"Whose Middle Ages? Identity, Otherness, and Openness in Medieval Studies."

Introduction: Medieval Studies in a time of alt-right and white supremacism

Like so many other fields, medieval studies in the Anglophone world and in Europe needs more diversity within its own institutions, and like everyone else in the humanities, medievalists have in recent years intensified their self-scrutiny, in order to define and eradicate exclusionary practices within the discipline.

But medievalists are facing a particular contemporary challenge because the Middle Ages is often appropriated for political and cultural purposes, most recently by white supremacists. Medieval chivalric and military insignia are used as cultural props for militaristic white nationalism; European and especially history in the Anglophone world is assumed to be white (never mind the role of early African and Middle Eastern thinkers such as St Augustine, a Numidian of mixed African and Roman parentage, in the doctrinal foundations of medieval Christendom, or the Muslim communities of medieval Europe). Desires for early medieval England to be peopled solely by Anglo-Saxons pure in genes and tongue are strong, and pay no heed to the major role of England’s immigrants and its multiculturalism in English history (see e.g. England’s Immigrants http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/englands-immigrants-1330-1550/). So too beliefs in an originary ‘pure’ English language as the rightful property of white people flies in the face of medieval England’s multilingualism (a point made among many others in the 2017 Mullarkey Forum on ‘Linguistic Diversity in English’). There is a Medievalists of Color website at https://medievalistsofcolor.com/ where matters within and external to the profession are now being given airing as public discourse with discussion blogs and information.

Medievalists are therefore reaching out wherever they can to correct these cultural myths: a good example is The Public Medievalist, edited by Paul B. Sturtevant, an American graduate of the University of York, UK; this web site, available on free subscription, publishes short articles by scholars in highly accessible style (it has series on race and on gender and sexism, and may be useful for your students): https://www.publicmedievalist.com/ There is a Medievalists of Color website at https://medievalistsofcolor.com/ where matters within and external to the profession are now being given airing as public discourse with discussion blogs and information.

Some Fordham medievalists are responding to these issues with a project called Whose Middle Ages?

Mary Erler and Andrew Albin spoke ex tempore at the Forum about this project and what has led to it. Andrew outlined the construction of European whiteness as a new narrative needed by colonialism. Shifting from nineteenth-century national origin stories to a pan-European whiteness, this was constructed just as the fields of future Medieval Studies began to emerge: a problematic origin for the discipline. Anglo-American traditions reinforced this whiteness and the European Middle Ages began to be imagined as specifically pan-white. Citing Tolkien’s representation of races in The Lord of the Rings, he noted that the orcs in the book and the film are racially marked: enemies are often perceived as Eastern and darker-skinned. He pointed out that students absorb the Middle Ages through popular culture and raised the question of what entry points they have into the Middle Ages that might enable
them to have new narratives of the Middle Ages, especially needed, in the light of Charlottesville, by young white male students,

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They have sent this account of their project:

Andrew Albin and Mary Erler reported on their collaboration (with other Fordham faculty including Tom O'Donnell of English) on a collection of essays to be titled *Whose Middle Ages? A Reader*.

In September 2017, partly in response to the events in Charlottesville, we began putting together a collection of essays. Our idea was to start from various flashpoints in popular culture regarding the middle ages and to commission around twenty short essays dealing with current misunderstandings of this period. These misunderstandings, many of them politically influential, have recently become so widespread that it seemed useful to assemble various corrective views discussed in the academy, but not so widely disseminated.

We planned a short, small volume which could be used in classroom teaching, mainly as a supplementary text. Its audience would be students whose knowledge of the middle ages came mostly from popular culture--the media, received wisdom, or myths of national origin. Its ten-page essays would not include notes, just a few suggestions for further reading. (Our model was Oxford’s *A Short History of _______*. The book’s small size would make it possible to price it inexpensively.

The authors we invited responded with enthusiasm for what they saw as a needed project. The contributors come from Australia and England, as well as the U.S., and we are hoping for international sales. The book has been accepted by Fordham University Press, to be published in their Medieval Studies series, and we hope to see copies in 2019.