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Editors' Introduction: The Presence of the Medieval Past—Retellings and Social Value

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Abstract

This issue consists of two special clusters: “Retellings of Medieval Literature in the Classroom,” edited by Eva von Contzen and Sophia Philomena Wolf, and “The Social Value of Medieval Studies,” edited by Gregory Sadlek.

While this issue was in the making, we experienced the hottest summer ever. In parallel to the hot temperatures, or rather, caused by them, one natural disaster followed upon another, from wildland fires to incessant rain and extreme flooding in many regions of the world. While to many, the Covid-19 pandemic now feels like a nightmare from a long time ago, other threats are approaching fast, which question, with new urgency, how we have been living and treating our planet. Given the global scale and impact of these events, the ongoing concerns within our field, medieval studies, may seem negligible and insignificant. However, any discussion about the future of the planet inevitably also includes discussions about the many small futures that are at stake on other planes, below the planetary, including that of academia and its disciplines. This issue consists of two special clusters, both of which address the presence of the medieval past in the twenty-first century and its (social) value: how can the medieval be made relevant in the classroom; to what extent is the medieval (still) relevant on a social scale?

Our first special cluster, “Retellings of Medieval Literature in the Classroom,” edited by Eva von Contzen and Sophia Philomena Wolf, focuses on the manifold ways in which retellings of medieval texts can be useful entryways into engaging students with medieval literature. Recent years have seen a striking surge of retellings, including such works as Patience Agbabi’s *Telling Tales* (2014), which is based on *The Canterbury Tales*, and Maria Dahvana Headley’s retelling of *Beowulf*, *The Mere Wife* (2018), but of course there have always been retellings: works that are based on an existing story (or several stories, for instance in the Arthurian context) derived from the Middle Ages. The cluster features eight essays and an interview. The first three essays, by Anna Wilson, Mohamed Karim Dhouib, and Timothy Miller respectively, discuss different retellings of *The Canterbury Tales* as pedagogical tools for engaging students with Chaucer’s work in the classroom. Wilson introduces the fanfiction story “The Seconde Tale of the Wyf of Bathe” by Beth H as a contemporary retelling and makes a strong case for including fanfiction as a genre that is very modern and yet echoes medieval ways of collaborative and anonymous writing in the classroom. Miller’s example is the game-like, interactive novel *The Road to Canterbury* (2018) by Kate Heartfield, which is a challenging, yet rewarding experience of engaging with Chaucer’s tales. Dhouib’s contribution considers Zadie Smith’s retelling of the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, *The Wife of Willesden* (2021), as a rich and densely intertextual work that offers starting-points for a nuanced discussion of the ongoing relevance of many of the topics raised already in Chaucer, especially with respect to gender and the #MeToo debate.

Whereas the first three essays use the retellings to explore Chaucer, the four essays by Katherine Storm Hindley, Brendan O’Connell and Alexandra Colby, Sheila Coursey, and Sophia Philomena Wolf and Eva von Contzen use the category of “retelling” to introduce medieval texts into the classroom, with a special emphasis on students’ creative engagement with those texts. There is also a special emphasis on students’ creative engagement with the medieval texts. Hindley argues for the relevance of having students write their own retellings of medieval texts in a Singaporean teaching context, including *Sir Orfeo*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and *Sir Gowther*. O’Connell and Colby, a teacher and a student, offer their dialogic perspective on an assessment that combined a creative response with a critical commentary. Coursey discusses her experiences of teaching *The Castle of Perseverance*, which she puts in a fruitful dialogue with the 2015 Disney/Pixar film *Inside Out*. Both the medieval morality play and the

film bear striking similarities in terms of story-telling and creating immersion. Wolf and von Contzen introduce a class on medieval retellings they have taught in a German undergraduate context and discuss the role of creative writing and the difficult question of how to have the students engage with the source texts if they have little to no knowledge of medieval literature and languages.

The special cluster on “Retellings” is rounded off by two pieces that highlight the creative process of retelling. Malte Urban offers a polyphonic and densely intertextual dialogue based on, and engaging with, the various retellings he used in an undergraduate module called “ReMix: Chaucer in the Then and Now”. The issue is rounded off by an interview with the poet and performer Caroline Bergvall, who reflects on the role of retellings in her medieval-inspired works and the power of making the medieval available for a contemporary audience.¹

In many ways, all of the essays in the first special cluster demonstrate the ease with which medieval literature and contemporary questions can be connected. These connections can be continuities but also differences and divergences, which throw into sharper relief both that which is particular to medieval literary and socio-historical contexts and that which is modern or contemporary. The question of the literary canon looms large throughout: why do we read what we read; how do texts continue to be relevant today; by which forces and power structures?

The second cluster featured in this issue takes a broader perspective on the relevance of medieval studies more generally, focusing on its social value: edited by Gregory Sadlek, the six essays advocate for a strong presence of medieval studies in academia and beyond. In his introduction to the cluster, which sketches the wider contexts of the social value of medieval studies, Sadlek quotes the sociologist William Bruce Cameron: “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted” (1963, 13); as a public good, Sadlek argues, medieval studies is worth being funded because it “add[s] significant value, not only to the lives of individual students but also to society at large” (125).

Albrecht Classen, who opens the special cluster, writes about his experiences of teaching medieval German literature to Egyptian students as a test case of how reading medieval texts can be eye-opening with regard to timeless values and concerns. Two other contributions—one by Marion Turner, the other by David Raybin and Susanna Fein—invite us to think outside the box, taking medieval texts as their springboard: from NASA and technological advancements to the idea of love and the postmodern Americas, we can learn from looking at the present through past texts and contexts. Andrew Lynch and Julia Costa Lopez direct our attention to Australia and international relations respectively. Taking the UK project *Refugee Tales* as his springboard, Lynch reflects on the links between Indigenous Australians’ refugee stories and *The Canterbury Tales*, a dialogue which can give voice to previously silenced or suppressed stories. Costa Lopez emphasizes the centrality of ‘the medieval’ for contemporary politics because medieval studies can give new impetus, for instance, to debates on community and identity formation. Last but not least, Claude Fagnen, former Finistère departmental Archives Director, reflects on the role of archives as keepers of memory beyond the present moment.

¹ The editors would like to thank Kazim Ali (UC San Diego), co-founder of Nightboat Books, for establishing contact with Caroline Bergvall.

Taken together, the two special clusters demonstrate the ongoing relevance of the medieval: like a burning lens, it allows us to see and understand more clearly the challenges and chances of our own time.

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