Book Review: Why the Middle Ages Matter: Medieval Light on Modern Injustice (Chazelle, Doubleday, Lifshitz, & Remensnyder)—Review by Yvonne Seale


People often query the relevance of studying the Middle Ages in the twenty-first century; some undergraduate history students struggle to relate millennium-old events to their daily lives and concerns. Similarly, medievalists are unaccustomed to grappling with concepts like “end-of-life care” or “refugees” in their work; they are not often called on to comment on the social implications of best-selling novels or the political causes of modern Middle Eastern conflicts. Yet the contributors to this volume of essays are concerned with showing how the study of medieval Europe qualifies scholars to do exactly those things—to provide us with new ways of thinking about contemporary social justice problems of gender, race, justice, and inequality, among others. The editors situate Why the Middle Ages Matter within what they, in their introduction, term a burgeoning “ethical turn”; since history “as it really was” cannot be recreated, and true scholarly objectivity is impossible, historians should “take ethical stances with regards to their own world” and recognize that the practice of history has “an inescapable ethical dimension” (3). For many of the contributors to this volume, their desire to engage historians sprang from the rhetoric which predominated in many parts of the West in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks; they model their approach on other historians such as Marc Bloch, John Boswell, Howard Zinn, and Judith Bennett.

Several of the essays focus on medieval ideas of justice and healing and how they might provide solutions to some modern problems. Celia Chazelle’s “Crime and Punishment: Penalizing without Prisons” compares the contemporary American prison system with medieval European methods of dealing with criminal behavior. She contrasts the United States’ high, and racialized, incarceration rates, tendency to think of justice as punitive and judicial, and pattern of siting prisons in remote, rural locations, with the Middle Ages’ custom of keeping offenders within the community and putting an emphasis on reparative justice. Negotiations and reparations helped to “underscore the value of community” and to reintegrate the wrongdoer into that community (16).

Chazelle’s argument is complemented by Frederick S. Paxton’s contribution on the modern hospice movement and medieval practices of dying, and Kristina Richardson’s discussion of how methodologies and perspectives drawn from disability studies might help us to reassess the medieval Islamic world, but particularly by G. Geltner’s essay. This examines prisons but also other examples of institutions which offered what the author terms “social semi-inclusiveness” such as hospitals, brothels, and leprosaria (29). He argues that while the inhabitants of such institutions occupied marginal social roles, and were often visibly othered by medieval authorities—by being forced to live in particular parts of town, for example—the very fact that civil authorities claimed control over such people worked to
incorporate them into the community. The social bonds which connected lepers and prostitutes to other community members were never entirely severed, something which can all too easily occur in modern society. “How,” Geltner asks the contemporary reader, “will we promote respect for the needs and rights of the homeless, the physically handicapped, substance abusers, or the mentally ill if we never see them?” (36) Chazelle and Geltner both argue persuasively for the relevance and utility of medieval concepts of semi-inclusiveness and reparative justice.

Several topical issues of gender, sexuality and power are examined in this collection. Felice Lifshitz’s “Women: The Da Vinci Code and the Fabrication of Tradition” demonstrates how the memetic propagation of misunderstandings about the medieval past can have ramifications in the present day. The eponymous best-seller is far more anti-feminist than it is feminist, selling as it does a Whiggish fantasy of progress towards sexual equality, set against the backdrop of an unenlightened medieval period in which women were always, passively the victims of an “unremittingly repressive, male-dominated hierarchy” (74). Dyan Elliott’s topical “Sexual Scandal and the Clergy: A Medieval Blueprint for Disaster” argues that modern Catholicism’s response to scandals about clerical sexual abuse forms part of a “pattern of evasion [which] has been shaped by centuries of discussion in canon (church) law and theology about how to contend with clerical criminality and scandal” (91). Elliott argues that the institutional Church—mediated through legal and theological discussions and praxis often originating in the Middle Ages—has sought to cover up scandalous incidents because the primary attribute which it associates with the word “scandal” is “its ability to occasion sin in another” (91). Discretion thus becomes a spiritual good. Other contributions on the theme of sexuality focus on the ways in which medieval and modern speech echo one another, such as Ruth Mazo Karras’s on the similarities of rhetoric in medieval debates on clerical marriage and modern debates on the morality and utility of same-sex marriage, or Mathew Kuefler’s provocative re-reading of Augustine of Hippo’s autobiographical writings for evidence of his being in the “Christian closet” (78). These authors ably demonstrate that contemporary mores and social rhetoric can be better analyzed with an understanding of the medieval past.

Other essays look at modern social concepts in light of the medieval past, and in doing so demonstrate how medieval historians can profitably contribute to contemporary social and political discussions. Martha Newman’s contribution examines how Cistercian monks thought about work, and sees in their reflections a set of tools for thinking about the value of work as something not inextricably bound up with consumerism and commodities (118). Meghan Cassidy-Welch’s essay seeks to provide a new way of thinking about a contemporary issue by demonstrating that refugees are not figures who appear on the world stage only with the advent of “modernity”, but can be traced in the historical record in the aftermath of the Albigensian Crusade. Geoffrey Koziol’s discussion of mirrors for princes argues that this literary genre, while didactic, is far less naïve than some modern commentators have given it credit; such works were reminders of a ruler’s responsibilities and of Christian “society as a moral community” (194) and seem out of place to modern readers because “classical liberal theory tended to banish ethics from public political discourse” (183). This banishment of ethics, Koziol suggests, has come at a cost. One of the volume’s fieriest contributions, Amy G. Remensnyder’s “Torture and Truth: Torquemada’s Ghost” looks at the rhetoric surrounding the use of waterboarding and other torture techniques by the U.S. government. She argues that officials have deliberately stressed that their actions cannot be understood as torture because torture is “medieval”, the period presented as a “negative foil for modern values” (155). Modern leaders, she argues, would do well to learn from the Inquisition that torture is as ineffective as it is unethical. All of these authors speak as much to the modern world as they do to the Middle Ages.

Some essays in this vein, however, do not work as well. Maghan Keita’s contribution, “Race: What the
Bookstore Hid”, seeks to dismantle ideas of medieval Europe as a racially homogenous region—an argument which has merit but which is not well served by the elision of terms such as “black” and “African”, or by a lack of clarity as to whether the author is primarily concerned with the actual or metaphorical presence of phenotypically black people in medieval Europe. Feirefiz—the biracial character with mottled skin who appears in the thirteenth-century romance Parzifal—is presented here as part of a “profound desire to link East and West, black and white” (137), yet may speak more to a literary strain of Orientalizing exoticism. Peter Linebaugh’s “Class Justice: Why We Need a Wat Tyler Day” argues that the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 is an event which should be remembered more widely today, though does not quite make the case for how the actions of Wat Tyler and his companions should indeed be seen as the direct progenitors of modern movements which agitate for social equality.

The collection as a whole is not without weaknesses. The book seems aimed at a general readership, yet the prose is often dense and at times assumes some level of familiarity with medieval history. While the essays are not inaccessible to a general audience, the volume as a whole may appeal more to graduate students or faculty, with some essays working well for a class of advanced undergraduates. Given the intended audience, it is understandable that the contributors did not wish to devote much of their essays to hashing out historiographical debates, or to weigh down their writing with discipline-specific jargon. Yet several of their arguments turn on concepts such as “power”, which even the editors do not define in their introduction; it is not clear that the reader will associate the same meanings and connotations with such words as do the authors. Most of the contributors are at North American institutions, which makes the culturally-specific focus of many of the essays unsurprising, though occasionally limiting; depending on the reader’s politics, they may find the volume’s left-leaning perspective a positive or a negative attribute.

When Why the Middle Ages works best—as in for example Chazelle’s, Elliott’s, Koziol’s, or Newman’s contributions—it does show how even the distant medieval past can be made relevant to the present through a sensitive integration of modern concerns with considered historical analysis. It offers a provocative starting point for those medieval historians who wish to engage in self-reflection, or who are considering beginning an ethical turn of their own.

Yvonne Seale

Yvonne Seale is a doctoral candidate and Presidential Graduate Fellow in the Department of History at the University of Iowa. She is currently working on her dissertation, which focuses on the involvement of women with the Premonstratensian Order in twelfth- and thirteenth-century northern France. Her research interests include women’s history, landscape and spatial history, and the social history of religion.