Editors' Introduction

Novelty

Jeffrey J. Cohen^a and Cary Howie^b

^aDepartment of English, George Washington University, Washington.

^bDepartment of Romance Languages, Cornell University, New York.

postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies (2011) 2, 239–241.
doi:10.1057/pmed.2011.12

Like most titles, 'New Critical Modes' presents a problem, as well as an opportunity. In fact, the phrase offers a series of problems, as well as a series of opportunities. Is novelty a good thing, especially for those of us who claim to be at least tangentially interested in the past? Is new criticism distinct from New Criticism and from those other new schools of thought loudly announced in recent decades (new philology and new historicism, to take but two examples), and much more quietly relinquished? And what, after all, is a critical mode? Is it to be understood as a kind of method or technique – a *modus operandi* – or, perhaps, as a kind of organizing, largely implicit esthetic system (think of musical modes) that would constrain yet enable experimentation? And what distance is there, really, between a mode and a mood, a flourish and a feeling?

We proposed a special issue of *postmedieval* on 'New Critical Modes' not so much because medieval studies lacks novelty, but because the field is positively crawling with it. Traditional journals and book series are the spine of the professional advancement process; nevertheless, they do not necessarily generate invention, experiment and play. (In fact, they are in many ways engineered to impede these very things. When was the last time you had an article turned down because it was insufficiently *playful*?) And yet, at the same time, some of the most interesting recent experiments in critical form have been enabled by a book series – Palgrave Macmillan's *The New Middle Ages* – whose commitment to organizing novelty around the medieval has allowed this journal, among other things, to take shape. With this special issue, we wanted to create a space where our contributors could embrace the risks and rewards of

novelty – by which we mean freshness, imaginativeness, a thing appropriate to its season, trifles or *nugae* or gewgaws perhaps, but also a kind of writing that is at once new and tradition-laden (novelty is intimate to the once pioneering genre known as the novel, via Latin *novellus*, *novus*). Novelties come from ice cream trucks in summer; they are sweet and for the moment. Yet they are also suffused with nostalgia, piquant with memory and beloved because they sensuously connect us to what was and what we wish had been. They make us think ahead *and* back. Novelty is an intransigent time-knot rather than a small piece of sudden holiday or a merely ephemeral future.

The idea for ‘New Critical Modes’ was born in the good company of a bottle of sauvignon blanc in Kalamazoo. It burgeoned through e-mail exchanges that became blog posts. The project was from the start gregarious: of and for flocks (and, inevitably, the occasional shepherd or wolf). We structured this collaboration as a communal experiment, a textual laboratory for intensifying creative strains within contemporary academic writing, even as we have tried not to lose sight of the precariousness of both creativity and community, both of them so easily taken for granted as objects of knowledge. (In other words, we have never really believed in the well-worn modernist imperative to make things new, even as we have never really abandoned our sense that things are always – *always* – in the process of being made new.) We therefore encouraged the resuscitation of outdated forms, experiments in voice, manipulations of genre and ruminations upon the possibilities yielded by new media. We wanted this issue of *post-medieval* to examine and embody some of the novelties (flavors of the week, even) that have been emerging among contemporary medievalists. Just as importantly, we *wanted* this issue. It was – and is – an object of no small desire.

Critics have too often been content to adopt the voice, citational practices, textual apparatuses, forms, forums and ambits of those who trained them, leading to a great deal of continuity in criticism published over the years. And this is not just a medievalist problem: think of how the disciplines of literary and cultural theory, in the wake of the deaths of so many founding fathers (Derrida, paradigmatically), have become downright manic in their search for some new daddy to whip his children into philosophical shape. (You may as well think, here, of Badiou.) Some of us, however, have been or have become restless with such means and models and genealogies, choosing to compose, frame and disseminate our work differently. This happens off-screen and under the radar, most of the time. In fact, it would be naive to presume that an issue of a peer-reviewed academic journal, published by a mainstream press and co-edited by two tenured university professors (much as it hurts to describe oneself along these lines), could give voice to the most radical gestures of experimentation. Nonetheless, this special issue examines the possibility – indeed, the possible actualities – of critical novelty, sometimes by analyzing it, most often by performing it. In fact, you could fairly accurately say that this issue is drawn to form, the heart of performance. It also takes seriously the importance of queer

friendships to new critical modes: whether we have met each other or not, whether we fundamentally agree or not, we have opened places of connection to one another through the past (and to the past through one another). To emphasize this even more strongly, our hearts – differently sexed, placed, eloquent, employed and able – are always on our sleeves. Where else would they be?

You will not find a road map for the essays that appear hereafter. (The hereafter is not an easy place to map, after all.) You will not find an overview of each contribution, nor an aerial survey of what geometric shape emerges into sharp focus when the heterogeneous pieces of 'New Critical Modes' are aligned. You will not find a new criticism. What this issue presents is, rather, a gathering. It has its aspirations, of course, as well as its solidarities. (It could not have happened without Eileen Joy and Myra Seaman, as well as a whole host of more or less angelic interlocutors.) It presents not a new –ology so much as a kind of secular (or not always even secular) series of pneumatologies: exhalations of dispersed bodies, condensed, for a hundred or so pages, on the windows of the world. If it is not always new, it will at least, we hope, be a little more – and a little less – than the same old shit.

About the Authors

Jeffrey J. Cohen is Professor of English and Director of the Medieval and Early Modern Studies Institute at The George Washington University. His books include *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minnesota, 1999), *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minnesota, 2003) and *Hybridity, Identity and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: Of Difficult Middles* (Palgrave, 2006). He is currently at work on a book on art, stone and the medieval prehistoric. He is also co-editing a special issue of *postmedieval* on 'Ecomaterialism' with Lowell Duckert (forthcoming in 2013) (E-mail: jjcohen@gwu.edu).

Cary Howie is an Associate Professor of Romance Studies at Cornell University. He is the author of *Claustrophilia: The Erotics of Enclosure* (Palgrave, 2007) and, with Bill Burgwinkle, *Sanctity and Pornography in Medieval Culture* (Manchester, 2010; Palgrave, 2011) (E-mail: caryhowie@cornell.edu).