothing of English or French Studies as such, and would not have cared about the investigation of vernacular poetry or the visual arts as an academic discipline. Instead, students first learned the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, and logic), and then turned to the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music; cf. Lundy, Martineau, Sutton, Ashton, and Martineau 2010; Rachel Grundmann 1957; Weijers, ed. 1997; Holley, Wynne, *et al.*, ed., 2016; Sarnowsky 2022). Since most university programs aimed at training future clerics, that system made good sense. Later, medicine, the sciences, and philosophy joined the range of taught disciplines, but in essence we can certainly claim that the modern humanities grew out of their medieval roots, especially because of the emphasis on disciplined thinking and refined writing/speaking in a logical and coherent fashion.

Similarly, the modern university, at least in the western world, is arguably the outcome of the rediscovery of the Middle Ages since the late eighteenth century and hence the introduction of the study of vernacular literature and culture as an academic discipline. Consequently, the modern humanities are not a field of investigation that has always been acknowledged as valid and legitimate, i.e., as relevant for society at large. Instead, the humanities as an academic discipline are the outgrowth of a long-term intellectual development, directly mirroring the results of the rise of western, democratic, and humanitarian systems.

One of the critical issues within the humanities, however, continues to be that graduates do not have easy access to the job market and need to adjust considerably to find their own niche of work once they have left the university. This does not mean, however, that they are seriously disadvantaged in contrast to graduates in the STEM field, as many statistics have clearly demonstrated (see, e.g., <https://luminare.prospectors.ac.uk/what-do-humanities-graduates-do>; <https://datausa.io/profile/cip/liberal-arts-humanities>; both last accessed on July 4, 2023).

Ironically, if not tragically, the public commonly misunderstands the entire institution of the university and equates it with a vocational training facility where knowledge is acquired in a mechanical or technical fashion so that it can be applied directly in the field of medicine, chemistry, blacksmithing, or optics. Granted, students with a major in architecture, engineering, the law, or medicine seem to match the general expectations very well, whereas all the others, including majors in psychology, anthropology, history, languages and literatures, the visual and auditory arts, communication, sociology, etc., and also mathematics and geometry represent an intellectual and social, if not even an economic, puzzle. Addressing the relevance of the Middle Ages as an academic discipline hence forces us to explore the much larger issue pertaining to the relevance of the humanities per se, continuing with the discourse that scholars have pursued already for a long time.

However, we currently face, globally, so it seems, an increasing challenge not only to some specific disciplines that are regarded as irrelevant, anachronistic, or even dangerous for society, or as a luxury which society no longer wants to or can afford, but also to the humanities at large. The growing divide between STEM and the humanities, above all, constitutes a critical break with the academy as a unified institution of higher learning. Moreover, the public, the government, university administrations, and industry have taken on a rather negative view of the University at large and of the humanities in particular since it is a field of intellectual endeavor that does not produce money up front and seems to cost society valuable resources.

By contrast, researchers in the STEM field bring in money through huge grants and work on the practical application, so it seems, of their learning (for critical responses, see Nussbaum 2012; Collini 2012; and now especially Gumbrecht 2015). This large issue is beyond the purpose of this paper; instead, the focus will be on the question of how we can explain the meaning and relevance of the Middle Ages for the public, the administration, the politicians, and also students as an area of research and teaching, a topic which has been addressed by a number of recent scholars (Aldama 2008; Drees 2021; Classen, Humanities, 2022), in both the worlds of literature and history, among other disciplines (Boldizsár

Simon and Deile 2021; Albin, Erler, O'Donnell, Paul, and Rowe, ed., 2019; Kostick, Jones, and Oschema, ed., 2020; Classen, *The Relevance*, 2020; Drews, Müller, and Toepfer, ed. 2021; Tracy 2022. For reflections on St. Augustine and his messages for us today, see O'Donnell N.D.). For some, medieval literature might be too arcane to be recognized as a serious study subject; for others, it seems too playful to be recognized as legitimately academic. Is it hence a luxury only some opulent societies are willing to accept as significant for their purposes? Or is there more meaning and relevance to it than the common opinion assumes? In fact, most of the burning issues concerning us today, whether gender fluidity, queerness, climate change, violence of all kinds, racism, etc., find vivid expression already in the pre-modern era, and the close reading of some medieval texts often opens significant perspectives regarding a better understanding or handling of those issues (See now, for instance, the contributions to LaFleur, Raskolnikov, and Klosowska, eds., 2021).

But there is the well-known danger that we address the proverbial choir and appeal only to our own colleagues to stay true to their commitment as intellectuals and teachers. What we really need are critical concepts about the fundamental necessity of studying art, history, philosophy, or medicine from the Middle Ages for our modern comprehension of reality or our life conditions. We require convincing and *yet also* complex arguments in favor of the humanities and the historical dimensions entailed by them. However, this paper does not attempt to explain the relevance of literature or philosophy in general, which might be impossible at any rate, especially in our electronic and digital world where only data and data analysis seem to matter (Gumbrecht, 2015). It is simply a given, especially for the subsequent reflections, that we, as human beings, are both material and intellectual/spiritual, and that we hence accept the great need of education for all individuals to handle even the most ordinary challenges in our lives. The debate sets in as soon as we reflect upon what education might consist of, what topics need to be covered, what languages have to be learned, what disciplines are to be treated as relevant, and how much we would accept the past world as a foundational rock for all our modern and future endeavors.

The Middle Ages For Us Today

Before we proceed to the next step of our investigation, however, we need to acknowledge that there is nothing intrinsic to that cultural period commonly identified as the Middle Ages that would make it essential as a study object for our generation today. We could argue just as well that antiquity or the Baroque are crucial periods that deserve to be examined by our students for the benefit of their broadly conceived advanced education. Or we could focus on the age of Enlightenment or the epoch of Realism in the late nineteenth century.

Of course, today we admire the Gothic cathedrals greatly, we marvel at the fantastic works by the anonymous poet of the Old English *Beowulf* (ca. 750) and by Geoffrey Chaucer (d. 1400); we pay deep respect to Marie de France (ca. 1160–1200), Hartmann von Aue (ca. 1170–1200), Wolfram von Eschenbach (ca. 1190–1220), or Don Juan Manuel (1282–1348) and Juan Ruiz (ca. 1283–ca. 1350); or we greatly cherish any of the many Old Norse sagas, here limiting ourselves to the medieval European framework. But similar observations also pertain to the medieval cultures in the other continents, whether we think of the kingdom of Mali or the Chinese empire. Anyone who wants to claim to be well educated in the western humanities ought to have studied Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), Petrarch (1304–1374), and Boccaccio (1315–1375). Similarly, both Johann Tepl (ca. 1370–ca. 1420) and Christine de Pizan (ca. 1364–ca. 1430) belong to the fundamental canon of literary master poets as well because they offer profound messages about crucial issues in human life, such as the gender relationship and the notion of death and life. Of course, we should also investigate world literature and incorporate masterpieces from other cultures, which can also offer important insights for students in the West. Comparative work can only be welcomed.

Hence, what would really matter for our students, colleagues, administrators, and government officials, and why would that be? The study of the Middle Ages might not enjoy a privileged status any longer, and yet we could all easily agree that those ca. thousand years of cultural, historical, religious, and artistic developments matter critically for us today as a kind of bedrock of our society and civilization against which we have to measure ourselves constantly, especially in ethical, moral, and spiritual terms. After

all, the western world as we know it today grew out of those roots, and medieval culture continues to be present everywhere in physical and spiritual forms. What the Middle Ages really were, however, seems to be a matter of debate, negotiations, and discursive reflections, as the vast body of contemporary research indicates (Albin, Erler, *et al.* 2019). Undoubtedly, we also need to think in more global terms, as recent research has rightly emphasized, but for my purposes here I limit myself to the western culture, although the same issues would certainly be of relevance in other parts of the world. After all, no one can avoid the question regarding the relevance of one's own history and deep culture.

The Middle Ages and Modernity

We do not live in an independent world today free from any influences coming from the past. On the contrary, as countless historians have already noted, the present is the result of past events, and in order to move forward toward the future, there is no alternative but to be fully cognizant of the sources, the roots of our existence. Ernst Robert Curtius had already famously traced the contact links and traces between antiquity and modernity (*tropes and topoi*) (2022; orig. 1948) and countless researchers following him have confirmed the huge impact that the medieval world has had on our own. The contributors to a recent volume edited by the contributions to Saltzman and Perry (2022) engage with intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt, Erich Auerbach, W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Erwin Panofsky, and Simone Weil, and suggest that the Middle Ages continue to be of great intellectual relevance for modern thought. The online book description says: "This interdisciplinary collection gives us a fuller and clearer sense of how these figures made some of their most enduring contributions with medieval culture in mind. Thinking of the Medieval is a timely reminder of just how vital the Middle Ages have been in shaping modern thought."

This is not to belittle or to dismiss, for instance, the century of the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter Reformation, or the huge role which the Baroque has played, even for us today. But there is little doubt that the Middle Ages all by themselves and through the highly fertile process of reception since the late eighteenth century and especially the period of Romanticism have exerted a deep and

lasting influence on us today, whether in terms of our values and ideals, the political process (democracy as the response to feudalism), spirituality, or even with respect to rationality as the guiding principle of intellectual life (Classen, "Self-Control," 2022).

Much of modern critical theory, above all, is intimately predicated on medieval concepts of epistemology, whether we think of scholasticism or beyond (Holsinger 2005; Labbie 2006). For a good illustration of the four levels of interpretation, or hermeneutics, here applied most famously to Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and outlined by the poet in his famous letter to Cangrande (<https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/cangrande.english.html>; see also <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hermeneutics-principles-of-biblical-interpretation>; <https://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/dante2.htm#:~:text=There%2C%20he%20reflected%20the%20traditional,the%20moral%2C%20and%20the%20anagogical>; cf. also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_senses_of_Scripture; all last accessed on Nov. 8, 2022).

Many times, specific events or developments in the pre-modern world set the stage for conflicts or problems today. We can, for instance, trace the earliest efforts by Christians to engage with Muslims back to the high Middle Ages; the history of conflicts and exchanges between Jews and Christians erupted at the latest since the thirteenth century, or was already a severe conflict in the earliest Middle Ages, such as in Visigothic Spain; the exploration of mystical experiences was deeply embedded in medieval culture (Hildegard of Bingen); women's struggle for their own agency and independence began in the ninth century (Hrotsvit of Gandersheim); feminism originated in the works of Christine de Pizan, and our entire system of polite society is predicated on the courtly principles. If we search for a solid philosophy regarding the notion of happiness in a secular context, we only need to return to the teachings by Boethius in his *Consolation of Philosophy* (ca. 524). This treatise became the bedrock of all advanced teaching throughout the entire Middle Ages and well into the eighteenth century, if not beyond. Philosophy teaches Boethius how to understand the role of Fortune and how to distinguish between false and true happiness. The applicability of the insights provided here to our own existence is self-evident.

Medieval Myths

Unfortunately, contemporary culture, being mostly ignorant about the Middle Ages, has strongly fostered numerous myths about that world, whether that it was a "dark age", that husbands employed chastity belts for their wives when they had to be away on journeys, that the world was considered to be flat like a plate, that witchcraft was a typical medieval phenomenon, and that the Catholic Church ruled supreme and never faced any opposition (Classen 2007; Harris and Grigsby 2008; Albin, Andrew, Erler, *et al.* 2019; cf. the contributions to Harris and Grigsby 2008). It is simply easy to embrace a binary worldview and to stereotype the past in negative light, as if the present would truly be able to stand out as superior in ethics, morality, virtues, philosophy, and the arts.

At the same time, the public has fully embraced the Middle Ages as an essential historical, military, political, and cultural reference point, such as when there is talk about a draw bridge, a tower, a moat, etc., in concrete and in metaphorical terms. When we feel besieged, we think of the medieval castle; when we dream of chivalrous ideals, the medieval court emerges in our mind; when we reflect on epidemics and massive deaths, the Black Death immediately assumes center position. Who would not be familiar with the ideal of the shining knight who rescues a damsel in distress? Who would not have heard of King Arthur, or Emperor Charlemagne? Similarly, the struggles by Robin Hood against corruption, repression, exploitation, and political abuse are very popular themes. Even the concept of liberty and the fight against a tyrant goes back to the Middle Ages (e.g., John of Salisbury, Marsilius of Padua), as best represented in popular culture by the mythical images of the 'evil king.' When we laugh about a fool or a jester who actually exposes our own shortcomings and failures, then the stories of the Low German character Till Eulenspiegel (first printed in 1510, but the original was composed sometime in the fourteenth century) still come to our mind and prove to be highly effective.

Little wonder that the famous sketch comedy TV show *Monty Python* achieved such success since it first aired in 1969 because their creators, Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin drew from and

predicated their major narratives on the Middle Ages, as their subsequent movies then also illustrated (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monty_Python). Both children's literature and mystery stories (Dan Brown's novels), and both famous Umberto Eco's *Il nome di rosa* (1980) and J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1937–1949) have deeply influenced modern culture, which seems to be essentially determined by the Middle Ages, as many scholars have already confirmed pointing toward the world of modern films with medieval themes (Harty 1999; Masters 2022). The symbolic object of the sword regularly reappears in contemporary rhetoric, such as the identification of vaccinations as a "sword" in the fight against the Covid epidemic (see, for instance, <https://www.kcibi.org/praise-is-our-greatest-weapon/>; or the comment by the German federal minister of health, Karl-Josef Laumann in a speech on Dec. 2, 2019, <https://www.land.nrw/pressemitteilung/minister-laumann-unser-schaerfstes-schwert-droht-stumpf-zu-werden>; both last accessed on Nov. 6, 2022).

Beyond that, there is a worldwide obsession with swords as brilliant weapons from the past that continue to be associated with the famous Arthurian sword, Excalibur. Swordsmanship, production of swords, training for the fight with swords, and other military and technical aspects would have to be considered in that context. In other words, the Middle Ages continue to be extremely influential on us because the modern public tends to equate that world with honor, bravery, knighthood, masculinity, courage, and physical skills demonstrated at least by members of the aristocracy according to medieval documents and poems.

Of course, the very opposite is also true in some quarters of medieval research, i.e., the identification of the pre-modern world with barbarity, primitivism, brutality, injustice, and intolerance (Niremberg 1996; cf. Smelyansky 2020). Medievalism is alive and well, and this both in terms of fantasy and playfulness, or in terms of serious re-enactments (see, e.g., the North American Society for Creative Anachronism), and this also in myth-making, surprisingly all over the world, whether in Germany or Japan, Great Britain or China.

In light of these facts, we might wonder why then the academic study of the Middle Ages is not doing so well. At least in the context of North American

universities, one could no longer responsibly recommend a graduate student to try to pursue a degree as a medievalist unless s/he is truly passionate about it and willing to take the risk of not being able to teach in the narrow field of his or her research. The academic field of medieval studies is not yet lost, but it seems to be in a crisis, and every effort to explain its relevance today can only be welcomed, even at the risk of preaching to the choir, perhaps without reaching the powerful university administrators and government officials.

Addressing the Middle Ages as such, however, contributes to the essential debate on the value of literature at large and the relevance of the humanities, certainly a most valuable enterprise, pursued through a medieval lens. If enough of our students embrace the concept that the pre-modern world has much to tell us and proves to be profitable for us, then the public and the administrators have to listen to them, which subsequently strengthens our position.

Practical Investigations and Theoretical Reflections

Anyone turning to documents produced in earlier periods faces the tremendous opportunity of encountering relevant voices that have important messages to relay to us today. Wisdom, for instance, however defined, is a global concept and matters to everyone throughout time in all cultures. Many medieval poets writing in Latin, French, German, Spanish, or Italian apparently formulated profound insights that continue to appeal to many of us today. In fact, historical perspectives often make it easier for us to explore critical issues in different light, which then can illuminate us in rather unexpected and refreshing manners (Olson 1995; Kekes 1997; Celano 2016; Classen, *Wisdom*, 2022). Most of the issues troubling our society today can be traced back to earlier periods, and the responses by previous intellectuals thus promise to provide us with a range of important perspectives.

Both gender conflicts and religious confrontations, political tensions and problems with the natural environment, even medical and scientific issues as they emerge today find parallels in the past, whether we think of Covid or the Black Death, whether we explore the topic of gay marriage or abortion; transgender issues and racism certainly

go back to the Middle Ages, even though the historical and cultural time frame has changed dramatically ever since (Whitaker 2019; Hsy 2021; both representing strong leftist perspectives; again, see the contributions to LaFleur, Raskolnikov, and Kłosowska 2021; cf. now Classen 2023).

Toleration and Tolerance in the Middle Ages

For the present purpose, I am choosing the topics of toleration and tolerance as they slowly but certainly developed in the Middle Ages, well before the age of Enlightenment. If we accept their relevance universally, then we must also acknowledge the roots of this new philosophical-ethical concept since we are their direct heirs. Toleration implies that an individual acknowledges others despite differences in faith, culture, or ideology, but still assumes to be superior and 'correct.' Toleration represents the next step in which an individual embraces otherness as interesting, perhaps valuable alternatives without abandoning one's own faith or ideals, that is, one's identity. If we can identify literary texts, for instance, in which we can recognize specific elements of open-mindedness and mutual respect, then we have available important arguments justifying the study of medieval literature once again, and now by means of critical theory, for instance.

Fortunately, the larger issue has already been dealt with at length, so here I only need to pick up a few examples to illustrate how they contribute to the value of medieval studies Classen 2018; paperback, 2021; Classen 2020; cf. also the contributions to Dunne and Gottlöber 2022.

Classen 2018; paperback, 2021; cf. also the contributions to Dunne and Gottlöber 2022). To remind us briefly, Wolfram von Eschenbach, in his Grail romance *Parzival* (ca. 1205), projected the possibility of a Christian knight, Gahmuret, the father of the future protagonist Parzival, fighting in the service of a mighty Muslim ruler in Baghdad and receiving highest accolades after his death. Gahmuret also falls in love with a black queen and has a child with her, although he leaves her because he desires manly accomplishments more than marital bliss. The anonymous author of the huge but fragmentary *Reinfried von Braunschweig* (ca. 1280) imagines the possibility that the eponymous Christian hero realizes that he cannot force anyone to convert to Christianity, so he abandons all of his

intentions with the defeated Persian prince and rather strikes a friendship with him, whereupon both tour the Persian empire to marvel at the many "wonders."

The didactic poet Freidank formulated numerous epigrams (ca. 1240–1260) in which he acknowledged that all three world religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, were God's children. Boccaccio, in his famous *Decameron* (ca. 1350) included three stories that are predicated on the notion of toleration and then even tolerance, with the third story told on the first day later becoming the source for famous Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* (1779), where tolerance gains the clearest expression in the history of western literature yet. And in the ninth story told on the tenth day, we observe a close friendship and mutual respect between the Sultan Saladin and a Pavian Christian merchant, with the religious differences not playing any role any longer. And the Mallorcan philosopher Ramon Llull (ca. 1232–ca. 1315) developed in his dialogue treatise *Llibre del gentil e dels tres savis* (ca. 1270) a first major philosophical platform for the representatives of all major religions to come together, to debate their own faith, and to acknowledge the validity of the other religious beliefs. Beyond that, the late Middle Ages (Nicholas of Cusa) and the early modern age (Sebastian Franck, Valentin Weigel) witnessed ever new voices speaking up in favor of irenic principles and early forms of toleration and then tolerance.

We realize, in other words, that the critical debate about the harmonious cohabitation of people from different races, religions, and languages, as it originated already in the Middle Ages, appears to carry direct relevance for modern students. As much as Islam was a truly profound challenge to medieval (and modern) Christianity, already medieval thinkers, poets, and artists endeavored to build bridges and to reach out to the other side (Paravicini Bagliani, ed. 2020; Roth, ed. 2023).

By the same token, of course, intolerance was rather the norm within the Christian (and Muslim) pre-modern (and modern) world. The critical issue here is not to whitewash the Middle Ages as an ideal period in contrast to our time, far from it. However, in terms of teaching or defending that culture as valuable for our consideration today it behooves us to discuss the variety of voices within the public discourse and

to abstain from the post-modern arrogance that might suggest that everything is better today than in the past.

Similarly, exploring feminism or gender with all the inherent conflicts and tensions could be a typical medieval research project for students, especially if we think of important female voices such as Hildegard of Bingen, Marie de France, Christine de Pizan, Margery Kempe, or Marguerite de Navarre. Issues such as identity, authorship, agency, empowerment, mysticism, and spirituality hence immediately enter the discourse. Research has already investigated many of those writers and has demonstrated in many different scholarly efforts that the entire discourse on gender was already much present in the contemporaries' minds, especially if we consider the heated debate ("Querelle") about women's equality as expounded by Christine de Pizan (1364–ca. 1430), Alvaro de Luna (ca. 1388–1453), and Argula von Grumbach (1492–1545 or 1557).

Here I refrain from discussing the many excellent studies dedicated to this topic in the assumption that the few names of medieval women authors mentioned above signal already clearly enough how much we have learned over the last half century and more in that regard (see now the latest volume edited by Loveridge, McAvoy, Niebrzydowski, and Price, ed., 2023).

Courtly Love – also for us?

Since the early twelfth century, *troubadour* and *troubairitz* poets in southern France (Provence), then *trouvère* poets in northern France, *Minnesänger* in Germany, and poets of the school of the *dolce stil nuovo* explored the vast and highly intricate domain of courtly love. While in most cases they focused on the issue of unrequited love, hence elaborated on the phenomenon of emotional suffering and longing, there were also many cases of other types of love relationships dealt with, such as the meeting of lovers during the night who then have to leave in the early morning (*alba*, *aube*, or *tageliet*). More violent forms of erotic encounters were dealt with in the so-called *pastourella*, and many times, we encounter love poems in which the male and the female are engaged in intensive dialogues about the nature of their feelings for each other (*tenso*, *Wechsel*).

Research has engaged with the topic of courtly love since the nineteenth century, discovering, for instance, countless examples of contradictions, dialectics, confrontations, and conflicts, as best expressed in the famous treatise on courtly love, *De amore*, by the Parisian cleric Andreas Capellanus (ca. 1180/1190). Even though the later Middle Ages then witnessed a gradual transformation of this discourse, increasingly including the notion of marital love, throughout the fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth, and subsequent centuries the interest in the issue of love has never faded, whether we think of William Shakespeare or Johann Wolfgang Goethe. It would hence be absurd to draw strict line between anything – draw a strict line in the past and the current situation in literature because the issue of love has never disappeared (see, e.g., Ulla Hahn; cf. the introduction by Hübner, 2023). Courtly love was certainly unique in many ways, reflecting primarily the values and ideals of an aristocratic society. However, if we can justify the study of literature at all in global terms, then we simply have to incorporate the Middle Ages just as well because of the universality of the themes discussed already then. Medieval vernacular love poets contributed critically to the renewal of this topic, after a hiatus between late antiquity and the early Middle Ages – here disregarding the continuity of the erotic discourse within monastic cultures for the teaching of Latin – and they created the essential rungs on the ladder of love taking us to our own time. The experience of love has always been with us, while the critical understanding of this phenomenon has normally evaded our grasp; hence the great need for love poetry also, if not particularly from the Middle Ages.

Conclusion

It has become apparent that if we employ a smart teaching approach, drawing from universal concerns and ideals relevant for humanity at large, we are in a good position to identify the topic of medieval literature as refreshingly attractive and important also for the present student generation. The real issue is not dependent on the medieval component, but on the question of what literature per se would matter for modern readers, hence students and administrators. As long as the humanities are accepted as a relevant field of study at large, there is little doubt that the research and teaching of the Middle Ages will continue to be of importance.

I would like to round off these reflections first with two quotes from a statement provided by a US freshman who took an honors colloquium online with me in Fall of 2022 (email, Nov. 8, 2022), and then with two quotes from fellow students in the same group. In class we discussed the works of the South German (Swabian) poet Heinrich Kaufringer, and the course was provocatively entitled “Reflections on Life – The Late Medieval Poet Heinrich Kaufringer.” His verse narratives, which resemble in many ways the tales by Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales* (both composed around 1400), raise numerous intriguing questions about human justice versus divine justice, communication, marital life, honor, female agency, self-determination, and the use of rationality – as if they had been written in the twentieth century! The student had at first worried about the possible difficulty level of that course, but quickly changed her/his mind: “His stories are packed full of interesting characters and moral quandaries. And every work we have read has involved themes that remain relevant.” At the end, the student states, or rather asks –which is a great promise for the future of medieval studies –: “Now, I am curious about the work of other Medieval [sic] authors. Is Kaufringer’s writing typical of the period?”

The other student commented: “the study of the Middle Ages is very complimentary and enriching to scholars of all studies, especially those who seek to learn and understand the reasons behind human nature, our weaknesses, and our strengths individually and as a community. The Middle Ages give us a look into the past and the history of human culture. It helps us to think deeply and ask provoking questions.” And the third student opined: “The Middle Ages is a period that should be studied by all students because it gives an educative insight into the development that occurred in the following fields: art, languages, culture, and religion. I studied this period because it gave me a better understanding of how civilization started and how the middle ages [sic] are connected to the modern and how it did shape the modern world. The middle ages [sic] made me learn how moral values, cultural values and religious values were the order of that period which can’t be said of the modern.”

In a subsequent class at the University of Arizona (Spring 2023, in person), we studied, among many other texts, the Old High German balladic

poem “Hildebrandslied” (ca. 820 C.E.), and again, students responded with enthusiasm and agreed, for instance, that it carries relevance “because it discusses conflicts like war and lack of communication It refocuses the importance of miscommunication and the lack thereof.” Indeed, here we observe the catastrophic consequences of the military code of honor in the early Middle Ages, with an old father (Hildebrand) being forced to fight his son (Hadubrand), who does not recognize or acknowledge him. As another student stated, “The conflicts discussed in the song are still applicable today.” These opinions, shared by the other members of that class, confirm what I have argued already quite some time ago (Classen 2005).

In short, the study of medieval literature, history, or the arts, philosophy, music, medicine, and the sciences can indeed deeply appeal also to the current generation. Pursuing medieval studies is thus not at all a lost cause, as long as we remember that our class topics must be relevant insofar as the material reflects human life in all of its intricacies, problematics, and potentials. The historical perspective hence provides a medium for future orientation. We should not shy away from this challenge and take it on proactively both within our departments and colleges. If we diversify our educational programs and have graduate students take courses both in medieval studies and ecocriticism, or gender studies and medieval studies, for instance, they would be well qualified for the future academic job market. We are the direct heirs of the discourses from the past.

The opening line of Leslie Poles Hartley’s famous novel *The Go-Between* from 1953, “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there” (Hartley 1953), would perfectly apply to our reflections and ought to be embraced by any student who is invited to consider the Middle Ages as a topic of interest and relevance. The combination of alterity and familiarity makes medieval literature into a truly fascinating and valuable object of investigations.

All this might, of course, amount to a preaching to the choir, but the arguments developed here could easily be extended to all other cultural periods as relevant early stages for our current world, both East and West. The Humanities are not dead yet, at all. On the contrary, as the cases discussed here illustrate,

there are very good reasons to appreciate the older discourse on topics such as toleration, tolerance, and love as highly valuable topics of great relevance for us today. All my observations here were, of course, predicated on literary documents from the West, but the same conclusions could probably be drawn for the Eastern or Southern World as well. The past is an archive of all our human experiences, a treasure trove of utmost importance because it holds the key for our future. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to two anonymous reviewers and their valuable comments.

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