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DWARFS SEATED ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Patricia Ann Quattrin

The study of the Middle Ages, and medieval literature in particular, has often received a "bad press." Why, some ask, should we study a people and period so far removed from our own? How could a culture whose life and literature were so completely controlled by the Catholic Church possibly be relevant to people in the late 20th century? What could a pre-enlightenment, pre-scientific European society have to impart to American students in the world today? Even those closest to the Middle Ages in historic time, the people of the Renaissance, chose to reject the heritage of their immediate past as a period of cultural darkness and to view their own age as a rebirth of classical culture and humanistic literature.

The Middle Ages is an important period to study for a myriad of reasons. I am a medievalist: that is, one who has spent most of her adult life studying the history, philosophy, religion, culture, and literature of this period, and sharing with my students the insights I have gained from this endeavor. While this doesn't necessarily make me an expert on all aspects of the Middle Ages, I am one passionately engaged with this subject matter, one who loves this period and its literature not only for itself, but also for its relevance for each of us.

The period known as the Middle Ages is generally accepted by scholars as beginning with the fall of the Roman Empire, about 500 AD, and ending with the Protestant Reformation in 1550, a period of time that covers over ten centuries. The term "Middle Ages" comes from the Renaissance. Certain humanist scholars of the 16th and 17th centuries chose to treat these centuries as an "unfortunate interlude between the calm, clear light of classical antiquity and the scientific reasoning" of their more "modern" age (Jackson, xi). Even in our language today, the term "medieval" carries a pejorative sense, indicating something old-fashioned or easily dismissed as of little or no relevance. A close look at this period, however, reveals some interesting facts. During these centuries, dramatic social and cultural change and invention took place. At the beginning of the period, people with little or no formal education lived in small nomadic tribes, led by charismatic, valorous lords, or in monastic communities, under the guidance and security of the Roman Catholic Church. By the mid-16th century, Europe was populated by large urban cities, engaging in cross-continental trade and commerce, and offering university education for those who sought it. In between came the invention of eye glasses, tableware, the mechanical clock, horse-drawn carriages, the cannon, and the printing press, the development of gun powder and the compass, the discovery of oceanic trade routes to India, Africa, the Orient, and the Americas.

The Middle Ages of Europe were the spawning ground of our modern Western world. Craftsmen and engineers harnessed natural power and developed labor-saving devices, such as water-powered grinding mills, to increase industrial production, thus laying the foundation for the coming of capitalism. The rise of political power among trade guilds and within cities laid the foundation for the coming of democracy. The operation of schools, hospitals, and orphanages moved gradually away from family to become the responsibility of the community, thus laying the foundation for the coming of socialized government. Certainly enormous differences in thought, social organization, and cultural level existed between the sixth and the sixteenth centuries, perhaps as many as exist between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, in the teeming, somewhat barbaric, essentially rustic life of these medieval centuries, many aspects of our modern society existed in different stages of development: our institutions, our class structure, our urban way of life. In the enduring controversy over the relevance of studying the past, a controversy that has gone on in one form or another since the recording of time, the illustrious scholar and teacher of the twelfth century, Bernard of Chartres, compared his own age with the ancient past by calling the twelfth century dwarfs seated on the shoulders of giants: we see more things than the ancients and things more distant, not because of the sharpness of our own sight or the greatness of our own stature, but because we are raised and borne aloft on that giant mass of past history and culture. The Middle Ages are important to study as one of those giant masses, an ancestral form of our own culture.

At the same time, however, this medieval culture is complete and distinctive in itself, differing profoundly and sometimes most strikingly from our own. One of the most strikingly different features which has at various points in history and from various groups drawn either excessive admiration or dramatic contempt is the culture's apparent unified Christendom and its deep, simple Christian faith. Like so much else about the Middle Ages, this view about Christianity is oversimplified. Scholars now recognize that such a Christian unity and naïve faith were not so complete or so widespread as once supposed. Much variation existed both in the levels of faith and in the practice of Church doctrine. Nevertheless, the Christian Church and its teachings did form the background of nearly every activity: social, political, cultural, as well as religious. The medieval Church served and shaped the civilization of Western Europe. The Church was a religious institution with secular power; it wielded a cohesive, independent, and political leverage unmatched in all history. Through its economic and political power, the papacy played a strong role in limiting the rise of and control by monarchies, although individual popes were never able to dominate kingdoms or kings. Perhaps more important to history and humankind than these political involvements, the Church also sponsored the rise of universities, supported vast numbers of schools and hospitals, provided hostels for the poor, homes for orphans, and help for the physically handicapped. Through its developing educational system and its preservation and copying of manuscripts, the Church did much to preserve, stimulate, and pass down intellectual thought and exploration. The impact of medieval Christianity on our modern world, not simply by

way of its religious doctrines, is far more pervasive and complex than most could ever imagine.

Another profound difference between the medieval culture and today is the bookish character of the Middle Ages. Although literacy was far rarer in that culture than it is today, reading was far more important. Whether it was reading aloud in community or reading to oneself, which even then often meant reading aloud, as words were mouthed to be heard by the reader as well as tasted, manuscripts offered a way into the past and a way to preserve the present. This was a culture indeed credulous of books. What the ancient *auctours* said was true. If one *auctour* contradicted another, which was often the case, the contradictions were simply harmonized. In our enlightened, scientific society, most knowledge depends in some way upon observation. In the Middle Ages, knowledge depended on authority, the authority of the book. Poets drew on, embellished upon, and poured new life into the matter that was handed down to them by means of the book.

The most essential element in a work of literature is the language in which it is written. The literature of the Middle Ages originates in several languages. Each "language has its own personality; implies an outlook, reveals a mental activity, and has a resonance, not quite the same as those of any other" (Lewis 6). The vocabulary, the syntax, the tone, the rhythm of a language all differ according to whether its roots are Germanic or French or Latin. Thus, to read *Beowulf* in the original Anglo-Saxon offers a much different experience than reading it in translation. To read Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in its original Middle English provides an inroad not only into the author's imagination, but also his mindset. To read Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* in its highly syntactic Latin is to understand a mind and a culture that are passionately systematic and formalized. To read Dante's *Commedia* in its medieval Italian is to experience a religious faith at once both beautiful and lyrical.

Yet, given all these facts about the economic, political, technological, and intellectual importance of the Middle Ages, why study its literature? When I teach a Medieval course, my intention is 1) to introduce students to the medieval roots of individual, social, and institutional ideals and values of our modern Western culture; and 2) to make students aware of the ideological and cultural presuppositions underlying the value systems, behavior patterns, and institutions of our modern Western civilization. While the study of a culture can proceed from a number of sources—such as, historical, philosophical, psychological, sociological, etc.—I choose to explore the Middle Ages through the study of its literature. Literature renders the whole of human experience.

The object of literature of any age, or any culture, is to reflect the attitudes, the beliefs, the understanding of that culture. Literature, good literature, is the expression of a society, as is music or art. Like music and art, literature "stirs the senses to action and the imagination to pleasure and the mind to delight" (Edman 39). Literature, even more than music and art, however, can transport one into the very being of a society. Much can be learned about a people through their literature: how they view themselves; how they view the world; how they view their place in the vast scheme of things.

Reading the literature of another time and place is important not only because it provides pleasure and enjoyment, but also because it can reveal the possibilities and limitations, the dangers and rewards of being human. One need not know about the Christian religion and certainly need not believe in the tenets of that religion, any more than one needs to know about Greek religion or believe in the Greek gods to appreciate and enjoy the literature and the art of these early periods, to absorb their aesthetic value. Whether it be a stained glass window of Chartres Cathedral or an Anglo-Saxon poem, such as "The Wanderer," these medieval works of art provide not only expressions of a deeply held faith, but also expressions of another civilization, a culture far removed in time from our own.

In academic circles today, the question of the importance of multicultural education for every college student remains the hot topic. Our own General Education Subcommittee at this very moment is engaged in a conversation about whether category CGE/B (Cultures) ought to be split into two categories: United States Diversity and Foreign Cultures. Perhaps the question that needs to be asked about the Middle Ages is not why should we study medieval literature, but rather why isn't the study of medieval literature a requirement under the General Education rubric of Foreign Cultures. For, by transcending the limitations of the present through the literature of another people, in this case a people who offer an ancestral form of our own culture, yet are essentially different from us, not only do we extend our own experiences in time and space, and our knowledge of history, but also we may come to know ourselves better. And isn't that, in the end, what the study of literature is really all about?

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