

The New Middle Ages

Series Editor
Bonnie Wheeler
English & Medieval Studies
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, TX, USA

The New Middle Ages is a series dedicated to pluridisciplinary studies of medieval cultures, with particular emphasis on recuperating women's history and on feminist and gender analyses. This peer-reviewed series includes both scholarly monographs and essay collections.

More information about this series at
<http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/14239>

Matthew X. Vernon

The Black Middle Ages

Race and the Construction of the Middle Ages

palgrave
macmillan

Matthew X. Vernon
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA, USA

The New Middle Ages
ISBN 978-3-319-91088-8 ISBN 978-3-319-91089-5 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91089-5>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018942752

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2018

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors, and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover credit: Zoonar GmbH / Alamy Stock

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer International Publishing AG part of Springer Nature.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*To my family who lives the vernacular.
And to my family who gave me a light in the dark places, when all other
lights went out.*

PREFACE

ABOUT THE NATURE AND STRUCTURE OF THIS STUDY

Even at the level of lexicon there are clear difficulties with this project. This subject is literally hard to talk about. To paraphrase Twain, medieval and African-American studies can seem like two fields separated by a common language. What do we mean when we say “vernacular”? Are we discussing the vernaculars of thirteenth-century England or the multiplicity of registers in American English, including dialect and regional vocabularies? When we say “feudalism,” do we mean the baggy category meant to capture the economic and social relations of medieval peoples or is it meant as the equally fraught category for slave labor in a capitalist American context? Is “Anglo-Saxon” a cultural designation for a person who has not existed for nearly a thousand years or shorthand for a white American? Even deceptively straightforward terms like the lyric, race, and the literary tradition are revealed to be peculiar within each field and incommensurate with itself when scaffolded by a different scholarly apparatus. In constructing this book across two fields, I attempt to respect the intellectual context that allows each of these terms to be legible to scholars in their respective fields. While I do mean the unusual intersection of discourses in this book to provoke a broader conversation between the medieval and African-American studies, the reason for this intervention is practical. Many of the people under consideration in this book were trained before these disciplinary boundaries had solidified. As will be discussed in Chap. 2, several significant African-American writers read medieval texts or Sir Walter Scott and a few studied medieval languages. When they deployed terms like

“feudalism” or “romance” they did so with a deep understanding of the implications for putting African-American experiences into paradigms that were constructed to describe a wholly different historical period. Writers who did not have this training found explanatory power in the space created by the distance in-between applications of these terms in different contexts. For example, Gloria Naylor invites a discussion of the relationship between Chaucer’s “greet multitude of folk” and the boisterous language of the neighborhoods she imagines. Part of this book’s project is to begin to supplement the ways in which scholars of the Middle Ages and of African-American literature permit themselves to deploy terms that are fundamental to their fields so that they can imagine different boundaries for their inquiries. To bridge these fields, I will occasionally have to tread territory that is familiar to specialists in either medieval or nineteenth-century studies.

The breakdown between fields and time periods has prompted me to construct this book in a way that is different from most of contemporary scholarship. Although a significant amount of this book examines the origins of medieval studies within African-American scholarship and literature, it also looks outside of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter 5 and the Coda look at the afterlife of African-American perspectives on the Middle Ages. Although it is unusual to find work on the Middle Ages alongside that of far-flung periods, it is necessary to include it within the pages of this book. Part of the reason for this is the performative function these chapters serve. This book insists that what early African-American scholars and writers undertook when studying the Middle Ages or making use of medievalisms was not a mere curiosity to be studied at a remove. The invocation of the medieval or the desire to do philological work often had a component that transcended the object of study. As I argue throughout Chap. 2, the relevance of the Middle Ages redounded to fundamental questions about the construction of race, the production of social space within the nation, and the possibilities of a humanistic education.

I hope to use the shape of the book itself to advance a different set of logics than those of periodization and specialization. The danger inherent within studying the origin of medieval studies is to reify the social distinctions that African-American scholars sought to complicate by entering into areas of study that were simultaneously socially constructed as alien to them and essential to narratives of the nation. Much of the book will examine hybridity in the sense that Homi Bhabha uses the term to discuss

race, that is, as “cultures caught in the transitional and disjunctive temporalities of modernity.”¹ However, I will expand the assumed dynamics Bhabha proposes between modern and pre-modern temporalities by adding a temporal site that is negotiated by these African-American scholars as a means of claiming agency within temporal frames, rather than being “caught” within them.

Davis, CA

Matthew X. Vernon

¹Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 360.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I must thank Bonnie Wheeler, who has overseen a series rich with ambitious scholarship on medieval subjects. I am honored to have the opportunity to be included among the roster of scholars whose work has inspired me throughout my academic career. Without her, this book would surely be adrift.

Over the course of constructing this book I feared sharing the fate of Nick Carraway, that is, being a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none. Although I have made many missteps along the way, I have been fortunate enough to have many patient teachers who have tried to usher me ever upwards. Any mistakes in this book are my own.

I have the privilege of being a member of a department that is both intellectually stimulating and generous in its support. There is no department I would rather be part of. I would like to particularly thank John Marx, Desirée Martin, Scott Simmon, and Seeta Chaganti for their critical roles in welcoming me into the department and keeping me afloat. Above all, I owe a considerable debt of gratitude to Claire Waters whose brilliance and grace suffused the million acts of kindness she showed me while I was figuring out my place in academia. To properly thank her would take longer than the whole book. It suffices to say that I wish to one day be half the superhero she is.

I would like to single out Mark Jerng, Katherine Steele Brokaw, and Justin LeRoy for reading my manuscript at a critical point in its development and for encouraging me subsequently. Kristen Aldebol-Hazle and Margaret Miller were also instrumental in helping me edit my manuscript.

Alastair Minnis, Stephen Yale-Loehr, Susanne Wofford, Robert Stepto, and Robert Frank were pivotal in my intellectual development. They heard me out even though I had not yet figured out a vocabulary. Thank you for taking a chance on me.

Tom Hill deserves special thanks. Without him, none of this would have ever gotten started.

I would like to thank Grace Lo, Dan Gustafson, and Serena Klempin for reminding me where my treasure is. Thanks also to Quinn Javers, Matthew Stratton, Asa Mittman, Ann Zatsman, Britney Dann, Sophia Ioannou, Katie Peterson, Francis Vernon, Laura D'Amato-Contreras, Rosslyn D'Amato-Contreras, Lucia D'Amato-Contreras, and Cristina Biasetto. The next one is on me. And also Teddy.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction: Reading Out of Time—Genealogy, African-American Literature, and the Middle Ages	1
2	Medieval Self-Fashioning: The Middle Ages in African-American Scholarship and Curricula	45
3	Failed Knights and Broken Narratives: Mark Twain and Charles Chesnutt’s Black Romance	103
4	History, Genealogy, and Gerald of Wales: Medieval Theories of Ethnicity and Their Afterlives	159
5	Other Families: Dryden’s Theory of Congeniality in Dante, Chaucer, and Naylor	203
6	Coda: True and Imaginary History in <i>Django Unchained</i>	247
	Index	263