

MEDIEVALISM A MANIFESTO

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MEDIEVALISM A MANIFESTO

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Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Foreword	ix
Chapter 1: What's Love Got to Do with It? Our Middle Ages, Ourselves	1
Chapter 2: Don't Know Much about the Middle Ages? Towards Flat(ter) Futures of Engagement . . .	17
Chapter 3: Intervention One: Residual Medievalisms in Eastern Bavaria	39
Chapter 4: Intervention Two: Race and Medievalism at Atlanta's Rhodes Hall	53
Chapter 5: Intervention Three: Medievalism, Religion, and Temporality.	69
Chapter 6: Manifesto: Six (Not So) Little Medievalisms.	81
Further Reading	89

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. General Robert E. Lee saying goodbye to his soldiers before departing to sign the terms of surrender at Appomattox Courthouse.	59
Figure 2. A Soldier's Goodbye.	61
Figure 3. A Soldier's Welcome Home.	62
Figure 4. Cotton Harvest.	63

Foreword

This book* is called a *manifesto* because it has an unapologetically political objective. I want to help reform the way we think about and practise our academic engagement with medieval culture, and I will use my observations as a medievalist and medievalism-ist over the last twenty-five years to offer ways in which we might reconnect with the general public that has allowed us to become, since the late nineteenth century, a rather exclusive clan of specialists communicating mostly with each other.

Many considerations have played a role in my decision to address this subject: most importantly, my experience of going back and forth across the Atlantic and living, teaching, and writing within different cultural and educational contexts for the study of the Middle Ages. As a result, much of my scholarship shows traces of an identity anchored both in places, traditions, and rituals dating back to medieval culture and also in manifestations spatially, temporally, and politically removed from medieval culture. In addition, I believe my ideas relate to a larger set of questions currently asked by students, parents, journalists, politicians, and academic advisory boards about the relevance and value of

the humanities and social sciences in radically new contexts for knowledge production and reception.

I wanted to write a volume for *Past Imperfect* because this new series allows for a concise monograph written in a somewhat “edgy” style. In my last monograph, *Chaucer and the Discourse of German Philology* (2002), I managed to include as many paratextual features (footnotes, annotated bibliography, general bibliography, and so on) as actual scholarly narrative. It was the fruit of nine years of reading and research, and its audience, while appreciative, was rather small and comprised a few handfuls of colleagues worldwide also working in the reception history of Geoffrey Chaucer. Like *Chaucer and the Discourse of German Philology*, this new monograph also wants to speak to my colleagues, but to many more of them, and it wants to entice them to look beyond our traditional academic audiences in a variety of ways. I am grateful to Simon Forde and Ruth Kennedy, for launching *Past Imperfect* and for curating my volume into shape. The series itself is an excellent example of the kind of medievalism I propose.

Like every member of the academy, I could list a whole host of teachers, colleagues, and friends who have played a role in shaping my views on engaging with the Middle Ages. Among them, however, Kathleen Verduin (Hope College) and the late Leslie J. Workman (1927–2001) stand out as the two without whose personal and professional support I would not have been able to bridge my own pastist German philological roots with more presentist and often continuist Anglo-American academic approaches. Together with them, and the members of the international and interdisciplinary community of scholars they brought together in the International Society for the Study of Medievalism, I was not only

able to historicize the *longue durée* of the postmedieval reception of the Middle Ages, but also to situate my own place within this process.

* Portions of chapters 1 and 2 were presented as the plenary at the 50th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University in 2015 (later in part condensed into “Don’t Be Snobs, Medievalists” for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 4, 2016). Some shorter sections in chapter 1 were previously published as “‘Mes souvenirs sont peut-être reconstruits’: Medieval Studies, Medievalism, and the Scholarly and Popular Memories of the ‘Right of the Lord’s First Night,’” *Philologie im Netz* 31 (2005); sections of chapter 3 were previously presented at the 30th International Annual Conference on Medievalism (Washington & Jefferson College, 2015) and the 51st International Congress on Medieval Studies (2016); and sections of chapter 4 were previously presented at the 48th International Congress on Medieval Studies (2013). Finally, an earlier version of chapter 5, “Medievalism and the Subject of Religion,” was published in *Studies in Medievalism* 25 (2015). I would like to acknowledge all who commented on and enriched my conference papers, and I thank the editors and publishers for their permission to include previously published materials.