Making Medieval History in ‘Modern’ America

AS.100.446 & AS.100.636

Spring 2023
Brody Learning Commons (BLC) 4040 | Tuesdays 1:30-4pm

Prof. Anne E. Lester
Office Hours: 2-3:30pm; and by appointment
Gilman 322 | alester5@jhu.edu

“One is then just one science of men in time. It requires us to join the study of the dead and of the living. What shall we call it?” – Marc Block, The Historian’s Craft, 47

Course Description

This course examines the emergence and practice of medieval history as a field of study in the United States beginning in the nineteenth-century. We will address what the medieval past meant for the formation of the discipline of history in the US and how an imagined medieval past came to inform scholarly discourse, research approaches, methodologies, ideas about race and gender, legal and constitutional history, and the contours of nations states. The narrative of the medieval origins of nation-states will also be addressed and questioned as it developed over the course of the twentieth century. Students will do archival research in the JHU archives and in other published and unpublished source sets.

One of the key themes that we will take up and that runs through the course is how past moments and past politics came to shape the present study of history, specifically medieval history? Together we will look
for and chart threads of ideas and methodological genealogies as we follow the development and definition of medieval history meant specific in America, a place without a tangible European medieval history, archives, or aesthetic. We will address then, what medieval Europe and fantasies of the medieval European past meant in America at different moments, for different historians, and with different exigencies and pressures in mind. Each present moment demanded a different version of the Middle Ages and in turn historians crafted a different picture of the past, picking up on different pieces of evidence and asking, overtime, profound various questions of their sources. We will consider closely, what defines the specific nature of the scholarly work medievalists do in the US. For example, what does philology as a training and a practice mean? What of the role and idea of translation, both of (purchased) source materials, gifts and endowments, or the translation of texts from one language, place or idiom to another. How is the European Middle Ages related if at all to the political context and intellectual formation of modern America? In what ways has this dynamic persisted into the present?

**Goals and Objectives**

One of the key goals of this course is to think together about the ways that historical knowledge is created and to understand the context in which specific historical questions emerge and methods are generated to address them. By looking at the development of medieval history in modern America we will follow how the present presses into and shapes the past in turn, even as historians were ardently committed to having the past inform the present. To this end, we will consider closely the sets of research methods and tools established by medieval historian and we will talk about our own present day research methods.

*Other goals include:*

-- How to find answers to precise and pressing historical questions.
-- How to read sources in context, especially the context in which they were generated.
-- How to read primary texts closely and to consider the tools medievalists have developed to make sense of our sources.
-- Consider carefully how and under what conditions history is written, shaped, informed, expanded, and narrativized.
-- To engage in shared discussion and analysis of texts and ideas in seminar.
-- To hone your writing skills over the course of the semester.

**Assignments & Evaluations**

Every week you will be asked to engage with a series of readings. Some will be contextual, some are medieval texts, and some engage explicitly with the work of historians and their methods and thus we would say they are historiographical. You are asked, as you read each week, to consider how these different sorts of sources interact and inform one another; and to build connections from and about them in turn. To that end, although grades really should not be the focus of a course such as this, your performance in the course is based on a number of things:

1) **Class Participation** (40%) is a critical part of any seminar experience, especially so at the graduate and upper-division level. Engaged, lively, and open discussion that privilege the exchange of ideas and spirit of risk-taking and inventiveness is key. Please come to class prepared, with the readings in hand, and willing to take part in discussion.

Twice during the semester, you will **lead the discussion** of the weekly readings. For this you should prepare a 1-page document to share with the class that offers a roadmap of the key points you want to discuss,
identified several key passages and ideas; and poses at least 3-5 structuring questions which can lead us into discussion.

2) **Reading Notes & Questions** OR **Reading Response:** (5 are required and can overlap with presentation days). (35%) Each week you should plan to either turn in a 1-page document that reflects some of your thoughts, reflections, and notes on the readings as well as two key questions and 3-5 key terms. For 5 of the weeks during the semester, you must elaborate on these notes and write formal responses (ca. 1000 words). For the formal responses, sometimes, you may be led into discrete short research questions that you should drill down on. This is the treasure or truffle hunting of history. It is fun; dig in.

3) **Philology Exercise** (10%): Close reading of a source from among the JHU archives or other archival materials of your choice.

4) Option to watch four films throughout the semester. These are not required, but will shed additional light on how the Middle Ages was constructed and presented during this period. Reviews of the films would be welcome additions to your Dossiers.

5) **Final Dossier** of writing OR WordPress website (15%). Putting together the final dossier allows you to step back and consider the bigger picture and larger animating questions that have occupied you/us over the course of the semester. Consider what are the larger threads that tie your responses together? How my you impose or offer that and shape them into something more than their fragments? In what ways do other things, especially images and the aesthetic of the medieval play into this process of framing and of digging deep? You are strongly encouraged to use images as you put together your dossier both to deepen your reading and arguments, but also to consider the kinds of pauses and aesthetic choices you will use to frame your writing; evocations if you will. One component of the final dossier or website is a “Past in the Present” reflection. The medieval and medievalism is also very much about an aesthetic sense; making the past present. – I will circulate a detailed rubric for the Final Dossier in due course.

**Books for Purchase**

The following books have been ordered to the JHU Bookstore. This list is also compiled and visible on Amazon: [https://www.amazon.com/hz/wishlist/ls/3MP9YMNJYLF/ref=nav_wishlist_lists_2](https://www.amazon.com/hz/wishlist/ls/3MP9YMNJYLF/ref=nav_wishlist_lists_2)

You are welcome to acquire these books in any way that works for you.

**History: A Very Short Introduction**, John Arnold (Oxford UP)
**The History of the Kings of Britain** by Geoffrey of Monmouth (Paperback)
**The Song of Roland**, trans. by Robert Harrison (Paperback)
**The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology (Princeton Classics, 87)** by Ernst Kantorowicz, William Chester Jordan (Paperback)
**The History of William Marshal** by Nigel Bryant (Paperback)
**The Gawain Poet: Complete Works: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Patience, Cleanness, Pearl, Saint Erkenwald** by Marie Borroff
**The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages** by Geraldine Heng (Paperback)
**Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking (The Middle Ages Series)** by Cord J. Whitaker (Paperback)
**Weekly Reading & Meeting Schedule**

**Week 1:** (Jan 24): [Introductions to the course and its goals](#)

For the following week (Jan 31) be sure to read over the syllabus and choose at least two weeks for which you will lead discussion and write a response to the weekly reading topics. Since you may not get your first choices, be prepared to present in any of 3-4 weeks during the semester.

Take some time as well to look through the links in the Appendix to the syllabus (online version) and familiarize yourself with some of the tools that will help inform, deepen, and guide your reading and research in the course.

**Part I: Legacies and Learning**

**Week 2:** (Jan 31): [Medieval History Comes to America: A Short Introduction](#)


Read at least one bibliographical entry from: *Medieval Scholarship: Biographical Studies on the Formation of a Discipline*, ed. Damico and Zavadil (See Appendix – available online; we’ll assign these in class.) [10pp]

**Consider:** What is the longer history of the formation of medieval history and medieval studies as a discipline with the in US. What sorts of historical norms and practice were in place before ca. 1860 and how did that change? What (preliminarily), according to Rand and Coffman, is the creation of the MAA (Medieval Academy of America) responding to? Why found it in 1925? What was the perceived need there? What role did Hopkins play in that process? From your reading of one biography, what sorts of approaches did scholars bring to the study of the past; how would you characterized the methodology of your scholar? What do we mean by historical methodology? In what ways are some of these debates, especially about the role of the present in the past, still operative today, at the AHA in January, 2023?
Week 3: (Feb 7): “Modern America,” German Models & the Profession of History: The Case of Herbert Baxter Adams

*NB: I’ve put Ross and Menand in conversation. I am not sure what that would be like in real life, but fun to imagine it. Both seem very nice. The key question is what makes ‘modern’ America, or America ‘modern’ in the second half of the 19th C. We’ll lean into this question as we go.*


[PRACTICUM]: This meeting we will engage with the Baxter Adams Archive and begin to look for letters or pieces to transcribed.

**Consider:** How Ross and Menand agree or don’t and how they approach – essentially one of social and intellectual history – opens up a window into defining ‘modern’ America. ---- What were the innovations and new approaches of the German model imported into America? How did the importation, that is, the movement and exchange of ideas occur? Are there medieval analogies for the movement of people and ideas? ---- Bonnie Smith offers a stunning and important reading of the Seminar model and form, what should we learn from this? What else is being ‘taught’ and ‘disciplined’ in the all-white-all-male space of the Seminar? ---- And from Adams himself: How does Adams define historical methods? How can we best distill this as an approach? What is it grounded in?
**Week 4: (Feb 14): Hopkins History, Imagined Origins, and the ‘Modern’ Politics, 1870-1914**


**NB:** Do read this for the ways that Geoffrey is putting together a story, not for the details. You should be able to read quickly. He is unfolding a story of how different peoples come together during periods of violent change. I am not asking you to take extensive notes, nor to remember all the names and details, but consider the stakes of the meaning of the deep past in the twelfth century.


Lester | Spring 2023

Consider: Define and analyze the idea of Inheritance and genealogy that Vernon evokes. How does Monmouth use this in the 12th century; how does Adams construct this in the 19th C? What is the role of myth in the creation of an historical narrative? Try to identify a set of methods and commitments that lie behind the workings of both authors.

**Part II: Reshaping the Field: Between America and Europe**

---.


Carol Symes, “Harvest of Death: Johan Huizinga’s Critique of Medievalism,” in *Rereading Huizinga: Autumn of the Middle Ages, a Century Later*, ed. Peter Arnade, Martha Howell, and Anton van de Lem (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 229-244.
**Recommended:**


**[PRACTICUM]:** This meeting we will engage with the Baxter Adams Archive

**Consider:** In reading these selections from Charles Homer Haskins, consider how his ideas and conceptualizations changed over time. What role did WWI play in this formation. He was one of the American Scholars employed by Woodrow Wilson at the end of the war in the group known as the “Inquiry” to provide the analysis and information (as trained bureaucrats and administrators could) that lead to the 14 points and the Treaty of Versailles, which formally ended the war in 1919.

---

**Week 6: (Feb 28): Creole Medievalism: Multiple Meanings of Roland, A Case-Study**


OR

Watch: The Passion of Joan of Arc, directed Theodor Dreyer (1928)

Consider: What is the role of a national (medieval) epic? How did it function in the years between ca. 1870-1930? What does it mean that America does not have this? What does Roland mean to the French? Following on the discussions of nationhood before, at, and after Versailles, what are the stakes of philology as a study; an academic pursuit; an historical and critical methodology?

Charter of migration from the York immigrant project: https://www.englandsimmigrants.com/

Week 7: (March 7): Emigrés: The Example of Ernst Kantorowicz and the Impact of WWII


Consider: The impact of scholars who immigrated from Europe to the US between ca. 1933 and 1945 was tremendous and reshaped the US and intellectual life in the US and American academia in profound ways. What was Kantorowicz’s experience of this, of exile and eventual acceptance? Arguably, for a medievalist his works sits as close as one could come to the center of German power in 1939. How might that fact have shaped the questions he asks in the work that followed? What was it about power that interested him most?
Week 8: (March 14): The Second World War: Reconfigurations

NO CLASS Prof Lester is traveling – For Extra Credit/Interest you may Read ONE of the following clusters

Destruction of Munciple Buildings in Charters 29 May 1244 from allied bombing; Origen, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. Chartres, 12th century (2nd quarter). Chartres, Bibl. mun., ms. 54.

Recovery of Chartres Manuscripts: https://www.manuscrits-de-chartres.fr/en
The Lazarus Project: https://lazarusprojectimaging.com/Projects/Chartres
**United States:**


**Germany:**


**France:**


**Watch:** The Monuments Men (2008); it’s pretty terrible, but attempts to tell an important story.

**Consider:** What was being published in both the *AHR* and *Speculum* between 1939-1945? What conclusions do you draw from this?

---

*Inverted shield of William the Marshal (the incomparable knight) with obituary and epitaph portrayed by Matthew Paris.*

**Week 9:** (March 21): **SPRING BREAK! --- Enjoy!**
PART III: COLD WAR MEDIEVALISM

Possible tomb effigy of William Marshal in Temple Church, London, d. 1219

Week 10: (March 28): Specters Persist: Sidney Painter, Chivalry, Colonialism, & the F-Word


[PRACTICUM]: Painter’s archive at JHU

Consider: The mid-twentieth century was taken up by the idea of the feudal family and the relationship – imagined in many respects – of land and family. How does the family work in the History of William Marshal? What does it mean for Painter? We will consider the kinds of lectures and structures that Painter presented while teaching and training students here at Hopkins. What sorts of genealogies of knowledge were embedded in this and how did the play a role in the wider world, for example, according to either Shepard or Symes? Why does Brown think we need to jettison the word ‘feudalism’? What of ‘—isms’ in the past?
Marginal sketch on a copy of a truce made between King Edward of England and Philip of France at Tournai, 1296-7. Ref. E 368/69.m54.

**Week 11: (April 4): Joseph Strayer & the Work of the Modern State**


---, “Philip the Fair—A ‘Constitutional’ King,” *AHR* 62 (1956): 18-32


**[Practicum]** Look online at the manuscript of the *Medieval Origins* -- where in those notes for the prepared lectures do you find the beginnings of the book? How should we imagine Strayer’s methods here?

**Watch:** Becket (1964)

**Consider:** In what ways did Strayer’s work, interest and methods as an historian inform is work for the Board of Estimate and the modern US State? What did the ‘State’ mean to Strayer? How did he combine history and an idea of service in this work? Using the scans of his manuscript copy of *Medieval Origins*, consider carefully what his methods and thought process might have been. What were the conditions under which he wrote? What role does he see for the State in the state of the field?
Week 12: (April 11): Diversifying the Practice of the Past: Margins, the Grotesque, and a Turn Towards Difference

Read at least one from each section [A], [B], and [C]:


Consider: How and in what ways did the practice of medieval history change between 1980 to 2000? What were the concerns and methods driving these changes? Try to come up with a list or taxonomy of these issues and the ways they were addressed. Do you detect anxiety about this or is there a feeling of efflorescence and an opening out of medieval history? Is all change messy and contradictory, resisted even; or are there ways to shift our discipline and methodology that are agreeable? What is the dialectical process involved in producing change in the ways history is pursued. And to return to our first question: How is the late twentieth-century present apparent here in the practice of the past?
PART IV: PAST IN THE PRESENT: BRINGING RACE BACK

Week 13: (April 18): Racing the Middle Ages


OR


Watch: The Green Knight, 2021 (David Lowery)

Consider: You are not asked to read all of Heng’s book. It is a complicated book and Pearce points out its flaws in important ways. Nevertheless, her book has made a tremendous impact: account for this and for the press of its argument. Using the text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* how were medieval fantasies of difference and otherness described, confronted and portrayed in the language and narrative arc of the poem? What else is at work in the attention modern historians have given to race as a term, a construction, a fantasy in the past and present? How is Iberia exceptional?
Week 14: (April 25): Medieval Studies between Black and White & the Future of Learning Communities


OR

Consider: In some respects, we have come full circle to consider the ways that the history profession, at its origins, came to define and delineate certain terms, ideas, and genealogies of thought and method that still haunt us today. What is the argument of Whitaker’s book? How is philology, or rather, shimmering philology, defined and useful to him and to Warren, who coined the term? And how could we in the present best deal with and address the legacies the past? What new forms of knowledge creation might best address this and move us into a different world? What might be the role of memory, of haunting fragments and materials, or of digital pathways in that process?

May 2nd – Final meeting at the Walters Art Museum in lieu of a Final Exam
Final Dossiers should be submitted by 5pm.
APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL TOOLS AND RESOURCES

Related Texts and Volumes that Will be of Use:


*Rewriting the Middle Ages in the Twentieth Century*, ed. J. Aurell and F. Crosas (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005). – Bibliographical overviews and commentaries


John Van Engen, (ed.), *The Past and Future of Medieval Studies* (Notre Dame, IN, 1994)