Cluster Essay

Said in jest: Who's laughing at the Middle Ages (and when)?

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Abstract The essay begins with a negative image of a medieval scene in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, which is used to point out that the scene is a knowing parody rather than founded on a genuine belief in an unmitigatedly dark age. I argue that the humor emerges from this disjunction rather than because a depiction of shit-covered medieval peasants is innately funny. I briefly look at the lineage of the notion of a dark age, before turning to some texts in order to discuss the question of when and why the medieval period became humorous. I look first at episodes in *Don Quixote*, before turning to a little known humorous story, the *Iest of Dane Hew of Leicester*, a text printed in the later sixteenth century but usually taken as a fifteenth-century work. I argue, instead, that it is self-conscious medievalism of the Elizabethan period, and I look at the way in which humor is used in it to confirm the periodizing divide between the Middle Ages (a term not yet current at that time) and the printer's present moment.

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The Dark Age

The second scene of the classic 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* depicts a plague-ridden village, its people crawling around in the mud and a cart going from door to door to collect the dead (and even, as the scene unfolds, those

not so dead). At its conclusion, King Arthur and a few attendants ride by, prompting the following exchange:

> *Man [John Cleese]: Who's that then?*
> *Body-collector [Eric Idle]: I don't know; must be a king.*
> *Man: Why?*
> *Body-collector: He hasn't got shit all over him.* (Gilliam and Jones, 1975)

In this example of a text of medievalism, the Middle Ages is reduced to absolute fundamentals: the common people were starving and ate dirt; most of the population had the plague; indeed, almost everyone was covered in shit. There are thousands of medievalist jokes, but this one goes a long way to reducing the trope of a dark age to the barest essentials. Monty Python's shit-covered peasants are the distant progeny of the humanist/Reformation construction of a dark age, and this depiction of the period is the logical outcome of centuries of denigration of the Middle Ages.

At the same time, however, in order to be funny the scene needs also to have descended from another tradition, that of the *revival* of medieval culture as it has unfolded in the past 250 years. The humor in the scene does not arise from its fulfilment of the 'dark age' stereotype, because there needs to be some distance between depiction and understanding. For an imagined sixteenth-century reformer, the scene would function as propaganda, precisely confirming that this is the unenlightened past to which no one would want to return. But modern viewers are less likely to respond knowingly: 'Ah yes, shit-covered peasants, what a faithful depiction of the medieval way of being in the world.' The depiction is too extreme for that. The following scene suggests as much, in its staging of an encounter between King Arthur and some peasants who are digging dirt apparently as a food source. Faced with their king, the peasants reveal themselves to be an autonomous collective of anarcho-syndicalists, a joke which throws light back on the preceding scene: this is a knowing satire, aimed not at the Middle Ages as a period itself, but at contemporary understandings of the period.

The second scene of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, then, plays with the modern stereotype of the Middle Ages; I argue that the humor comes out of a gap between the sense of the Middle Ages as unmitigated dark age, and an implicit understanding that this is a stereotype. This is, perhaps, why the film is so beloved of medievalists (in a way that so many other medievalist films are not), because it plays to our knowingness about the period. While it perhaps *could* nevertheless be mistaken as proposing that peasants really did eat dirt and were covered in shit, it flatters viewers with its knowingness.

There is humor in knowingness. But there is not much humor in the original conception of a Dark Age. For Petrarch, gazing on the light of antiquity and attempting to commune in his letters with Cicero, the dimmed present is

melancholy. Later, Petrarchan rhetoric made a seamless transition into the Reformation, which turned melancholy into menace. John Leland's comment about bringing the literary monuments of the Middle Ages 'out of deadly darkenesse to lyuelye lyght …' (Bale and Leland, 1549, Bviiir) is famous because it so neatly captures what is at stake: anything we want to preserve from the Dark Age must be brought out of a darkness that kills. It is true that in the Reformation, there were the beginnings of a tendency to mock and laugh at the Middle Ages. Pilgrimage, saints and particularly relics were irresistible targets for reformers and humanists: in his 1526 colloquy *Peregrinatio religionis ergo* [*A Pilgrimage for Religion's Sake*, first English translation 1536/7], Erasmus has much fun at the expense of pilgrimage through the persona of the credulous Ogygius and his reverent account, for example, of such relics as the holy snot on a saint's handkerchief (Erasmus, 1965, 308). But while Erasmus makes his critique with 'good-humored enjoyment' out of a commitment to 'humor and education' (Waller, 2011, 75), the more dominant note of the Reformation appropriation of the Middle Ages is terror. That of humanism is melancholy. For both reformers and humanists, I would argue, humor is a minor weapon.

The larger questions behind this essay include: what's so funny about the Middle Ages? Who flung the shit, and when did it begin to stick? When did the period get funny? It is striking that the Middle Ages has a capacity for producing laughter that other periods simply do not generate in the same way. Late antiquity cannot be thought of as funny in the same way as the Middle Ages. The fashion in which *Blackadder the Third* made the eighteenth century funny was unusual; the medievalist humor of the first series, *The Black Adder*, more typical. In this essay, I examine some texts that shed light on the question of when we started laughing at the Middle Ages, and why.

The Melancholy of Romance

Monty Python and the Holy Grail places many aspects of the Middle Ages under the satirical lens, but the founding genre of the film is Arthurian romance. This is a clue: no medieval genre is more persistent after the Middle Ages – and no genre more parodied – than that of romance. Conventionally, it is Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's *The Adventures of Don Quixote* (1605, 1615), first translated into English in 1612 (de Cervantes, M. 1612), that is held responsible for beginning the comprehensive destruction of the genre's credibility.

The well-known premise of this work is that Don Quixote, the novel's antihero, is a prodigious reader of romances, which have filled his head with dreams of chivalry and knight errantry, eventually provoking him to start off on a misguided career as a knight errant himself. The running joke of the book is focused on misrecognition: Don Quixote sees a series of romance adversaries – windmills

taken for giants – where there are, in fact, only ordinary people going about their business. His victories are won against innkeepers, carters and monks whom he takes for castellans, felon knights and Basques; his defeats come at the hands of shepherds who are similarly transposed into medievally conceived romance adversaries.

But it is important that the misrecognition is not complete: Don Quixote does not entirely believe that he has entered the Middle Ages of romance. That the illusion is not entirely self-sustaining is made concrete in Part I, Chapter 20 of *Don Quixote*, in which the knight and his 'squire' Sancho Panza find themselves, as night falls, in a dark valley from which a dreadful noise issues. Don Quixote determines to investigate even if it should cost him his life. Sancho Panza, inevitably, tries to dissuade him, whereupon the knight delivers a long speech, in the course of which he says (here in the first English translation):

> I was borne by the disposition of heauen in this our age of iron, to resuscitate in it that of golde, or the golden world as it is called. … I am he which shall set vp againe those of the *Round Table, the twelue peeres of Fraunce,* and the *nine worthies* ….
>
> (Cervantes, 1612, Part 3, Chapter 6, 164)

It is quite clear here that in spite of his repeated misrecognition of everything he encounters in the contemporary Spain in which he goes about his quest, Don Quixote correctly recognizes that he does *not* live in the era of romance. That era is something he is trying to restore. It is in that disjuncture that the Middle Ages as a period can be envisioned, and the gap is opened up in which it is possible to laugh at it.

The cunning Sancho engineers things so that Don Quixote is unable to move in the course of the night. In the morning light, they both go to investigate and find only a fulling mill, its hammers pounding noisily away. What had sounded frightful and monstrous by night is simply explained by day as an instance of modern technology and even Don Quixote, at this point, begins to laugh, apparently at his own credulousness. Seeing him laugh, Sancho Panza joins in. But he gets carried away, mockingly quoting, verbatim, Don Quixote's own earlier words about being born in an iron age with the task of restoring a golden age. At this point, Don Quixote resumes seriousness and beats Sancho for his presumption, giving him two mighty blows of his lance. He tells Sancho that if the fulling hammers had indeed represented some perilous adventure, he would have undertaken it; in any case, he argues, how could he, Don Quixote, be expected to recognize such base objects as the hammers, which are familiar to a peasant like Sancho. He concludes that *if* giants had been the source of the noise and he had failed to take them on, *then* he would be deserving of mockery.

It is an interesting and rare moment in the text in which the characteristic *mis*recognition on which the narrative and its humor are founded give way to

recognition. The episode inverts the more famous tilting at windmills, depicting the deluded knight, for once, as seeing something for what it actually is. But in order to continue with his founding illusion, he must imagine how things would have been *if* he had continued in his misrecognition: if steam-powered hammers had in fact been giants. Sancho Panza's humor is upsetting to the illusion – and causes Don Quixote to beat him – because it reminds the knight, and the readers, that there is no golden age, only this time in which we live, this time of iron.

Even here, then, the laughter that is thereby provoked is not really at the expense of the Middle Ages. It is not so much that the golden age is at stake here, as that the humor is at the expense of the deluded Don Quixote himself. It is a melancholic moment, made poignant by Don Quixote's moment of self-understanding. The humor of *The Adventures of Don Quixote* is generally undercut by its melancholy in this fashion. In a slightly earlier episode, when Don Quixote achieves one of his rare martial successes, Sancho Panza gives his master in response a sobriquet, in romance fashion. But somewhat surprisingly, Sancho dubs him the 'caballero de la Triste Figura' (usually translated as the 'Knight of the Sad Countenance'). Here Sancho points out what readers could not otherwise know: in his moment of triumph, the knight's face is not happy. It is almost as if the knight himself is subconsciously aware of what the reader *does* already know: the nature of Don Quixote's 'success' as a knight is that it can only ever be achieved at the cost of an undeserved beating for someone else who has been misrecognized.

As such moments suggest, Cervantes's *Don Quixote* does not involve a straightforward program of satirical laughter at the Middle Ages. As a proponent of medievalism, Don Quixote often cannot see the humor himself and the reason is that when that humor is on display, it is directed more at himself than at a period in the past. I now turn to another text in order to pursue this interest in the possibility of laughing at the Middle Ages, specifically in the disjunction between the early modern period and the Reformation and what was constructed as a dark or Middle Age. In the remainder of this essay I will examine a text which appears to straddle both periods, the *Iest of Dane Hew of Leicester*. *Dane Hew* has usually been treated as if it were an actual medieval artifact, despite its incontrovertible status, in the form in which we have it, as a text from the second half of the sixteenth century. But as I will argue here, it is more medievalism than medieval. Its laughter is *at* the Middle Ages and is by definition outside that period because its laughter is constructing that period.

The Trouble with Dane Hew

In Hitchcock's 1955 film *The Trouble with Harry*, the central character is never seen alive. Harry Worp is a corpse, first seen lying in some woodland near a

picture-postcard New England town of white clapboard cottages. The body is successively discovered by various inhabitants of the town, in whom it provokes a range of reactions (none of them, curiously, fear). Several different people think they are responsible for Harry's death, all wrongly; as a result the corpse is buried and exhumed several times, and eventually carried back to town, where it is discovered that Harry died of natural causes (Hitchcock, 1955).

This is a sly version of a folklore narrative type known as the circulating corpse story, which is often combined with a motif known as 'the corpse killed five times.' In this widely attested story-type, a person is killed and the body is moved around, 'killed' again in each new location, leading innocent people to think they are killers and generally provoking fear and chaos. In most stories of this kind, it is the mobility of the corpse that spreads disruption. But the irony in *The Trouble with Harry* is the sheer inertia of the corpse. Harry is simply *there*, and there is nothing that is uncanny about him. Nobody ever thinks he is other than dead; it is the fact of his repeated reburials and exhumations by which the characters themselves create the problem of the corpse that will not die.

Uncharacteristically for a Hitchcock film, the element of outwitting the law is here relatively slight and there is no violence depicted on screen. Instead, the violence is all around the edges: one woman, for example, was married to Harry, believes she has killed him, and also lost her first husband in circumstances that go unmentioned. The dead man represents a violent act in the immediate past (though precisely what no one can say). Yet if in the story violence is to be contained, it is by no means entirely to be deplored. There are repeated hints that a healthy culture welcomes a bit of shooting ('What have you got against people doing a little shooting now and then – let off a little steam?' as Sam Marlowe says to the skeptical undersheriff, Calvin Wiggs). Underlining this, in the opening scene a small boy runs through the woods brandishing an outsize toy gun.

There is also very little fear in the film (again, uncharacteristically of Hitchcock). But *The Trouble with Harry* is nevertheless to a great extent *about* fear. The characters conceal the body, always only one step ahead of the suspicious undersheriff, fearful of what will happen if he catches on. The postwar world of *The Trouble with Harry* is one in which violence is largely normalized. The challenge facing the characters, in that world, is to normalize heterosexual relations. They do this over Harry's dead body: in the course of the narrative, new couples form, making contact with one another by means of the corpse. These relations become more complex as it transpires that most of the individuals believe they have killed Harry. At all points, through the motif of the restless corpse, these fears are hidden behind black comedy.

There is no medievalism in *The Trouble with Harry*, except in the traces, through the circulating corpse narrative, of the medieval fabliau. The *Iest of Dane Hew* is another example of this kind of story, itself somewhat belated by the time of its appearance in the late sixteenth century. It is a tale of a lustful monk and

a failed attempt to satisfy his desires that leads to his death. It is fabliau-like and has obvious analogues in the thirteenth-century French fabliau *Du Segretain moine* and its variants (see Cooke, 1994). Specifically, it belongs to a genre loosely called the medieval comic tale, and scholars have been reluctant to label *Dane Hew* and other stories like it as actual fabliaux.

Heere beginneth a mery Iest of Dane Hew munk of Leicestre and how he was foure times slain and once hanged (to give it its full title) is a tale of 326 lines in rough couplets, extant in a single exemplar in the Bodleian Library, a print by John Allde. The print is undated, but Allde was active between 1560 and his death in 1584. It tells the story of a monk of Leicester who is enamored of the wife of a tailor: 'Fair woman free, / Without I haue my pleasure of thee / I am like to go from my wit' (*Dane Hew, Munk of Leicestre, 1985, lines* 19–21). To this, the wife first responds that she is sexually happy in her marriage, but then, apparently relenting, proposes that the monk come to her the next day when her husband will be out of town. She also asks him what she will get from their liaison, and the monk replies that he will bring 20 nobles.

That evening, however, the wife discloses all this to her husband and assures him of her fidelity. The following morning when the monk visits, the wife has her husband hidden in a chest; when the monk gives her the promised 20 nobles she opens the chest as if to put them away and the tailor leaps out and strikes the monk with a sword, killing him. In order to conceal the crime, the tailor and his wife wait till evening and then convey the corpse back to the abbey, propping it against a wall. The abbot, already angry at Dane Hew's absence, comes to the corpse and addresses it, thinking the monk to be alive. When he gets no reply, the abbot strikes the body with his staff – and the monk falls down, apparently killed at the abbot's hand: 'Thus was he the second time slain' (*Dane Hew, Munk of Leicestre, 1985*, 158).

The abbot, believing himself to be the monk's killer, begs the help of his servant and offers him 40 shillings. The servant says that Dane Hew was known to haunt a certain tailor's house for love of his wife, and resolves to leave the corpse at the tailor's house. That night the guilty tailor dreams the monk has come; fearfully, he goes to the door with a poleaxe where he finds the monk standing as if alive where the abbot's servant has propped him up. The tailor attacks the body with the axe, and Dane Hew is 'killed' a third time.

Presented once again with the need to get rid of the body, the tailor's wife proposes that the body be put in a sack the next morning and thrown in the mill pond. The tailor duly sets off to execute this plan but as he does so, he encounters two thieves coming from the mill, carrying a sack (full of bacon they have just stolen from the miller); the thieves, mistaking the tailor for the miller, lay down their sack and flee. Seeing his chance, the tailor swaps the sacks and makes off with the bacon. The thieves, returning, take the wrong sack; at home, the wife of one of the thieves makes the grisly discovery of a dead monk in the sack; the thieves blame the miller and return to the mill, where they hang up the monk in

the store. Now the miller's wife rises, goes to get some bacon and is aghast to see the monk hanging there instead:

> Heer is a chaunce for the nones,
> For heer hangeth the false munk, by cocks bones
> That hath been so lecherous many a day
> And with mens wiues vsed to play.
> .....
> This I call a shrewd play
> (*Dane Hew, Munk of Leicestre, 1985*, 261–264, 268)

Now the miller has the problem of a dead body on his hands and once again it is the wife who advises: she reminds her husband that the abbot keeps a horse nearby, and suggests that they place the body on the horse with a pole under its arm, in imitation of a knight.

Hence, the next morning when the abbot sets about his morning ride on his mare, a horse comes running, bearing the corpse of Dane Hew in the guise of a knight with a jousting lance. The abbot, convinced the dead monk is seeking vengeance, flees, 'almoste out of his minde for feare.' His men lay about Dane Hew with clubs and staves, 'killing' him once again: 'Thus was he once hanged and foure times slain, / And buried at the last, as it was best. / I pray God send vs all good rest' (*Dane Hew, Munk of Leicestre*, 1985, 313, 324–326).

There are some familiar fabliau resonances here which many sixteenth-century English readers would have picked up: the lecherous Dane Hew is a distant cousin of the monk in *The Shipman's Tale*, one might suggest, and a rather closer relative of *The Miller's Tale*'s Nicholas, who approaches Alison in a very similar manner to the way in which Hew approaches the tailor's wife; the result of this rough wooing is, initially at least, also similar. Likewise, the shift of scene to a mill from which two men are making off with stolen food is distantly reminiscent of *The Reeve's Tale*. There need not be actual influence here – indeed, the monk's lecherous approach is a feature of the pre-Chaucerian French analogs. But there is a strong sense of similar generic conventions and even of play with motifs that many readers of the 1560s would have known from the *Canterbury Tales*. Whereas the earlier French fabliaux emphasize a *haut-bourgeois* world (in which the husband is a wealthy merchant), like Chaucer's fabliaux, *Dane Hew* is set in a much humbler milieu, that of a simple tailor and his wife. Likewise the mill: the miller and his wife are significant variations from the French fabliaux, and hence perhaps represent a shift of the story into the rural setting of the Miller's and Reeve's tales.

Despite the tale's clear affiliations with medieval French fabliaux, nevertheless, it is easy to see the ways in which *Dane Hew* in fact evades the fabliau classification. When the tailor's wife promises a rendezvous with a lecherous monk, the fabliau trajectory seems assured. But when shortly afterwards she makes it clear

she will not cuckold her husband, much of the potential fabliau energy drains away. Indeed, the wives of this tale are consistently prudent and faithful. Nobody actually has sex; marital relations are untroubled; the money in the tale does not circulate; there is no consistent pattern of reward and retribution. In all of these ways the tale does not do what fabliaux usually do. Even when it is encapsulated in the fabliau form (as in *Du Segretain moine* and its variants), the circulating corpse narrative in fact works to *re*-establish normative heterosexual relations, quite unlike Chaucer's tales of the Miller, Reeve, Merchant or Shipman. This is true from the thirteenth-century *Du Segretain moine* right down to *The Trouble with Harry* (where, although the defeated authority is the law rather than the Church, there remains a whiff of the ecclesiastical in the undersheriff's name, 'Calvin').

For the printer John Allde, the genre of this tale was apparently unproblematic: it is a 'jest.' This word, at the time, had several resonances and they need not involve humor. The word was initially, of course, simply the same as *gest*, derived through French from Latin *gesta*, deeds. Synecdochically, *geste* or deed becomes a genre of text in which deeds are retold – as in what we call a *chanson de geste*. In the early sixteenth century, there was a particular association of the 'jest' genre with Robin Hood stories: a *Lytell geste of Robyn hode* was printed by Wynkyn de Worde as early as 1506 (STC 13689). What is meant here might still refer to 'deeds,' but there is also a sense that 'jest' is taking on the more lighthearted sense that will prevail later in the century, seen for example in *A merry iest of Robin Hood and of his life, vvith a newe play for to be plaied in May-games*, printed around 1590 (STC 13692), and of course in the 'merry jest' of Dane Hew itself.

Certainly, by the mid-sixteenth century, 'jest' could still be used neutrally in the sense of 'deed'; in 1548 Edward Hall's chronicle refers to 'iestes, actes and deedes,' for example (Hall, 1548, fol. ivv). But 'jest' had already begun to pejorate in the later Middle Ages, coming to indicate something trivial; this is the sense in which something might be said to be 'nothing but a jest' (the earliest example of this in the *OED* is in Hary's *Wallace* in the late fifteenth century) (*OED* s.v. jest n. 3). A jest also becomes a pleasantry; Hall also employs this sense in a remark about the future French king Charles VII when he fled from Henry V to Bourges in the province of Berri to set himself up behind strong walls there, 'and therfore in a Iest he was comonly called the kyng of Burges and of Berries' (Hall, 1548, fol. lxxvii^{v}).

In the sixteenth century the word 'joke' did not exist in English. The ambiguous and capacious word 'jest' comprehended the sense later accorded to 'joke.' From around the middle of the sixteenth century the pejoration of 'jest' became the norm and the word lost its association with 'deeds.' Hence a fellow of infinite jest was simply someone who joked a lot. At the same time, inevitably, *geste* as a literary genre also pejorated, so as to become an idle, even laughable tale. The noun 'jester' followed a similar downward trajectory. In Chaucer's *House of*

Fame, 'jestours,' like 'minstrales,' 'tellen tales' (Chaucer, 1986, iii.108). But by the early sixteenth century a jester has become not much better than a fool.

When Allde printed the *Iest of Dane Hew* around or soon after 1560, therefore, the ridiculous nature of the tale bore out what by then would have been a clear generic expectation of the 'jest,' involving laughter and comedy rather than famous deeds. The energy that drives the jest comes from the monk, Dane Hew, who threatens the initial disruption of social and sexual norms. In a sense his threatening energy is immediately contained by his death; we see the same pattern in *The Trouble with Harry*, where Harry's death liberates desire. But as in Hitchcock's film, the story enacts a kind of repetition compulsion that underlines just how threatening the dead man was in the first place by showing how difficult that threat is to kill. Harry is buried and exhumed, buried and exhumed; Dane Hew moves around from abbey to house to mill, from ecclesiastical to domestic to mercantile spheres, provoking horror wherever he goes.

In truly medieval versions of this tale, such as the French fabliaux, the story is set in a familiar and realistic world, usually an unnamed walled town where an abbey sacristan covets a respectable bourgeois wife. The tale relies on casual anticlericalism, and some fun is had at the expense of the monastery when, at the end, the sacristan's corpse, mounted on a horse as a knight, returns to the abbey to cause general terror and disrupt a meal. But the monastery and the attached church are simply a part of the social world that is depicted; at the outset the bourgeois wife goes to the church to light a candle and pray because her husband has lost all his money (through robbery, in *Du Segretain moine*, or overspending, in *Du Segretain ou du moine*) (de Montaiglon and Raynaud, 1878).[1] The abbey and its inhabitants are not depicted as evil in themselves. It is the sacristan who is the problem, seeing his chance and offering money to the wife if she will sleep with him – money which he then steals from the monastery itself. Especially in *Du Segretain moine*, where the wife and her husband are a loving couple, the story is an anticlerical joke in which the couple end up with the money extracted from the church, *and* the misplaced bacon, while the dead body returns to the church. The story then details one form of circulation in which a corpse keeps returning to where it belongs, while the money, the goods and the sex end up in the bourgeois world where they too, presumably, are thought to belong.

1 Items CXXIII (*Du Secretain ou du moine*), CXXXVI (*Du Secretain*); vol. 6, item CL (*Le Dit dou Soucretain*).

Obviously enough, when Allde printed his version of the tale in the closing decades of the sixteenth century, it had become a kind of historical fiction rather than realism. The source of the threat was no longer to be seen in England: monasteries still existed in living memory (and in actuality, just across the sea) but were no longer a feature of daily life. This opens up the possibility that the work had currency around the 1560s specifically because it offered the possibility of laughing at something that definitively belonged to the past.

Modern commentators have not explored this possibility because of their tendency to treat the text as if it were an actual medieval work. Among *Dane*

Hew's few critics, W.A. Clouston thought it was printed around 1554, 'but from the rudeness of the language it is probably from a century earlier' (Clouston, 1887, 354). Melissa Furrow explicitly edits the work as a fifteenth-century comic tale, pointing out that several words in the poem appear to be fifteenth-century usages and proposing that this along with 'the raggedness of the metre and the oddness of the rhyming suggests that a fifteenth-century version of the poem may well have been modernized (ineptly) for publication in the sixteenth' (*Dan Hew, Munk of Leicestre*, 1985, 161).[2] The 'rudeness' or 'raggedness' of the text therefore serves as a guarantee of its medieval character, an attitude implying that in its c. 1560 printing *Dane Hew* is an antiquarian work in which the printer John Allde revived an old trace of the Middle Ages for the purposes of laughing at that period. In this view, *Dane Hew* tells, for the early Elizabethan reader in a time of a restored English church, a typical story of lecherous monks, credulous and cowardly abbots, at the same time offering a parodic vision of the romance knight such as could only derive from the Middle Ages: a typical medieval story.

2 Clouston makes a similar point (Clouston, 1887, II, 354), according to Taylor: that 'the rudeness of the language' suggests a date a century or so before the print (Taylor, 1917, 242–243). This judgment is reiterated by Cooke (1994, 3172).

Without doubt, there are links between *Dane Hew* and medieval texts; its author may not have known the French fabliaux directly but there is a strong sense that this was a story told and retold from the thirteenth century onwards. The fifteenth-century usages to which Furrow points may well suggest some circulation prior to Allde's print. But the evidence for a medieval version of this tale as Allde printed it is in fact very slender. As Furrow also points out, there are other verbal usages in the poem which the *OED* has as first appearing in the mid-sixteenth century. (And of course the evidence for exclusively fifteenth-century usages can only be clinched by ignoring *Dane Hew* itself as evidence.) The tendency to treat *Dane Hew* as if it were really a fifteenth-century text is perverse when the sole testimony we have of it dates from after 1560. This is by no means the only instance of this tendency in studies of sixteenth-century popular literature; Nicola McDonald has recently made a similar point about the romance of the *Squire of Low Degree* (McDonald, 2012, 274). Here, I want to pursue what follows from the very obvious step of regarding the *Iest of Dane Hew* as what it actually is: a text which can *only* date from some time during the period 1560–1584, when John Allde was active as a printer.

Laughing at the Past in the 1560s

Little is known of John Allde. He was an apprentice to the bookseller Richard Kele in the early 1550s and took up the freedom of the Stationers' Company in 1555. His active career as a printer seems to have begun in 1560; from then until 1567, 'he registered many ballads and almanacs, but little else,' according to Tedder and Gadd (Tedder, 2004). Allde's career bloomed, then, during the

renewed protestantism of Elizabeth's reign, and his own religious credentials might be gauged by, for example, the account he printed of the death of the Catholic martyr John Felton in 1570: *A piththy [sic] note to Papists all and some that ioy in Feltons martirdome Desiring them to read this and to iudge not in spite at simple trust to grudge* (London, 1570; STC 15034). Even more pointed is a work printed in 1576, *The third new yeeres gift and the second protest and the first proclamation of outlawry for this year 1576, against all the learned papists in England, Antvverp, or els where the papists bookes are printed and sent in to England. And an answer to all those learned papists, who hauing vnitie, vniuersalitie &c. with the[m] of no religio[n] heretically aske, that is to say. How knowe you the holy scriptures to be the word of God?* (STC 18490).

In this time of protestant renewal after the death of Queen Mary, the *Iest of Dane Hew* is an obvious satire of the medieval past, rather than an artifact from that past. The abbeys and their inhabitants were at that time a living memory from just a generation before and closer at hand, an actual threat of the recently ended Marian restoration. The Chaucerian echoes would then quite conceivably be deliberate and knowing allusions to the *Canterbury Tales*, directed at a sixteenth-century audience that was perfectly familiar with the Chaucerian fabliaux from the strong printed tradition of the *Canterbury Tales*, the most recent instance of which was John Stow's edition of 1561, near the commencement of Allde's career.

In other words, what certainly appears to be the medieval setting of the text need not be explained as the result of mimesis on the part of a lost late medieval author, but rather of something slightly more complicated. The tale plays with living memories of monasticism; in it, the Middle Ages is a spectral past that will not die. This is presented in a medieval genre, the fabliau, which however promptly undoes itself: imitations of Chaucerian instances of the genre are immediately abandoned with the wife's full disclosure to a husband who does not, as was promised in imitation of the Chaucerian version, go out of town, but conceals himself in order vigorously to protect his own. Fabliaux need circulation, of goods, money and bodies. Brutality toward the body is of course endemic in the genre. But killing the body spoils the fun of fabliau. Much as the author seeks to kill it, fabliau proves to be the genre that will not die in the *Iest of Dane Hew*. Sex and money might not circulate in the tale, but the corpse of Dane Hew *does* circulate. It is only when the miller's wife ingeniously provokes a generic shift into parodic romance by arming the corpse as a knight that this circulation can be brought to an end. The final uncanny encounter has the undead Middle Ages in the form of a ghost-knight riding to vengeance against the medieval monastery. Whereas the French fabliaux have the corpse-knight ride back to the monastery and disrupt a lavish feast, in *Dane Hew* the equivalent scene takes place out in the open away from the abbey and is closely focused on the figure of the abbot himself, whose terrified exit comically mimics the exit of abbots in general from the historical scene.

Ideas of the Middle Ages as a period were still inchoate in the 1560s and 1570s. The *media aetas* was certainly a category in humanist thought and John Foxe appears to dub the period in the vernacular in 1570. But it was not until the seventeenth century that the term 'Middle Ages' took on its established sense and clearly indicated a general period of history. In the non-learned popular culture attested to by the *Iest of Dane Hew* we see much more of a continuum in periodization and consequent unease for readers who had recently witnessed the short-lived return of Catholicism. The depiction of a monastery and the use of fabliau motifs suggest something that belongs firmly in the past. But, as the events of the text show, that past is given to circulating around and making unwelcome and uncanny returns. There is laughter here, certainly, as the parodic medieval knight is finally done to death while the traumatized abbot rides away. But it is a rather uncomfortable form of laughter, even in 1560. Each iteration of the returning corpse motif ratchets up the humor, but each time the unquiet past becomes more disturbing. For the notional, invented medieval reader of this text, this is a funny story about monks. But for the more concretely realized reader of the 1560s, it is a much more disturbing and even unfunny text, about an uncanny, undead past. It is a past at which the text *wants* to laugh but the joke is premised on the possibility that the past might never truly die. Hence that laughter is always haunted by the possibility that that past might make yet one more uncanny, unfunny return.

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