Editors' Introduction

Novel medievalisms

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> In any case, there is one matter that has amused me greatly: every now and then a critic or a reader writes to say that some character of mine declares things that are too modern, and in every one of these instances, and only in these instances, I was actually quoting fourteenth-century texts.
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> And there are other pages in which readers appreciated the exquisite medieval quality whereas I felt those pages are illegitimately modern. The fact is that everyone has his own ideas, usually corrupt, of the Middle Ages. Only we monks of the period know the truth, but saying it can sometimes lead to the stake. –Eco, Reflections on *The Name of the Rose*

What is this truth that Eco knows? Does he have access to the uncorrupted 'real' truth about the historical Middle Ages? Or is this truth rather more the open secret – 'the fact' – that, whether we are expertly trained or not, no one can really distinguish between historical fact and the invention of the historical novelist? Could either form of knowledge really lead to the stake?

Eco's 'Reflections' follow up and develop a number of the paradoxes at work in his great novel: the apparent ease with which some defining tropes of modernist fiction (the percipient outsider; the conspiracy theory; the critique of a cosmological world view and a corrupt church) can be merged so successfully with some

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of the characteristic scenes and images of medieval life (the monastery; the library; repressed sexuality; the peasant girl; and the Inquisition). *The Name of the Rose* remains the paradigmatic text of medieval historical fiction not because it creates the illusion of a medieval world to the rigorous exclusion of the modern, but because it so successfully holds competing medieval and modern world views, genres and forms in such productive tension. The novel is a stunning performance of medieval historical fiction, but it is also a compelling argument in favor of the form and the depth of its intellectual and imaginative project, a project that is best conceived as dialectic.

Eco's death was announced as we were completing the final edits of this special issue of *postmedieval* on the topic of medievalism and historical fiction. Eco, who began his career as a scholar of medieval philosophy (his *laurea* thesis and first book were on the aesthetics of St. Thomas Aquinas, his second on medieval aesthetics writ large), helped shape the historical genre in ways that can still be felt among writers, critics and scholars alike. The media announcements of his death encapsulated his life and career in headlines with some variation of 'Italian author of *The Name of the Rose*,' identifying him with the novel that gave him an international reputation as a historical novelist of great originality and ambition. Certainly there were important precedents before Eco; scholars such as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien combined medieval scholarship with great imaginative achievements in fantasy texts that draw on powerful medieval traditions, images, narratives and mythologies. But our prime concern in this volume is with historical fiction that is set, relatively securely, in the historical Middle Ages, and Eco's achievement and influence here are paramount.

There is an additional dimension to the production and reception (both critical and popular) of medieval historical fiction, though, in the emergent discipline of medievalism studies. This field is far more advanced and extensive than, say, studies in Victorianism, or the imaginative reinvention of Tudor or Regency culture. The work of Eco is crucial to the formation of this movement, too, and all its implications for the mutual imbrication of fiction, history, scholarship and criticism, as well as the specialist, creative and 'amateur' reading and writing practices that are the subject of this special issue of *postmedieval*.

Eco's engaging and imaginative studies of the Middle Ages in the modern world have been deeply influential on the development of medievalism, beginning with what have become the classic essays 'Dreaming of the Middle Ages' and 'Living in the New Middle Ages,' and leading to what is now a thriving interdisciplinary field with its own journals, byways and preoccupations. This critical context of medievalism further enriches the debate and dialogue possible between present and past, and between scholarly and creative medieval work.

Disciplinary genealogies are always problematic, and the case of medievalism is no exception. The relationship between medieval studies and medievalism of different stripes is a history of alliances and affiliations that are constantly being forged, ruptured and remade. The full complexity of that history is still being

realized and played out in both academic theory and creative practice, but we may pause here to observe that one of the key preoccupations of this history is the shifting epistemological relation between what is perceived as the historical real and its reinvention. A recent symptom of that ever-changing relationship is the newly (re-)formed term 'neomedievalism,' which, in contrast to its first coinage as a version of self-reflexive medieval scholarship, now paradoxically refers to cultural practices that claim no historical grounding in the medieval past but which are nevertheless tied through this terminology to some version of the medieval. The question at issue can often be framed as a tension between a version of temporal, chronological or historical priority, on the one hand, and a version of ontological priority on the other.

Eco can help us untangle the problem here. In a delightful historical paradox that both underlines the perception of his influence and also exemplifies the difficulties of ordering the past to which he draws attention, it is a common error to believe that Ellis Peters' Cadfael series must take its inspiration from Eco. An ostensibly more lightweight series, as opposed to a single uncompromising intellectual tome, must surely be the derivative imitation of the Italian masterwork. But in fact, Peters' first novel in the series, *A Morbid Taste for Bones*, was published in 1977, while *Il Nome della Rosa* first appeared in 1980. The more curious question, then, might be about the conjunction of two such radically different novelists, each choosing to combine the genres of detective fiction and the Middle Ages at around the same time.

But how important is *medieval* historical fiction in the world of historical fiction more generally? Certainly the Middle Ages are exceptionally well represented in any survey of the *mise-en-scène* of historical fiction. The reasons are not hard to find. The dramatic alterity of medieval dress, architecture, language and sensibility, and the apparent otherness of premodern social, religious and political structures, easily account for the popularity of medieval settings, especially as an antidote to or retreat from industrial or post-industrial modernity, or as a sufficiently distant destination to make the conceptual and cultural work of time travel worthwhile.

Historical fiction has held a special place in the shaping of modern and contemporary medievalism, and now represents a fruitful avenue of inquiry for scholars studying the diverse legacies of the Middle Ages to the modern world. Beginning with an array of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century works set in the medieval world – Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), also a founding work of Gothic fiction; Clara Reeve's *Edwin, King of Northumberland* (1802), a children's book set in the seventh century; and, of course, the medieval-set novels of Sir Walter Scott, including *Ivanhoe* (1820) and *Tales of the Crusaders* (1825) – the medievalist historical novel has remained a consistently popular and often wildly creative subgenre of historical fiction into our own moment, from Tariq Ali's *Islam Quintet* (1993–2010) to Nicola Griffith's *Hild* (2013), from Paul Kingsnorth's experimental *The Wake* (2014) to the internationally

bestselling novels of Philippa Gregory, Ken Follett and Bernard Cornwell. Crossing and blurring lines of genre, readership and form, medievalist fictions exemplify the diverse historical habits of modernity while furnishing us with widely varying perspectives on the modern literary reinvention of the medieval past.

The essays and position papers gathered in this special issue, while not written as intentional tributes to Eco and his work, can be read as so many inflections of his influence and the imaginative reach of his medievalisms, both novelistic and critical. Including contributions from literary critics and novelists alike, the issue examines the interplay of history and fiction in shaping medievalist historical fictions from a number of angles and with a variety of aims in mind. While we have kept a reasonably narrow focus on literary fiction (as opposed to medievalist fantasy, time travel, cinema or television) set in the Middle Ages, we have sought the views of both literary and historical critics, and fiction writers themselves. Thus the essays here range from analysis, critique and criticism more baldly, in some cases, to a series of more personal explorations of the technical pleasures and practices of writing and researching historical fiction. This issue joyfully celebrates the fact that 'research' is not the provenance of the university and the professional scholar alone.

We have organized our contributions into four separate but related clusters featuring different modes of critical writing about historical fiction, beginning with seven longer essays on the subject of historical fiction and historical imagination. Each of these essays takes up a particular writer, novel or group of novels that speak in various ways (and often at odds) to the subject of this special issue. Candace Barrington's essay on 'archival blindness' and the Clerkenwell novels of Peter Ackroyd directly confronts the relation of fact and fiction, showing the intricate webs of archival assurance and deception that historical fiction can be capable of spinning. Mariadele Boccardi takes up Barry Unsworth's *Morality Play* (1995), a dark historical novel of performance and murder that she reads in counterpoint with Hayden White's theories of historical writing. Jonathan Hsy, drawing on contemporary convergence theory, examines the rhetoric of blindness in Bruce Holsinger's novel *The Invention of Fire* (2015), showing how the audiobook remediates the narrative's tropes of oral performance. Carrie Griffin's contribution examines the intermingling of history and myth in Anthony Burgess' *Any Old Iron*, a novel that enacts its mode of medievalist narration by thinking in part about the telling of history as a process of assembling fragments and ghosts from the past. In Miriamne Ara Krummel's 'Fictions of Identity,' such fragments inform novelistic imaginings of Jewish temporality, as in Charles Reznikoff's *The Lionhearted* (1944), Maggie Anton's *Rashi's Daughters* (2005–2009) and Michael Chabon's *Gentlemen of the Road* (2007) – novels that, Krummel argues, 'feature medievalisms that produce ontologically present Jews in Christian time and in normative history.' Nicola Gilmour turns to the representation of *convivencia* in medieval Iberia, reading the novels of César Vidal for their fascinating but quite troubled relationship to the premodern past and the post-9/11 present.

The cluster of longer essays concludes with Sarah Elliott Novacich's 'Alchemical Fictions,' a meditation on fiction and temporality that examines historical lives and literary afterlives through the literary lenses of novels by Hilary Mantel and Colm Tóibin.

The remaining two contributions come from a writer of narrative non-fiction and a historical novelist, both of them interested in some of these same conjunctions and clashes of history and fiction. Eric Jager, in 'The Inscrutable Past,' meditates on the art and craft of writing narrative non-fiction for a public audience, as in his acclaimed works on medieval France, *The Last Duel* (2005) and *Blood Royal* (2014). Robyn Cadwallader's 'Learning to Love the Dislocation' is a reflection on her writing of *The Anchoress* (2015), a novel set in the thirteenth century about the life and travails of an English anchoress.

For the 'Distant Voices' forum, we asked contributors to think about the very specific issue of producing speech and dialogue in medievalist fiction. This is both a technical and an epistemological question. How do modern writers bring the medieval past to life? How can they capture a range of linguistic and stylistic registers that will answer to the complexities of medieval life? Is realism the answer here? Or are there other solutions? Fashions in representing medieval voices have changed tremendously since the deliberate archaisms of Sir Walter Scott (or looking even further back, of Edmund Spenser), while recent works by Paul Kingsnorth (*The Wake*) or Kazuo Ishiguro (*The Buried Giant*) offer radically different solutions to the problem. The technical challenges of verisimilitude or characterization across centuries of linguistic change are enormous, and as our contributors show, there is a wide range of potential solutions. Again, we include perspectives drawn from literary and historical criticism as well as the craft of fiction.

Andrew Lynch opens the forum with a study of the way Walter Scott uses socially inflected linguistic forms to dramatize historical change in Scotland and England. Richard Utz shows how Jürgen Lodemann takes inspiration from Eco to develop a multilayered and polyphonic narrative stream that draws parallels between the *Niebelungenlied* and some of the cultural, political and social preoccupations of modern Germany. Elizabeth Chadwick and Gillian Polack each analyze the different writerly strategies they use in their own historical fictions. In each case, speech and dialogue emerge out of a series of self-imposed constraints. These distant voices become audible through a kind of stripping away of modern complications: sometimes hearing the past seems as much a matter of stilling and quietening the cacophony of other voices that get in the way. And finally, Mary Flannery tackles the very specific case of profanity. Swearing, oaths and obscenity are a special challenge for medieval historical fiction. They can bring us closer to the medieval past but they are a high-risk strategy.

Rounding out the issue is Barbara Newman's book review essay on the recent medievalist fiction of two contemporary novelists, Bruce Holsinger and Kazuo Ishiguro. (We emphasize here that Newman was not commissioned to write on

any particular works, and that her selection of authors on which to focus her review was left entirely up to her. One of us was embarrassed at her choice; the other was thrilled!)

Medievalisms are always 'novel' in some way; we hope this special issue renews dialogue about the relationship between critical, historical and creative scholarship in this field.

About the Authors

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Reference

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