



The Future We—and the Middle Ages—Want

Usha Vishnuvajjala
American University

The elections held in the past few years, in the U.S., the U.K., and France in particular, were drenched in the language and imagery of both documented and imagined pasts and the possible futures those pasts might hold. That language and imagery have continued to permeate discussions, news, art, and activism in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. election. It is clear that the different visions we all had for the futures of our countries were dependent on different ways of understanding the present, and on wildly differing ideas of the past, both medieval and not. Some of these visions are relatively harmless, some serve to highlight a more inclusive past than we often think possible, and some rewrite the past in dangerous ways. This short essay seeks to contextualize the false historicism and medievalism of one right-wing voice, that of now-former White House advisor Steven Bannon, and to show that the resistance to his ideas is also continuous with medieval modes of imagination.

Bannon served as a senior advisor in the White House for seven months in 2017, despite his documented affiliation with neo-Nazis. He has articulated his views of the past and his visions of the future in a multitude of strange ways over his adult life, including co-writing a so-called rap musical about the 1992 Los Angeles riots based on Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* in the 1990s.¹ Bannon's vision of the twenty-first century world is deeply invested in a specific vision of the past that he believes predicts the future. In 2014, he spoke at a conference hosted by the Institute for Human Dignity, an organization that claims to be affiliated with the Catholic Church. was founded in part on the belief that Christians are politically persecuted, and features an image and quote of Bannon on the homepage of its website alongside commentary on political documents including the Magna Carta.² At this conference, Bannon argued that the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in 1914 led to "the bloodiest century in mankind's history," and that before the assassination, "the world was at total peace. There was trade, there was globalization, there was technological transfer, the High Church of

¹ See Daniel Pollack-Pelzner, "Behold, Steve Bannon's, Hip-Hop Shakespeare Rewrite: 'Coriolanus,'" *The New York Times*, December 16, 2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/17/opinion/sunday/steve-bannon-hip-hop-shakespeare-rewrite-coriolanus.html>; John Blistein, "He Approaches the Baby Gangsta: Watch Steve Bannon's Rap Musical," *Rolling Stone*, May 3, 2017 <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/watch-steve-bannons-surreal-shakespearean-rap-musical-w480133>; and Yohana Desta, "Steve Bannon's Hip-Hop Musical is as Horrifying as You Would Imagine," *Vanity Fair*, May 1, 2017 <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/05/steve-bannon-hip-hop-musical-reading>.

² See the Institute's "Declaration" at <http://www.dignitishumanae.com/index.php/declaration/>; accessed on March 23, 2018.

England and the Catholic Church and the Christian faith was predominant throughout Europe of practicing Christians.”³ There is a lot that is disturbing about this fantasy that the world was completely peaceful and overwhelmingly Christian one minute and had descended into a bloodbath dominated by Muslims and atheists from “the east” the next. But a particularly telling moment in this speech, for those of us who study medievalism, is his claim that, in the future, the twentieth century will be “looked on as almost a new Dark Age.”

“Dark Age” is a backwards-looking term, whether it is used to describe the Middle Ages from the perspective of modernity or early modernity or the enlightenment, or to describe the pre-Christian world from the perspective of Christianity.⁴ But both of these uses of “Dark Age”—neither of which is exactly what Bannon seems to be doing with the term—are backwards-looking precisely because they seek to define the present from which they are used. In other words, it is a term used to define the future of a “dark age” in relation to that age, not to define a current moment. It is quite different than thinking of a time as a “middle age,” a period of change and uncertainty and development. For Bannon, this “Dark Age” is one he sees as chaotic and dangerous because of the lack of a hegemonic world order that suppressed difference and conflict and kept various peoples segregated in their own corners of the globe. We know that such an order did not exist in the pre-1914 world, and we also know that the historical period most often called the “Dark Age,” or “Dark Ages,” the early Middle Ages, was a time of cultural and scholarly production, technological transfer, and trade, precisely because of the collapse of the Roman empire and the mixing of people from different parts of the world—the same conditions that Bannon argues are causing the present “bloodbath.” A worldview like Bannon’s, then, is entirely about understanding the present by rewriting the past, not seeking to understand the present to imagine or construct the future.

I suggest that, as a corrective to Bannon, we think about our present political period—not since 1914, but perhaps the last two or three years—as a sort of ‘middle age’: one in which global and multinational and national political structures are facing increasing uncertainty, as evidenced by the Scottish referendum, Brexit, various U.S. states entering into agreements with other nations, and other events. David Matthews has written that the “middleness” of the Middle Ages has largely ceased to be considered as a pejorative term, while the “inescapable implication” of its identity “as a period between two other periods” remains.⁵ How might we look to the Middle Ages for a way to understand a time of uncertainty about what our political future might look like as a potentially productive period, in which new forms of art and technology, new types of relationships and alliances, new affinities and sympathies, and new forms of knowledge can emerge? How might we look to both the historical Middle Ages and the alternatives imagined by medieval writers to imagine the futures that we ourselves might work toward?

³ *Buzzfeed News* published the entire speech, unedited. See J. Lester Feder, “This is How Steve Bannon Sees the Entire World,” *Buzzfeed News*, originally posted on November 15, 2016; https://www.buzzfeed.com/lesterfeder/this-is-how-steve-bannon-sees-the-entire-world?utm_term=.yiweea4j5Z#.ceGZZDB6M5 accessed on March 23, 2018.

⁴ For more on the adoption of the idea of a medieval “dark age,” see Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 1-22., for more on the function of non-historical and metaphorical uses of the Middle Ages in twenty-first century American politics and international relations, see Bruce Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2007).

⁵ David Matthews, “Middle,” in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), p. 142.

In order to begin to answer this last question, very tentatively, I want to briefly consider something that happened on social media in early 2017. A twitter user posted a photo of a woman in a hijab and performer Samuel Themer (with Themer dressed in full drag on her way to work), sitting next to each other on public transportation in NYC. The photo was initially taken, and posted on Instagram, by a young immigrant who thought it represented the diversity one encounters in a place like New York City.⁶ The post was shared widely until it made its way to an alt-right twitter account which reposted it with the sarcastic caption, “This is the future that liberals want.”⁷ The alt-right poster clearly intended for their tweet to be darkly funny, by highlighting the dissonance between what they saw as a liberal fantasy of the future and what they saw as, perhaps, either a natural order or the continuity of an existing social order in which these two people could not inhabit the same space.

The tweet, though, led to a backlash from people who affirmed that it was, in fact, exactly the future many of us want.⁸ Many of the responses noted that it was a photo of two people, each living their own life and minding their own business but also, just by existing in proximity to each other, making each other’s experience slightly richer and slightly safer. In pointing out that this photo depicted not only the future many Americans want but also the present they experience, which may be invisible to right-wing forces, these responses remind me of the depictions, sometimes barely legible unless one is looking for them, of medieval women who ally themselves with each other despite the patriarchal forces that discourage or even prohibit such alliances. As a scholar of medieval romance, I have spent a lot of the past few years thinking about how romance as a type of fiction depicts moments of unlikely friendship and sympathy that do not easily map onto social or political structures.⁹

I do not necessarily suggest that friendships and sympathies that transgressed social or political identities or what a right-wing reader might see as a “natural” order were pervasive in the Middle Ages. However, writers of medieval romance *imagined* an alternative past—and therefore an alternative present, and perhaps a possible future—in which people who were held apart by patriarchal structures and discourses could be allies to each other, even as those structures sought to divide them in order to control them. Those structures and discourses often worked to limit or discourage bonds between women, and in doing so, often made such bonds invisible to the patriarchal gaze.¹⁰ The twelfth-century Anglo-Norman *lais* of Marie de France often depicted affective sympathies overcoming social structures. In her longest *lai*, *Eliduc*, Marie gives us a story of two women, set in Brittany in the distant past, who we are primed to see as unable to occupy the

⁶ The twitter user, @Boubah360, tweeted on March 2, 2017, “This pic has been everywhere on social media and tons of people are claiming it. I took this image on the train #unity #acceptance.” <https://twitter.com/Boubah360/status/837371546935177217>; accessed March 23, 2018. Themer, who tweets at @gildawabbit, tweeted that same day, “I woke up to realize that the picture taken of me and my co-passenger is now all over Twitter as well #blessed.” <https://twitter.com/gildawabbit/status/837304876833124358>; accessed on March 23, 2018.

⁷ The account, @polNewsNetwork1, has since been suspended.

⁸ Julia Reinstein documents some of the responses in “This Far-Right Tweet About ‘The Future That Liberals Want’ Backfired Into A Huge Meme,” on *Buzzfeed News*, March 2, 2017. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/juliareinstein/this-is-the-future-liberals-want>; accessed on March 23, 2018.

⁹ Usha Vishnuvajjala, “Marriage, *Lealté*, and Sympathy in *Eliduc*,” *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, 59/2 (2017): 162-81.

¹⁰ For example, see Karma Lochrie on Aelred of Rievaulx in “Between Women,” *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*, ed. by Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 70-90.

same space. As the wife and would-be lover of the knight Eliduc, they occupy what seems like the same role in the story of that knight, and even their names, Guilliadun and Guildeluëc, are suggestive of their sameness or doubleness. But the *lai* turns out to be, as Marie hints at in the opening lines, the story of Guildeluëc and Guilliadun, who come to feel friendship, sympathy, and even love for each other. Whether Guildeluëc's love for Guilliadun when she brings her back from death has a sexual element has been a topic of some debate, but what cannot be denied is that Guildeluëc's behavior toward Guilliadun indicates affection, even though that affection manifests in her leaving Eliduc for the church so that he and Guilliadun may marry. The *lai* can be understood in a variety of generic and historic contexts, including as a commentary on ideas of marriage, loyalty, and divorce, and as a depiction of shifting ideas about knighthood and allegiance to one's king. But, as I have argued in the article cited above, the true adventure of the *lai*, as Marie herself tells us in its first thirty lines, is the meeting, interaction, and sympathy between the two women. In this story, which seems to be about a knight but is actually about the two women who are sympathetic and loving toward one another despite the patriarchal system and the specific man that seek to divide and control them, we can see Marie creating an alternative past in order to imagine a future in which such love and sympathy is possible.

This is the past Steve Bannon cannot see, and the future imagined by writers of that past is one to which we can continue to aspire in our own period of uncertainty. We can reject Bannon's idea that our time will be looked on in the future as a "Dark Age;" that is, as a period whose uncertainties and multiplicities are erased by political discourses that seek to define a future period by what our own time can be depicted as lacking. Instead, we might see our time as a "middle age," an in-between period of productive uncertainty and possibility, bearing all the futures we can imagine—including ones in which we can overcome the forces that seek to divide us and use us as weapons against each other.