

# Introduction: The Medieval in the Modern World

## Simone Celine Marshall

The articles presented here attest to how the field of medieval studies is continually evolving, in particular encompassing how the medieval interrelates with the modern world. We see this development in multiple ways in these articles, which is an important feature: there is no single ‘right’ direction for medieval studies, but rather a plethora of possible avenues that intertwine and connect. This commonality-in-diversity is a feature to embrace and will no doubt ensure the continued success of the field in scholarly circles, and, one hopes, with the wider public.

Humanities research remains something of an unknown enterprise to many in the public, due, in some part, to limited media interest. There are pockets of success: law, politics, and sociology specialists are frequently called upon to offer expert opinions on contemporary concerns. Less so, specialists in medieval studies. The effort to explain to the wider world how medieval studies remains a relevant and vital part of research ought to be one of the goals of all researchers in the field. After all, we ourselves are able to instantly comprehend the relevance, and so it behoves us to explain this to others. Persuading mainstream media organisations that we have something to offer the public will remain an uphill battle, but not an insurmountable one. Research such as that presented in this issue of *Literature & Aesthetics* goes some way to contributing to the on-going endeavour of bringing the medieval past to light.

In this issue of *Literature & Aesthetics*, our authors examine how the past remains a significant cultural influence on our present, and that to ignore this connection results in cultural illiteracy. As Albrecht Classen notes, “sometimes the most popular or important texts from the past are simply unknown to most of us today,” and we are the worse for this. Understanding the process by which our cultural identity is shaped and created ultimately leads to a better society. In the first article in this issue Simone Celine Marshall offers a comparison between Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* and the mystical writings of the sixth-century philosopher Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, because such a comparison brings to the fore the need to acknowledge the human spiritual condition as part of social identity. Recognising that writers many centuries apart grappled with the same concerns and problems about the human condition acknowledges how important this is to the nature of humanity.

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Janet Wilson continues attention on the works of Virginia Woolf, this time in comparison with the works of Katherine Mansfield. Wilson highlights that both writers drew on medieval concepts of nature personified, but did so in different ways and for different ends. The article concludes by examining both writers' handling of the modernist trope of the mystical epiphany, inspired by landscape settings and natural or man-made forces. It asks how much these moments of illumination, wonder and heightened consciousness – whether suggestive of transcendence, healing, and psychic renewal, or of disillusionment and withdrawal – differentiate their literary modernisms.

Considering attitudes to disability offers another point of comparison between the Middle Ages and today. Much research has been conducted in this newly-emerging field, such as the mental illness of Thomas Hoccleve, and examinations of deformity and monstrosity. Here, Graeme Watts examines the life of Teresa de Cartagena, a fifteenth-century Spanish nun who was profoundly deaf. Teresa appears to have considered her disability as a just punishment, retreating into isolation from the world, refusing to speak or engage with the world around her. This might seem an extreme position that bears no comparison today, but Watts notes “according to the World Health Organization (2011), an estimated one billion people in the world live with some form of disability, [and] some also accept the suggestion that their disability is connected with sin and punishment.” Teresa's experience of disability bears reflection, for how it highlights the slow process of change in social attitudes.

In Max Herford's article, we see another angle on how the medieval influences the modern world. In this instance, it is the continued desire to appropriate medieval architecture, perhaps with a nostalgic sentiment. Herford examines the structure of the castle as an example of this sentiment. The purpose, ultimately, of the entertainment castle is to highlight the divide between fantasy and reality. Here, drawing on the past remains an important characteristic for enabling one to cope with the present.

Finally, this issue draws to a close with Albrecht Classen's new examination of the *Gesta Romanorum*. Classen underscores his investigation by emphasising the ethical, moral, religious, and social significance of this collection of texts, to highlight how important these features continue to be today. The *Gesta* brings to the fore the varied range of interests of medieval readers, rejecting the oversimplification of the medieval world often presented in contemporary public forums.

Classen's article reminds us of the complexity and sophistication of the medieval world, something that should not need to be reiterated, and yet constantly requires this. Along with the other articles in this issue, we are reminded of the importance that the medieval world continues to have in our contemporary societies, sometimes as a counterpoint to modern sensibilities, sometimes as a corollary.