

## Gwen to the Max

M. J. Toswell, University of Western Ontario

Tall, wearing high-heeled boots and jeans, striding about to greet people and organize their movements, smoking outside the front door (more recently fiddling with electronic cigarettes), getting a drink and setting up evening sessions where young and beginning scholars get to talk and argue with senior people in the field, making sure that someone's arm is twisted so that there will be a conference the next year: this is Gwendolyn Morgan at conferences of *Studies in Medievalism* and latterly the International Society for Studies in Medievalism. She was always working at a conference, behind the scenes and in front, setting up sessions for the next year or for various events at the MLA or at Kalamazoo or Leeds, making sure that two people talked with each other if they had similar interests, checking in with Leslie Workman and Kathleen Verduin over coordination with the journals, making sure that the smaller and quicker-moving *Year's Work in Medievalism* got edited after each conference and published successfully (she sang paeans of praise to Wipf and Stock), making sure that there was always money in the kitty for the publication, and generally checking up on all of us and on our work. The job of "Director of Conferences" was invented for Gwen, and she did her task with verve and enthusiasm. She was a brilliant director of conferences. Many of the contributors to this festschrift for her organized conferences in their home universities because they casually mentioned a theme or noted the existence of a good hotel near their university campus or came to a second or third conference of the medievalism crowd and got nobbled by Gwen.

Moreover, her own work was always top of mind for Gwen, enthusiastically and at length. She loved the chance to talk about ideas. And her own ideas were legion, from translating Old English riddles to inventing a new pseudo-medieval poem to the fad in the last decade for puzzle stories that had medieval elements to them to the medieval ballad and its ramifications for social order and political ideology. Everything interested Gwen, often stridently, sometimes more quietly and thoughtfully. In this collection of papers, we are delighted to present work from students of medievalism all over the world in her honour. For many of us, Gwen was at the door greeting us for our first paper in the field of medievalism, and was the first person asking us questions after it. She badgered and provoked us, making us think harder about our premises and expand our evidence. She made us think harder and better. She taught us as much as she organized us.

For a collection in Gwen's honour, her beloved journal the *Year's Work in Medievalism* was the obvious choice. And our topic, also highly appropriate to Gwen, was maximum medievalism or medievalism to the max. We asked our contributors, of whom there are a lot, as pretty much everyone we approached was enthusiastic and rapid in submission, to max out their ideas, to try to provoke themselves and others, to tackle the difficult questions. And they responded. Some engaged with new materials or unexpected materials from a medievalism-ist perspective. Others took on work in the area that they know well and found provocative new methods or topics. Others tackled some of the really difficult topics that make us uncomfortable about the Middle Ages: the religious

slaughter that was the Crusades, the rewriting of history by the conquerors evident in the tale of Pocahontas, the treatment of magic and of witches. Still others took on the overlap between our academic lives and our creative lives. Pam Clements, for example, very kindly gave us two previously unpublished poems in Gwen's honour because for so much of her career Gwen has worked on the edge between creatively engaging the Middle Ages and critically analysing the Middle Ages. We're delighted to have those at the beginning of the first section.

This issue is organized in four sections: Engaging with Gwen, Engaging with History and Politics, Unexpected Medievalisms, and New Figures in Medievalism. The first section begins with the aforementioned two poems by Pam Clements, who noted recently of her own practice "how much my poetic life is informed by my day job of teaching medieval literature" and points out that it is past time that we "add poetry to the world of contemporary medievalism."<sup>1</sup> We are delighted to have the chance to add some poetry here. Next we have two short reminiscences of Gwen and her teaching practices by recent students, Brady Jensen and Matthew Schwager. Brady's title reflects Gwen's characterization of student evaluations of their instructors as "character assassination"; he considers his own statement on that evaluation the first time he took a course with her—"Fear is an excellent motivator"—and how the shallow fear of not doing well in the course changed in further courses he took with Gwen to a fear of disappointing her or, worse, himself. Matthew Schwager makes a similar argument, but evocatively describes an evening spent with Gwen, other students, and an Ouija board as a way to discuss both the range of her interests and her engagement with her students. Her aim is to teach them to think critically and to question their assumptions, always to engage with literature because to engage with literature is to engage with life. Her approach is unorthodox, and perhaps terrifying, but it reflects her deep love of literature and of teaching.

Jane Toswell's paper compares the American poet Molly Peacock, creator of several translations from Old English, with Gwen Morgan's imitative translations from Old English. Peacock is a modern poet of the lyric, and what interests her in Anglo-Saxon England are the lyrics and the riddles and their relevance as the creations of like-minded souls of another era. Morgan is more passionately engaged with presenting the work of Anglo-Saxon poets as art in the same terms as the art we create and admire and engage with today. Where Peacock searches for emotional connections with individuals in the past, and Morgan wants us to engage with the medieval as something alive today, Flannery O'Connor—as Jesse Swan discusses—wanted to return to the medieval, to live her life as if she were in the Middle Ages. Thus, as Swan points out, where Morgan wants to engage with the medieval as a 'living medievalism' today, O'Connor would agree, as in the middle years of the twentieth century she looked to medievalize modernity. Swan argues for her use of a medievalizing narrative voice, and analyses the focalization of her novel *Wise Blood* to suggest that the search for the divine and for grace is in O'Connor also a search for a medieval approach to grace. Finally,

---

<sup>1</sup> Pam Clements in the opening and untitled reflection on her poetry included in *New Crops from Old Fields: Eight Medievalist Poets*, ed. Oz Hardwick (Norwalk, CT: Stairwell Books, 2015), 33.

Brent and Kevin Moberly address Ernest Cline's novel *Ready Player One*, published in 2011. They pick up Gwen's argument that medievalism and authority are complementary fictions, something she presented in various pieces in *Studies in Medievalism* and the *Year's Work in Medievalism* and also in her book on the way twenty-first century mystery novelists seem to revel in the invention of false medieval authorities for creating and solving puzzles. They take this intriguing concept and apply it to Cline's complex and engaging novel, whose awkward and geeky protagonist engages in immersive simulations as Parzival engaging in a thoroughly Arthurian and also thoroughly postmodern quest. Gwen has always encouraged the expansion of medievalism to encompass videogames and highly twenty-first century forms of creative engagement, so that this piece by the Moberly brothers is a particularly appropriate *hommage* for her.

Part B, entitled "Engaging with History, Politics, and Religion," includes papers which use medievalism as a lens with which to investigate actual historical events or approaches. Brian Johnsrud and Amy Kaufman both investigate perilously contemporary events, with Johnsrud presenting an argument about how the references by modern American presidents to the Crusades sometimes suggest a highly sophisticated interpretation of ISIS and its self-representation through modern social media, and its reception in the West. Kaufman considers the rampant masculinity in modern reconstructions of the medieval era, using *Game of Thrones*, ISIS, and Donald Trump as examples of the ways in which the contemporary era has placed its fears and its fantasies in the Middle Ages. She focuses our attention squarely on the muscular masculinity of the modern medieval, with its subjugation and suffering of women, its move to a renovated patriarchal world, and its construction of an hermetically sealed and single-minded notion of righteous patriotism. A similar kind of single-minded construction of Anglo-Saxon England, at least in the eyes of its protagonist, is perhaps to be found in Paul Kingsnorth's *The Wake* as analysed here by Lauryn Mayer. Buccmaster wants a return to the old gods, to Weland, to violence and to his own notion of freedom, and his unthinking, blinkered, and highly self-interested desire to return his corner of England, Lincolnshire, to his own notion of a real England. As Mayer points out, he is no redeemer, no Hereward the Wake, no Robin Hood: Buccmaster wants only his own power and success, as framed through Kingsnorth's invention of a shadow tongue aping Old English in deeply medievalist and deeply problematic ways.

Richard Utz moves the focus to Bavaria and away from the revived and reconstructed medieval worlds elucidated by Johnsrud, Kaufman, and Mayer. His concern is the residual medievalism to be found in various kinds of folk memories, pageants and theatrical moments as enacted in many towns and cities of the Bavarian borderlands, notably those by Eugen Hubrich. He uses these, however, to confront David Matthews' argument that after the high medieval art and architecture of the Victorian period, perhaps extending into Edwardian England, medievalism was pushed to the margins of culture, thereby becoming both ubiquitous and unnoticed, even quite unimportant.<sup>2</sup> Utz

---

<sup>2</sup> David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015).

considers the ideological import of these texts, their dangerous use of the medieval to promote Nazi positions, and the need to speak up and disentangle this kind of reconstructed medieval from the nationalist and imperialist ideologies often embedded in these representations. Some would argue that Michael Evans in his paper tackles a more innocuous version of this kind of ideology, as he considers the historical revisionism that allowed the episode involving Pocahontas, Powhatan, and the rescuing of John Smith from death in one of the most famous, and most problematic, episodes in the history of first contact narratives. Evans notices the connection of the episode to the fourteenth-century episode of the Burghers of Calais, in which only the intervention of the queen, Philippa of Hainault, prevented the grisly death of the burghers who saved their city of Calais by surrendering themselves to Edward III. Evans investigates the historical construction of the John Smith episode, and ties it to the historical notion of the queen as intercessor—a historical notion with very deep medieval roots—and also links in the medieval romance tradition of the Saracen princess. History, in this case, was written from the European medievalizing point of view, so that the Indian princess symbolically and fruitfully saves the foreign knight and establishes good relations between the two communities.

Part C of the collection addresses unexpected medievalisms, the sudden realization that authors and cultural moments that seem particular to one era actually form part of a medievalizing tradition, a tradition that informs and transforms these historical, cultural, and literary moments. In our spirit of medievalizing to the max, various colleagues who have already made great contributions to the growth of medievalism as a subject of study turned their sagacious minds to looking again at their own disciplinary subfields to find new examples of medievalism. Thus, Elizabeth Emery considers the French taverns of the late nineteenth century, with their unexpectedly predominant decorating motif being the neomedieval, with architecture, material objects, songs, and joyous debaucheries of the mind. She focuses on the Chat Noir and its cabaret, with its associated journal and its tendency to present *hommages* to Villon and Rabelais, medieval fabliaux filled with sexual innuendo, and encomia to drinking. Over time these taverns began to commercialize their celebrations of *l'heure verte* (the green hour, the time for drinking absinthe) and medievaesque cabaret, both opposing and endorsing political authorities of the time, looking nostalgically at the past but also standing aside and watching it represented theatrically, revelling in its distance from the present. David Lampe offers a similar unexpected and complex medievalism in his analysis of the detective novels of Margery Allingham and Dorothy Sayers. Usually analysed as firmly situated in the Edwardian world of little England, perhaps moving as far forward as the 1950s but mostly presenting a somewhat nostalgic but very English upper-class construction of the modern amateur detective, these novels—in Lampe's hands—become medievalist recreations of an antique past, with chivalrous knights engaging in quests and adventures, encountering marvels and firmly establishing a righteous and moral outcome, very much in the mode of the medieval romance. They reify and reinstate medieval notions of right and wrong, of the importance of authority while at the same time delineating a challenge, nearly successful, to that authority.

Kathleen Verduin takes on the great American progenitor of modernist poetry, Walt Whitman, and demonstrates that he, too, is writing remarkably medievalist materials. She anatomizes his vehement antimodernism and reconsiders his vehement reaction against what he perceives as the dangerous continuity in nineteenth-century American writings with ancient and feudal British traditions, but points out just how deeply he was embedded in and understood those traditions. William Calin turns to medievalism in France, but unusually to the seventeenth century, to the counter-reformation Baroque and to the unexpected figure of Pierre LeMoyne. LeMoyne's most well-known medievalist work is his epic poem on the thirteenth-century king of France and crusader, *Saint Louis*. Calin points out that, LeMoyne, like Whitman, tilts at windmills and constructs his own sense of the medieval (his version of Louis bears little resemblance to the original) in order to clear a mental and theological space for his own arguments in the seventeenth century. Finally, and significantly, Carol Robinson offers here the medievalism of deaf theatre, providing a first analysis of adaptations of Sir Gawain's marriage to Dame Ragnell and the morality play *Everyman* for deaf actors. From her opening analysis of how all medievalists "listen with their eyes" through the video clips that she provides through weblinks along the way to the final consideration of some works presented by her own students, Robinson provides an unexpected but extremely significant modern recreation of the medieval.

Part D considers new figures and approaches to the medieval, investigating figures and works never before considered for their connections to medievalism, or approaches that are extremely rare in the world of medievalism. Two papers actually address religion, something that in the modern era tends to be set aside as uncomfortable or difficult or polemic or dangerous. Clare A. Simmons even goes a step farther and first analyses both the historical and social context for John Henry Newman's grand plan to organize a new set of saints' lives for Victorian England, and then addresses some of the specific texts, including those of saints Helier, Bettelin, and Gundelus for the complex ways in which the Victorian authors of these re-made texts had to engage with the medieval legends and decide what to believe and what to include. The question of belief also interests Ronald Hutton, who tackles the awkward issue of Tolkien's use of magic, and how to reconcile his Christian beliefs with the supernatural effects he wanted to use in his fantasy works. Where John Henry Newman and his fellow writers adapted the lives of English saints on their way out of the Catholic Church (for most of them), John Ronald Reuel Tolkien wrote many of the materials in the *Lord of the Rings* and ancillary texts before thinking about his own orthodox Catholicism and the intersections of his beliefs with his writings. Hutton argues for Tolkien's initial conception of magic, his later attempt to reconcile the magic in his texts with orthodox theology and its opposition to notions of magic at work in the world unless the magic is tied to a monotheistic and benevolent Christian god, and his final decision to follow medieval tradition and incorporate the Valar, the elves, the wizards and others into a combined medieval tradition accepting both the supernatural and the magical and leaving the way open for the Christian.

Karl Fugelso continues his lifelong project of engaging with the medievalist reception of Dante with a first long look at Tom Phillips' illustrations of the *Inferno*. These highly personal and highly symbolic illustrations, produced in Britain in the 1970s, bring Fugelso to an edgy decision of his own: he surveys a group of fellow art historians in the field (dantisti) and also a group of his students asking for their impressions of one image from Phillips. His own maximum project leads him to conclude that Dante illustrations, even when only partially recognized, lead to profound engagements with Dante and with the Middle Ages. E. L. Ridsen looks at a similarly modern engagement with the Middle Ages, and one involving a similarly symbolic landscape, as he offers here a first analysis of the Japanese film-maker Hiyaoy Miyazaki. Miyazaki presents complex films which are child-friendly, and in which he anneals (as Ridsen puts it) Japanese myth with Western medieval romance tropes in the service of a genuine focus on the environment which Ridsen terms ecomedievalism. The stories are delicate and beautiful and quite profound, and Ridsen introduces the films elegantly for us. Also receiving an elegant introduction is Alfred Duggan, perhaps the least-known historical novelist of twentieth-century Britain. Tom Shippey gives us here a detailed commentary on Duggan's novels, focusing particularly on how his life intersects with his concerns in the novels, from his early years in Buenos Aires through his years as an entitled playboy in Edwardian England to his war experiences and his reinvention in the 1950s as a novelist. Shippey considers the most autobiographical of Duggan's novels, including *Knight with Armour*, *The Little Emperors*, and *Lord Geoffrey's Fancy*; Shippey is struck by the frequent ironies, the construction of feudalism as a very attractive way of life, and by the way in which Duggan used his novels to engage with some of the bitter miseries of his personal life, and to reach different conclusions. Reaching different conclusions is also Anita Obermeier's concern in her consideration of the post-medieval presentation of that unusual knight, Sir Dinadan. Obermeier articulates the independence of mind and approach of Dinadan, and examines his humour in a sequence of analyses beginning with the nineteenth-century Welsh writer Ernest Rhys, passing through various efforts including Mark Twain's complete recasting, and finishing with Gerald Morris' young adult interpretation in 2003. She brings to bear humour theory and psychological analysis in order to interpret this character, originally from Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* but now very much a part of the post-medieval Arthurian matter.

Gwen heard the first version of many of the papers offered to her here, and sometimes she tried unsuccessfully to recruit us to submit them to the *Year's Work in Medievalism*. Some of us did manage to hit her deadlines and get our papers in, and we have written new papers in her honour, maximizing our medievalism and pushing our boundaries. Others of us have taken advantage of this opportunity to ponder and rework our short papers, and think them through at a longer length and with more complexity of approach. All of us have enjoyed our many encounters with Gwen and with medievalism, and we hope that we have together maxed to the Gwen.