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Classen, Albrecht

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The Relevance of the Middle Ages—Revisiting an Old Problem in Light of New Approaches and Teaching Experiences in a Non-Western Context

Albrecht Classen

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3878-319X>

University of Arizona, U.S.

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The Relevance of the Middle Ages—Revisiting an Old Problem in Light of New Approaches and Teaching Experiences in a Non-Western Context

Albrecht Classen

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3878-319X>

University of Arizona, U.S.

Abstract

It ought to be an ongoing effort by all scholars/researchers to question the validity, legitimacy, and purposes of their own discipline because we live in an ever-changing world. This also applies to the field of medieval studies that faces considerable difficulties and challenges today with declining numbers of students enrolling in respective classes and lacking support by university administrators. This study begins with a general reflection on where we are today in terms of justifying the humanities at large, that is, of the study of literature particularly, and hence of medieval literature. Then this paper focuses on two universal themes, love and tolerance. While love has been associated with the courtly world since the twelfth century, tolerance does not seem to fit within the medieval context. However, the discussion of tolerance can be utilized as a catalyst for further investigations of medieval culture and literature within the framework of modern and postmodern responses to the Middle Ages. The exploration of this theme as it emerged already at that time offers intriguing opportunities to make the study of medieval literature relevant and important for us today.

Medievalism in the twenty-first century is alive and well, in terms of fantasy and playfulness, or in terms of serious re-enactments and also in myth-making, all over the world, whether in Germany or Japan, Great Britain or China. From the perspective of movies and video games, whether *Lord of the Rings* or the continuing interest in Arthurian stories, we can say that the medieval is still relevant, and this despite many misconceptions (Harris and Grigsby 2008). At the same time, the academic study of the Middle Ages is not doing so well, and that decline seems to have to do with its perceived irrelevance. At least in the context of North American universities, it might no longer be responsible to recommend pursuing a degree as a medievalist to a graduate student who is truly passionate about the field and willing to risk not teaching in the narrow discipline of their research. The academic specialization in medieval studies is not yet lost (Tracy 2022), but it seems to be in a crisis, part of the more general crisis of the humanities (Collini 2012; Nussbaum 2012; Drees 2021). Consequently, we should welcome every effort to explain its relevance today, even at the risk of preaching to the choir and perhaps without reaching powerful university administrators and government officials. Addressing the value of studying the Middle Ages contributes to the essential debate on the value of literature at large and the relevance of the humanities for exploring the human experience (Classen 2020). If enough students embrace the concept that the pre-modern world has much of value to tell us, then the public and the administrators must (or at least, should) listen to them, a development that could subsequently strengthen our position. Some topics that help make the medieval relevant for me emerged from a teaching experience in Egypt: the first topic focused on love as a universal emotion, and the second on the history of tolerance.

In the Fall of 2022, I had the opportunity to conduct research and to teach at Cairo University, Egypt, through a Fulbright grant. While I taught a range of different classes and gave lectures on many different topics, my focus rested on the idea of relevance. In the first part of the semester, we examined medieval courtly love poetry, especially Middle High German *Minnesang*, looking at a wide range of stances taken by the individual poets, from The Kürenberger to Heinrich von Morungen, from Heinrich von Veldeke to Walther von der Vogelweide.¹ This and other classes were mostly run in German. Subsequently, I asked students for written responses regarding the relevance of that literary material for themselves in Egypt today. To a degree, one might say that their embrace of these poems makes cultural and historical sense, since courtly love poetry likely demonstrates Arabic influences. My approach was not, however, comparative since this was a course on German medieval literature.

The outcome that I want to present here does not represent a truly reliable database because the number of participants was too small (ranging from eight to fifteen per class). However, even the rather anecdotal evidence I gathered signals a certain trend, especially because the Egyptian students appeared to respond to these medieval love poems in a very similar fashion as American students tend to do by focusing on the personal emotions the poems engender. For both Americans and Egyptians, the medieval past is almost similarly distant, both in terms of culture and history. Following, I will summarize, paraphrase, or translate some of the salient comments regarding the study of *Minnesang* shared by these students majoring in German and taking my course on medieval literature. These senior students are required to cover the major periods in the history of German literature, as it used

¹ For an excellent introduction, see Hübner 2023.

to be the case at many US universities until the late 1990s. As far as I could tell, the students' responses reflected their honest opinions. The students found relevant two main aspects of the course. The first, unsurprisingly, concerned the topic of love, and the second concerned the need to learn about the past in order to understand the present. The majority of the students approached the love poems in terms of personal and emotional feelings, whether the poems matched what they themselves thought about love. For example, Student A stated that the topic of love is simply important, both then and today, both for the individual and for those studying literature at large. Love represents an emotion, also in the Middle Ages, and examining courtly love poetry would hence open a window toward the world of feelings. This student did not yet demonstrate any awareness of the performative nature of most medieval love poetry, and so associated *Minnesang* with the personal experience of love, an observation that would not be wrong despite the lacking differentiation. Similarly, Student B expressed surprise that the problems of and being in love seem not to have changed profoundly from the Middle Ages until today, concluding that love, pain, longing, and passion are perennial experiences and deserve to be studied also through a historical-literary lens. Irrespective of the differences between the medieval period and the postmodern world, Student B observed, "human nature remains the same throughout time."

Such thoughts were echoed and expanded by Students C, H, and D, all of whom recognized the universality of love and then saw the poetry as a means to experiment and explore. For Student C, a focus on love made it possible to discuss other aspects, including tolerance and religion. While courtly love at first seems to concentrate on erotic feelings, the poetic engagement with it actually reveals the wide gamut of human actions, thoughts, and feelings as expressed by a poet. Similarly, Student H wrote "it is more than just that. It really is more complex than that. It is a mix of things & feelings like love, hate, war and many other things." This student realized the very nature of discourse and observed that courtly love poetry might be "a performance that opens a discussion about complicated feelings and how everyone views these feelings." Like Student H, Student D used the poetry to reflect on the purpose of literature. Literature, as this student formulated in response to my own suggestion, represents a laboratory of human life, that is, a unique space where extreme aspects in our existence can be explored in a more refined manner without having to engage with realism in the narrow sense of the word. A laboratory of love, so to speak, opens up when we study medieval love poetry. Or, put another way, the poetic text becomes a literary mirror that refracts in unique and multiple fashions the critical issues as they affect us throughout time.

Students were almost equally interested in discussing the relevance of the past to our own time. Of course, here we encounter the truism that "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it." Though broadly shared and seeming to be self-evidently true, it is too vague to bridge the real epistemological challenge the academic field faces among the young generation. Could, for instance, the study of medieval literature contribute to addressing fundamental issues today, solve major tragedies, console people suffering from strikes of misfortune, or answer critical questions pertaining to one's happiness or sorrow? I believe that this is certainly the case, and my students seemed to agree. For example, Student E first claimed that the examination of the Middle Ages might serve well to understand the other literary-historical periods. He then referred to an allegedly Egyptian proverb claiming that the person who does not have a past would also not have a present and hence a future, a close echo of Santayana's familiar axiom. Subsequently, this student proposed that virtually

everything we have today in the twenty-first century—except perhaps such technologies as the internet—already existed in the Middle Ages. All the ideas, ideologies, inventions were there already, especially the cultural aspects. While the formal conditions such as politics, social conditions, and the languages have changed since then, the cultural fundamentals all already existed in the past. By way of looking backwards to the medieval past, this student suggests, we would empower ourselves to comprehend our own life circumstances and hence develop a pathway toward our future.

I paraphrase this student's account at some length because it was initially more critical and dismissive of the relevance of the Middle Ages and identified its study as nothing but paying lip service to the demand of the academic canon that the study of German Literature must also cover the medieval past. The alleged irrelevance of the Middle Ages dissipated, however, when the student realized that soccer was already a practiced sport in that time period, for instance, or tennis, golf, swimming, and wrestling (Classen 2019). Suddenly, the entire epoch became interesting and relevant. We observe here clearly a certain degree of resistance to the idea that the study of medieval literature might be significant, but then, in order to comply with the 'task' of commenting, at least voluntarily, on the class's subject matter, this student paradoxically identified various tropes concerning the relevance of the past and concluded that only if we study past cultures can we comprehend our own world predicated on those medieval conditions.

Other students also noted that the Middle Ages was the origin of many of today's institutions and ideas, and, as a result, the study of it would proffer insights into our present. For example, Student F simply commented that many discoveries and inventions were made at that time. Understanding the Middle Ages would contribute to our comprehension of how our own society and civilization developed. This student also emphasized that it is impressive to know that many aspects of medieval culture emerged in the Orient and not in the Occident. Overall, the student expressed great respect for and admiration of the Middle Ages as an intriguing, in fact already highly sophisticated, world that deserves our attention and close examination. Much evidence regarding medieval philosophy, medicine, architecture, hygiene, and the sciences points toward that direction, but the student could not elaborate further except expressing pride in the glory of the medieval Orient.

Similarly, Student G broadly embraced the Middle Ages as a cultural period filled with much useful information. Consequently, many aspects of medieval philosophy, culture, art, economy, education, literature, and trade exerted a considerable influence on the modern world. The student then sought to differentiate further between positive and negative impact factors, a step highlighting the way rationality might allow us today to approach dangerous ideologies or types of ideas more critically. It would be intriguing to probe more deeply how this student pursued such rational critique; however, the response demonstrates a recognition that the study of the Middle Ages remains a worthwhile enterprise.

This interest in the past was described not just in general terms, with a focus on institutions, but also in individual terms, as the medieval past became personally meaningful to these students, especially for those majoring in German Studies. For example, Student H voiced extensive comments about the importance of the Middle Ages because having a solid understanding of the literature produced at that age would be a *conditio sine qua non*. We also hear an impressively mature insight: "studying medieval ages [sic] creates a deep connection to the past and with that, we can get a deeper perspective into the future." This student admitted to having a love for simply collecting treasures

from times past because they constitute memories. Examining the Middle Ages provides a “historical perspective of the very past. Studying old songs and manuscripts is mesmerizing because we get to see the way they wrote back then, their track of thoughts, and mainly a glimpse of what every aspect of life was like a long time ago.” To scholars, such an approach might seem unsophisticated since the past is taken as a purpose by itself without any further reflections on the meaning and relevance of studying it. At the same time, this student also expressed contempt for all those people who easily claim to have come up with something new, when a thousand years earlier the very same thought had already been formulated. The student concluded, quite meaningfully, “it pretty much means that everything is connected and every one of us contains traces of the other.”

Similarly, student I simply expressed great interest in the history of that past world, particularly in realizing that the Catholic Church exerted such a great influence on society at large during the Middle Ages. This student, another major in German Studies, embraced the medieval period as equally important as all the others, and hence as an important topic at large. Speaking broadly, the student emphasized that many major events that took place in the Middle Ages had a considerable impact on the modern world. Finally, Student J stated that “[l]earning about the medieval ages [sic] is thought-provoking,” a comment that proves to be insightful by itself. The student advocated the study of medieval literature as a medium to understand people’s lives from the past. As a major in German, the student considered the Middle Ages, its language, and its literature necessary to learn about since they “create a deep connection to the past and with that, we can get a deeper perspective into the future,” and they contribute to a better understanding of the history of the German language.

Another group of students, who had briefly studied medieval German literature and listened to my lecture on the history and culture of the sixteenth century, also offered some similar opinions. Some of their relevant statements involved the importance of the Middle Ages as the foundation of our modern time due to the exploration of the world and the rise of modern sciences already then (1), the beauty of medieval literature at large (2), the difference to us today in terms of global world knowledge (3), the great importance of religion at that time, and the position of the Middle Ages between the past and the present (4, 7, and 8), the foundation of medieval German literature as such (5), the alterity of that period compared to us (6), and the conflict between the Church and the state (9). Finally, Student 10 commented that Christianity was established in the Middle Ages and identified the significant role played by Charlemagne. Interestingly, Student 9 also wondered why feudal society developed at that time.

Clearly, neither group of these students would have engaged with the Middle Ages if they had not been required to take that course for their major in German Studies. This factor is very common in all educational situations since students normally do not yet know what awaits them in the various courses. It pertains to our judgment to select subject matter we deem important as the central core for our majors or minors. By the same token, we must be open and honest about the reasons why we made that choice for them and try to convince them concerning the relevance of those courses, whether in Egypt or in the United States. Not to teach medieval literature does not represent a catastrophe and abandoning the humanities at large would also be imaginable for our post-modern society, as horrible as that scenario might sound. However, what we do in this field, past or present, constitutes a critical endeavor to explore and establish human meaning and relevance, which no STEM field can substitute (Gumbrecht 2015). Turning away from the humanities means turning away from

the human. Such a change might not have an immediately direct and negative impact, but the long-term consequences for society at large could not be more devastating because it would eliminate the teachings of ethics, morality, the formation of personal identity, and the value of culture for the community through a contemporary or a historical lens.

Preliminary Conclusions

Altogether, these Egyptian students demonstrated a considerable degree of curiosity about and interest in the Middle Ages, although they also openly admitted that they took the medieval German literature course because it was required. They were willing to accept the relevance of the past for their present and also future, even though they might have had good reasons to see the German medieval past as entirely foreign. Instead, they consistently recognized and acknowledged the universal relevance of the discourse on love as it had developed already in the late-twelfth century (within the Middle High German context). Under my guidance, they had partially managed to move away from wanting to see those poems as real or realist, and they realized to some extent the performative and artful nature of courtly literature.

This admittedly small sample of students' opinions can inform us well about general notions and perspectives, and it provides us with a gist of the general trend among our target audience at an Egyptian university concerning their expectations and responses. The students were required to take the course on Middle High German literature but volunteered their opinions (anonymously) after having studied their material. At the same time, we must keep in mind how we ought to think about major intellectual, spiritual, or ethical ideals and values as they developed in the past and ultimately have an impact on us today. This awareness would then facilitate our planning and development of relevant courses that promise to secure a strong enrollment.

Because of my time in Egypt, I am interested in interfaith contact, and so I am choosing the topic of toleration/tolerance as well as it slowly but certainly developed in the Middle Ages, well before the age of Enlightenment. If we accept its relevance universally, then we must also acknowledge the roots of this new philosophical-ethical concept since we are its direct heirs. If we can identify literary texts, for instance, in which we can recognize specific elements of open-mindedness and mutual respect, then we have available important arguments justifying the study of medieval literature once again, and now by means of critical theory, for instance.

Fortunately, the larger issue has already been dealt with at length (Classen 2018; Classen 2020), so here I only need to pick up a few examples to illustrate how they demonstrate the value of medieval studies in the history and study of tolerance. To remind us briefly, Wolfram von Eschenbach, in his Grail romance *Parzival* (ca. 1205), projected the possibility of a Christian knight, Gahmuret, the father of the future protagonist Parzival, fighting in the service of a mighty Muslim ruler in Baghdad and receiving highest accolades after his death. Gahmuret also falls in love with a black queen and has a child with her, although he leaves her because he desires manly accomplishments more than marital bliss. The anonymous author of the huge but fragmentary *Reinfried von Braunschweig* (ca. 1280) imagines the possibility that the eponymous Christian hero realizes that he cannot force anyone to convert to Christianity, so he abandons all of his intentions with the defeated Persian prince and rather strikes a friendship with him, whereupon both tour the Persian empire to marvel at the many "wonders." The

didactic poet Freidank formulated numerous epigrams (ca. 1240–1260) in which he acknowledged that all three world religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—were God’s children.

Boccaccio, in his famous *Decameron* (ca. 1350), included three stories that are predicated on the notion of toleration and then even tolerance, with the third story told on the first day later becoming the source for famous Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s *Nathan der Weise* (1779), where tolerance gains the clearest expression in the history of western literature yet. And in the ninth story told on the tenth day, we observe a close friendship and mutual respect between the Sultan Saladin and a Pavian Christian merchant, with the religious differences not playing any role any longer. Moreover, the Mallorcan philosopher Ramon Llull (ca. 1232–ca. 1315) developed in his dialogue treatise *Llibre del gentil e dels tres savis* (ca. 1270) a first major philosophical platform for the representatives of all major religions to come together, to debate their own faith, and to acknowledge the validity of the other religious beliefs. Beyond that, the late Middle Ages (Nicholas of Cusa) and the early modern age (Sebastian Franck, Valentin Weigel) witnessed ever new voices speaking up in favor of irenic principles and early forms of toleration and then tolerance. There was, of course, not a wide-spread consensus in that regard, but there were enough individual voices to teach us that the roots of tolerance can be traced back even to the Middle Ages, although it was, overall, a fairly intolerant culture (Smelyansky 2020).

We realize, in other words, that the critical debate about the harmonious cohabitation of people from different races, religions, and languages, as it originated already in the Middle Ages, appears to carry direct relevance for modern students (Classen 2023). Testing out this topic in workshops and lectures to larger groups of students at Cairo University and elsewhere confirmed that the interest in that time period was uniformly high, irrespective of political and cultural differences between Egypt and the United States (or other countries). If this observation can be upheld in other educational settings, then there is nothing in the way of studying those universal humanist issues also through a medieval lens. In fact, the discussion of toleration/tolerance in the pre-modern era promises truly innovative perspectives students would not have expected, while the material at discussion addresses the issue head-on.²

Conclusion

The certainly limited data collected from Egyptian students indicated that there is considerable potential among the present generation to attract them to medieval literature. That potential matches with what I have learned after having offered numerous lectures on different topics regularly pertaining to the Middle Ages and having discussed with M.A. and Ph.D. students their projects: a smart teaching approach, drawing from universal concerns and ideals relevant for humanity at large, can make medieval literature refreshingly attractive and important also for the present student generation. The real issue is not dependent on the medieval component, but on the question of what literature per se would matter for modern readers, hence students and administrators. As long as the humanities are accepted as a relevant field of study at large, there is little doubt that the research and teaching of the Middle Ages will continue to be of importance for the young generation, and this not only in the Western world. Vice versa, if medievalists can invigorate the study of literature from their

² See the contributions to Dunne and Gottlöber 2022.

time period because it offers so many fundamental insights into universal themes such as love, death, God, spirituality, gender, racism, and the environment, then the humanities will be well served.

I would like to round off these reflections first with two quotes from a statement provided by a US freshman who took an honors colloquium online with me in Fall of 2022 (email, Nov. 8, 2022), and then with two quotes from fellow students in the same group all about the continued relevance of the Middle Ages for our students. In class we discussed the works of the South German (Swabian) poet Heinrich Kaufringer, and the course was provocatively entitled “Reflections on Life—The Late Medieval Poet Heinrich Kaufringer.” His verse narratives, which resemble in many ways the tales by Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales* (both composed around 1400), raise numerous intriguing questions about human justice versus divine justice, communication, marital life, honor, female agency, self-determination, and the use of rationality—as if they had been written in the twentieth or twenty-first century (Classen 2013). The student had at first worried about the possible difficulty level of that course, but quickly changed her/his mind: “His stories are packed full of interesting characters and moral quandaries. And every work we have read has involved themes that remain relevant.” At the end, the student states, or rather asks—which is a great promise for the future of medieval studies—: “Now, I am curious about the work of other Medieval [sic] authors. Is Kaufringer’s writing typical of the period?”

The other student commented: “the study of the Middle Ages is very complimentary and enriching to scholars of all studies, especially those who seek to learn and understand the reasons behind human nature, our weaknesses, and our strengths individually and as a community. The Middle Ages give us a look into the past and the history of human culture. It helps us to think deeply and ask provoking questions.” And the third student opined: “The Middle Ages is a period that should be studied by all students because it gives an educative insight into the development that occurred in the following fields: art, languages, culture, and religion. I studied this period because it gave me a better understanding of how civilization started and how the middle ages [sic] are connected to the modern and how it did shape the modern world. The middle ages [sic] made me learn how moral values, cultural values and religious values were the order of that period which can't be said of the modern.”

In a subsequent class at the University of Arizona (Spring 2023, in person), we studied, among many other texts, the Old High German balladic poem “Hildebrandslied” (ca. 820 C.E.), and again, students responded with enthusiasm and agreed, for instance, that it carries relevance “because it discusses conflicts like war and lack of communication... It refocuses the importance of miscommunication and the lack thereof.” Indeed, here we observe the catastrophic consequences of the military code of honor in the early Middle Ages, with an old father (Hildebrand) being forced to fight his son (Hadubrand), who does not recognize or acknowledge him. As another student stated, “[t]he conflicts discussed in the song are still applicable today.” These opinions, shared by the other members of that class, confirm what I have argued already quite some time ago (Classen 2005).

In short, altogether we have direct evidence that the study of the Middle Ages can indeed deeply appeal also to the current generation. Pursuing medieval studies is thus not at all a lost cause, as long as we remember that our class topics must be relevant insofar as the material reflects human life in all of its intricacies, problematics, and potentials. The historical perspective hence provides a medium for future orientation. We should not shy away from this challenge and take it on proactively both within our departments and colleges. If we diversify our educational programs and have graduate students

take courses both in medieval studies and ecocriticism, or gender studies and medieval studies, for instance, they would be well qualified for the future academic job market. We are the direct heirs of the discourses from the past (Kostick, Jones, and Oschema 2020).

The opening line of Leslie Poles Hartley's famous novel *The Go-Between*, "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there," would perfectly apply to our reflections and ought to be embraced by any student who is invited to consider the Middle Ages as a topic of interest and relevance (1953). The combination of alterity and familiarity makes medieval literature into a truly fascinating and valuable object of investigation, a dark mirror of ourselves. It might be very difficult to convince students to major or minor in that field, but if we can hold their interest at least enough to enroll in some of our courses, we can trust in the viability of this field after all (Albin, Erler, et al. 2019). If that attraction to medieval literature can be maintained, then the Humanities will be in a good shape in the future as well (Aldama 2008; Classen 2022).

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