

UC San Diego

New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession

Title

Teaching Medieval Chivalry in an Age of White Supremacy

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/68z8t9mp>

Journal

New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession, 3(2)

Author

Moss, Rachel E.

Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/NC33259125

Copyright Information

Copyright 2022 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed



PEDAGOGY & PROFESSION

NEW CHAUCER STUDIES

Volume 03 | Issue 02

Fall 2022

Teaching Medieval Chivalry in an Age of White Supremacy

Rachel Moss

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0934-4080>

University of Northampton, UK

Moss. 2022. Teaching Medieval Chivalry in an Age of White Supremacy. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 3.2: 6-18. https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.

© 2022 by the author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives 4.0 license. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* is an open access, bi-annual journal sponsored by the New Chaucer Society and published in eScholarship by the California Digital Library. | https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.

The editorial staff of *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* works hard to ensure that contributions are accurate and follow professional ethical guidelines. However, the views and opinions expressed in each contribution belong exclusively to the author(s). The publisher and the editors do not endorse or accept responsibility for them. See https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/policies for more information.

Teaching Medieval Chivalry in an Age of White Supremacy¹

Rachel Moss

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0934-4080>

University of Northampton, UK

Abstract

This essay examines the appropriation of medieval history by far-right British publications in the 1960s and 1970s, in the context of teaching medievalism to undergraduate students. It is informed by the author's experience of designing and delivering an undergraduate course on chivalry in medieval and postmedieval context that utilises the resources of the Searchlight Archive, a significant repository for fascist and anti-fascist materials from British and international groups from 1965 to the near-present day.

¹ My thanks to Troy Paddock and Helen Young for their generous and encouraging peer reviews of the first version of this article.

In August 2017, hundreds of white supremacists converged on Charlottesville, Virginia, USA, for a violent rally that killed one woman and injured many others. As one might expect, the protestors carried and wore images evoking the Confederacy, the Ku Klux Klan or Nazis; but they also used symbols referencing medieval saints, Vikings and the Crusades. Anyone who has been at least a little bit online in the time since then will be aware that the extreme right regularly co-opt the medieval past. The years since the Charlottesville attack have seen growing scholarship in this area, including work on how to approach this topic in the classroom. Most of this scholarship has so far been focused on North America, but as a British historian I am keenly aware this is not only an “American problem”. There has also been limited engagement between scholars of the far right and medievalists in addressing this issue. Accordingly, in this short essay I will explain how, with the collaboration of colleagues in modern British history, I have accessed far-right materials held in a UK archive, and offer some insights into the safe and effective use of these materials in undergraduate teaching of medieval history.²

Charlottesville was, of course, not the beginning of an extremist trend in co-opting medieval history, nor was it the start of a conversation amongst medievalists about how we as a discipline address this issue. It did, however, give the discussion more urgency, and much important work has been published in the five years since. Much work by medievalists has emphasised the ways in which the far right wilfully misinterprets the medieval past to imagine an Edenic white pastoral paradise. Vanessa Jaeger has written recently for this journal on how American far-right extremists capitalise on a fantasy of white, heteronormative Middle Ages to press their anti-Islamic agendas (2021). Similarly, Dorothy Kim has argued that alt-right appropriation of Viking and Crusader history is “intended to incite violent racism, xenophobia, toxic masculinity, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism” (2018).³ She has been willing to acknowledge explicitly something many medievalists sidestep: that white supremacists may well assume scholars of the Middle Ages are on their side (2017).⁴ As Carol Symes has eloquently put it, the “task of the medievalist, from the earliest days of history’s institutionalization as a modern academic discipline, was to construct the nationalist narratives that bolstered the claims to territory, patrimony, and sovereignty on which 19th-century European states and aspiring states depended” (2017). The history of our field has been shaped by the demands of white supremacy.

While the field as a whole has shown a troubling inertia about the ongoing weaponisation of medieval history by extremists, a number of scholars are doing groundbreaking work in this area. These scholars have overwhelmingly been marginalised within the academy on one or more axes.⁵

² In this essay I will be using Tore Bjørgo and Jacob Aasland Ravndal’s definitions of the far right as a “broad [political] landscape [...] characterised by authoritarianism and nativism”, and that the extreme right are a sub-set of this broad category who “reject democracy and are willing to use violence or other nonconventional means to achieve their goals” (2019, 2).

³ See also Kim (2019).

⁴ Kim’s blog post for *In the Middle* really seized my imagination when I first read it in 2017, and the title of this article is intended as a very small tribute to her important work in this area.

⁵ My particular thanks are owed here to Dr Helen Young, whose generous and thorough peer review directed me toward several references I ought to have included in my first submission. Any further omissions are my own error. Happily, Dr Young’s excellent essay on white-washing the Middle Ages (2019) is already a key reading in the popular media week of my medieval chivalry module.

Many are precariously employed and many are people of colour. As Mary Rambaran-Olm has noted in a recent review of David Perry and Matthew Gabriele's *The Bright Ages* (2021), it is very easy for white scholars (like me!) to package an awareness of the failings of the field of medieval studies as something new and unexplored – “an obliviousness that comes with the privilege of a white lens” (2022). In fact, this work has been going on for years, although the specific academic focus on the draw of the Middle Ages for white supremacists has sharpened since extremist Anders Breivik murdered seventy-seven people in Norway, declaring himself a modern Knight Templar (Wollenberg 2014). Andrew Elliott's monograph on medievalism and mass media made the very important case for the “banal medievalisms” of popular culture that, disconnected from any deep understanding of medieval history, serve to underpin dangerous political ideologies in ways that cannot be mitigated by mere myth-busting, as it were (2017, 23). In 2019, the edited volume *Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past* brought together twenty-two contributors aiming to debunk damaging myths about the Middle Ages. All of these essays pushed back against a vision of a white, monocultural medieval world, but those that particularly addressed contemporary white supremacy included work by Nicholas Paul, Magda Teter, Fred Donner, William J. Diebold, Maggie Williams, Helen Young, and Adam Bishop. A year later, an essay by Cord Whitaker came out in an edited volume addressing far-right revisionism. In the article, Whitaker reflects on the Charlottesville attack, and unpacks the special role that medieval history, and in particular the ethos of chivalry, has for the “alt right” (white supremacy's latest moniker, coined in 2008 by extremist Richard Spencer [Bar-On 2019]). Whitaker finds in the Harlem Renaissance an answer to not only mid-century fascism but a Black lens through which to read the contemporary moment (2020, 166-170).

This is only a sample of the dynamic work being done in this area – work that is often undertaken at a high personal cost, as authors who write about the far right, particularly authors not shielded by their own whiteness, are often targeted for abuse and harassment by extremists. I am not here attempting to replicate or overshadow any of this work. However, much of the critical material published so far has focused on American extremists, and so in this short essay, I offer some insights into how I am using the opportunity of teaching a second-year undergraduate course in medieval history to open up much broader questions about how medieval history is co-opted by modern British fascists. In terms of locating myself within this field of scholarship: I am a white woman with an open-ended contract at the University of Northampton, meaning my employment is relatively secure (as British universities do not offer tenure). However, my current employer is a “post-92” university, an institution established following the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, which made changes in the funding and administration of further education and higher education within England and Wales. A number of former polytechnics (tertiary education institutions often with a vocational focus) and technical colleges gained university status through this Act. Institutions like mine are significant in offering access to students in the localities, as well as making space for students with non-traditional qualifications for entry into higher education. Often denigrated in the press and by the Conservative government for supposedly offering “low value” degrees, in recent years these newer universities have been targeted in the culture wars and seen repeated course closures and redundancies, particularly in

the humanities.⁶ With this cultural backdrop, it was bold of my institution to offer me a post as its first medieval historian, expanding rather than contracting its chronological offerings in terms of available courses.

In the context of both working in a field that has historically ignored – sometimes naively, too often wilfully – what can be seen as its complicity in white supremacy, and of working in an educational context that is being targeted for dismantling by the mainstream right wing, I was determined when I was hired by Northampton that I must create courses that not only introduced students to the medieval past but also connected the study of that past with urgent priorities of today. Medieval history is very poorly represented in school curricula in the UK, yet the institutional right wing regularly references key moments in English medieval history such as the Battle of Agincourt and the signing of the Magna Carta as “proof” of English supremacy.⁷ This language is of course replicated and intensified by far-right groups within the UK. Medievalism (briefly defined as the post-medieval reconstructions of the Middle Ages) thus has a significant cultural place in both mainstream right and far-right discourses in modern Britain, and it was clear to me that any courses I developed at Northampton must give students the tools to engage critically with the issue of how the medieval past is understood by later societies, and how that understanding shapes their cultures.

My first-year survey course “The Medieval World” prioritises working with sources that reveal the experiences of minoritised people over chronological grand narratives, and my third-year specialist course “The Wars of the Roses” lets students engage with film theory, fandom studies and more in looking at the cultural legacy of the fifteenth-century civil war. Meanwhile, in this essay I will focus on the development and teaching of my module “Medieval Chivalry and its Afterlives”, which is a second-year undergraduate course I launched in 2021.⁸ I intended to build an undergraduate medieval history course with a strong strand on medievalism, and to capitalise on our unique resource, the [Searchlight Archive](#).

Searchlight magazine was founded in 1964, becoming a monthly publication in 1975, and its continuing purpose is to investigate and oppose fascism. Its primary focus is Britain, but it is also interested in international fascism. As well as holding copies of the magazine itself, the Searchlight Archive holds a vast array of material associated with British far-right groups such as the National Front and the British National Party, as well as international materials by groups including the American Nazi Party and the Blood and Honour music network. The collection is held on long-term loan by Searchlight to the University of Northampton in a collaboration developed by my colleague Professor Paul Jackson, a leading scholar in fascism studies, and the current archivist for the project is his recent PhD student, Dr Daniel Jones. The archive is a phenomenal resource of international significance, and we currently have several PhD students using it. They are all focused on studying

⁶ The phrase “low value degree” directly relates to the salary prospects of recent graduates, as outlined officially by the UK Government [here](#). I would hope colleagues reading this publication can immediately see the problem with basing the value of a university education purely on salary outcomes within five years of graduation. The professional body History UK has given [this statement](#) on course closures in the UK.

⁷ John Ford (2021) discusses this in an excellent essay that sets medieval metaphors in the context of Brexit. John C. Ford.

⁸ A module is a typical unit of assessment in a British university. At my institution, students take 120 credits each year; on the History degree, each module is usually worth 20 credits.

more contemporary fascism, but my hope is that going forward we will also recruit research students interested in bridging the medieval and the modern.⁹

“Medieval Chivalry and its Afterlives” asks students to analyse the perennial appeal of the ethos of chivalry in a time when white supremacy is increasingly emboldened and taking centre stage in political discourse. Defining chivalry has been the life-work of several historians, but to sum it up simply: chivalry was a set of ideals and practices shared by an elite warrior cast in high- and late-medieval Europe.¹⁰ Its ideological influence, however, spilled out far beyond the strict martial context in which it emerged. Chivalry as a set of ideals never entirely died away in the early modern period, but the ethos saw a significant revival of wider cultural interest from the late eighteenth century onward, peaking with the mid-to-late Victorian period (think Tennyson and the pre-Raphaelite artists) and periodically coming to public attention again ever since. Consequently, I have divided my module on chivalry into two main strands. The first part charts the medieval development of chivalry as ideology and ethos, guiding students in understanding how it worked in theory and in a real-world context. The second part considers how chivalry as an ethos is interpreted and incorporated into post-medieval society, with case studies based around the Victorian era, the World Wars, and England from the late 1960s.

Students usually come to the course after having taken my first-year module “The Medieval World”, so they will have had some medieval history background but have not studied it in more specialist contexts. Many of them will have also taken Paul’s modules on Nazism and Communism and are also more likely to have studied those subjects at school, so they will usually come to my class with some understanding of the evolution of fascism. This is helpful in the second part of the module, which follows medieval chivalry’s “afterlives” from the early modern period through to the near-present. We focus particular attention on the period from 1914 onward. As Stefan Goebel argues, “The language of sanctity originated in wartime images of the Great War as a transcendental strife against evil”, which played a key part in the visual language of First World War propaganda (2007, 83). But perhaps more importantly, following World War I, medieval history, and particularly the ideology of chivalry with its focus on duty and honour, served a useful function in making sense of what otherwise might have felt like senseless slaughter. The chivalric shorthand of the Great War’s memorialisation attempted to transform the wholesale massacre of a generation of men into a meaningful sacrifice.

“Time is a flat circle”: Medieval Chivalry and Fascist Temporalities

I am of course not arguing that the authorities post-WWI were necessarily fascist, but I am making the case that to understand the far-right co-option of the medieval, we cannot just look at the contemporary alt-right movement or even the fascism of the 1930s and 1940s. Instead, students need to understand that folding the timeline between the distant past and the present is a long-established far-right political strategy, and also that it may reflect a more fundamental ideological certainty about the nature of time. As a comparison I used in the classroom to introduce these themes, in the 2014

⁹ You are welcome to get in touch with me directly if you have questions about potential projects.

¹⁰ The best introduction to both medieval chivalry and its complex historiography is Richard Kaeuper’s *Medieval Chivalry* (2016), which I have set as the textbook for my module.

TV series *True Detective*, character Rust Cohle declares that “time is a flat circle”, which reflects a fairly unsophisticated understanding of Nietzsche’s theory of eternal recurrence; Matthew McConaughey’s intense performance of the part gives such banal statements more force than perhaps the script deserved. Nazi ideology generated and relied upon oversimplified versions of Nietzschean thought, and the contemporary far right continues to make use of cherry-picked excerpts from Nietzsche’s writing. For instance, both Nazis and modern extremists like Richard Spencer enthusiastically emphasise Nietzsche’s work on civilisational decline and cultural decay but conveniently ignore his contempt for nationalism and his criticism of composer Richard Wagner’s antisemitism (Illing 2018).¹¹ For the Nazis, Nietzsche’s theme of recurrence was a vital part of an ideology that envisioned history not as linear progression but rather as a cycle. This provides an interesting point of discussion in the classroom, because I work hard with students to problematise simplistic linear narratives of history that often characterize their pre-university understanding of the past. A cyclical reading of the past can seem more sophisticated, and therefore “better”, so this point of the module requires some significant grounding in contemporary scholarship to problematise the far right’s reading of the past.

In the classroom I introduce Roger Griffin’s concept of palingenesis, which has been profoundly influential in fascism studies. This theory argues that a central definition of fascism is its core myth, namely that of the necessity of revolution in order to achieve a “national rebirth”. When this is combined with ultranationalism – an extreme promotion of and dedication to one’s nation – you have the basic recipe, Griffin argues, for fascism across many countries and time periods (2003). I make the case to my students that the way fascists co-opt symbols of medieval history is part of their collapsing of the distinction between past and future, of seeing time as a *True Detective*-like “flat circle”. Fascists see a necessary element of the struggle to escape the “degenerate” present as a societal rebirth that mimics the Edenic past.

This leads me to a difficult point, one that few medievalists have been willing to address head on: there is, in fact, quite a lot in the medieval past that appeals to fascist sensibilities, and it is not purely fascists’ misinterpretation of that history (for instance, believing medieval Europe to have been a white idyll) that explains their continued fascination with the Middle Ages. I am not just talking here about the obvious appeal to fascists of the image of knights in shining armour killing Muslims. There are deeply embedded elements of medieval culture that resonate with the values and fantasies of the extreme right. We are right to firmly reject extremist narratives that medieval Europe was an exclusively white space without immigration or free movement, but we must also grapple with the aspects of medieval culture that the extreme right finds so compelling. For example, medieval temporalities would not have seemed alien to mid-century fascists; indeed, they would have welcomed them as a respite from what they saw as a degenerate bourgeois preoccupation with progress through time. I would argue that medieval prophecy finds an intellectual descendant in Nazism’s hectic visions of the future. As Reinhart Koselleck has argued, prophecy collapses the distinction between past, present and future, predicting a future that is already determined (1979, 17-38). Similarly, scholars of fascism have examined how Nazi visual imagery draws on Christian eschatology to represent the folding of past, present and future. As Christopher Clark argues, the subject is “suspended between

¹¹ See also Whyte (2008). Nietzsche’s antisemitism or rejection of antisemitism is a topic of much discussion among scholars. This is well outside my area of specialism, but Alex Soros offers a good summary of scholarly perspectives in his review “Nietzsche’s Jewish Problem” (2018).

the memory of a past redemption (in the form of Christ's incarnation) and the anticipation of a future collective salvation" (2015, 158; see also Michaud [2004, 184; 196; 202-204]). This language may well sound familiar to scholars of medieval eschatology. As Guy Lobrichon states, "Eschatology and apocalypticism appear to be necessary, not just for social life but also at the very heart of notions of politics in medieval Christianity. [...] The religious and philosophical tradition of the West shows that eschatology provides the horizon necessary for all the promises of a better future" (2020, 25-26). Medieval Christians saw apocalyptic destruction as necessary for a redeemed future; so too did mid-century fascists, though Nazi ideology was far more actively engaged in the attempt to bring about the End Times, of course.

A direct example of this is the November 1940 iteration of the regularly staged *Deutsche Größe* ('German Greatness') exhibition, which opened in Munich and then toured Germany, attracting 650,000 visitors.¹² As Clark notes, in the exhibition the "linear sequences of 'history' were folded into a millennial chronoscape. [...] The Germans of 1940 appeared in this exhibition as the direct heirs and executors of the Ur-Germans of pre-history; the re-energised 'history' of the present culminated in an encounter with the distant past" (174). This "flat circling" of history made the bucolic fantasy of premodern Germany as easy to access as the history of the recent past.

Here I must note that the study of temporalities is not new in fascism studies. Indeed, it is a crowded field, with many historians observing the ways in which radical ideologies resist a history understood through a supposedly "bourgeois" linear progression of time, and instead establish a kind of totalitarian temporality.¹³ However, there is not much engagement between fascist studies scholars and historians of the pasts which fascism evokes to establish those temporal continuities. The Middle Ages features heavily in the fascist imagination, and together with my colleagues Paul Jackson and Daniel Jones I am developing a research project which will draw together the medieval, medievalism, and contemporary far-right movements in Britain. Teaching "Medieval Chivalry and its Afterlives" has played a key role in the early development of this project, because it has given me the space to explore ideas about medievalism, temporalities and fascism in a classroom context, which has been an excellent arena to explore archival material, talk about it with students, and react to their responses.

Using Radical Collections Responsibly

One of the important strands of the module is examining source material held by the Searchlight Archive. The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that so far this engagement has been more limited than I had hoped – much of the archive material is not yet digitised, though our archivist Dan has been making great progress on this front – but we were still able to access a number of fascist sources that make use of the medieval past to make explicitly political points about their present day.

I want to write briefly here about how we use this kind of material in the classroom. In 2020 my colleagues Paul, Dan and I, along with Northampton PhD student Siobhan Hyland, received a modest sum from our institution to fund a pilot project, "The Impact of Teaching BAME and other Targeted Groups using Radical Collections". This project was specifically focused on questions around using extremist collections in teaching Black and minority ethnic and other marginalised students, whose

¹² Images and records from this exhibition can be found at the database put together by the [GDK Research project](#).

¹³ Clark (2015, 157-158) gives a useful summary of this historiography.

identities are often the target of said historical material. We engaged with the local community via a long-standing relationship with a local activist group. We also held focus groups with students and a workshop with library and academic professionals, in order to develop best practices around appropriate use of extremist material in the classroom. Our student focus groups placed a high value on engaging with radical material, as they felt it provided access to sometimes hidden histories and marginalised groups within them. The students wanted methods on how to work with this material, and emphasised that they did not want lecturers to avoid using it due to its extreme nature. Our project was curtailed by COVID-19, but we hope to publish a best practice guide detailing some of our findings and recommendations for colleagues working with similar material. Our focus groups made it clear that before introducing extremist sources, students required scaffolding around the vocabulary and rhetorical strategies of far-right materials, especially with sources that on the surface appear more “rational” or “moderate” in tone. It is also vital that students feel supported in the classroom when being exposed to potentially distressing materials. This is best done not only by adequately preparing students for the content of said sources but more broadly in building a safe classroom environment. This includes (though is not restricted to) actively listening to students, affirming their emotions and validating their experiences.¹⁴

With these measures in place, I was able to introduce students to a range of sources from the Searchlight Archive, a selection of which I will introduce here to explain their potential in the classroom. My examples are all from the fascist magazine *Spearhead*, founded in 1964, which for many years served as the official voice of the National Front, a British far-right party established in 1967. The examples I will use here are: entries in the “Great Britons” series from issues 10 to 15 by an author using the pen name “Pendragon”, 1966-7; a poem titled “A Cautionary Tale” by an author using the pseudonym “D.A.P.” in issue 14, spring 1967; and an article titled “Leadership or Not?” by Richard Verrall published in October 1975 in issue 88.¹⁵

Richard Verrall was originally a member of the Conservative Party who left to join the National Front and ultimately became its deputy chairman. He was also the editor of *Spearhead* from 1976 to 1980. Verrall is most known, however, for writing under a pseudonym an infamous Holocaust denial pamphlet, *Did Six Million Really Die?* Compared to my next examples, this article is a relatively intellectual piece of writing from the magazine. “Leadership or Not?” was written as a direct response to an internal leadership struggle facing the National Front in 1975. Verrall was not only inspired by the medieval past, he saw it as a direct solution to their problems: “I believe we will find [the answer] in our own British past, in the medieval centuries which saw the wise evolution of constitutional authority” (8). The article makes the case for the value of a strong leader to reunite the party, using the example of medieval English kingship as a guide to good governance. Verrall applied a seemingly learned gloss to his reading of the medieval past, arguing that “we would do well to reflect on the medieval achievement in kingship, whose checks and balances and constitutional forms yet gave supreme authority to men of commanding spirit, great organising power and integrity of character” (8). Interestingly, Verrall argued that the English example of medieval kingship builds a case for strong

¹⁴ University College London has created [a useful toolkit](#) for creating an inclusive classroom.

¹⁵ Searchlight Archive issues 10-15 are in box SCH/01/Res/BRI/01/001 and issue 88 is in SCH/01/Res/BRI/01/002. The scanned documents were provided for me by the archivist and are not currently publicly available.

leadership without absolutism, or, in modern terms, dictatorship. The medieval past is presented, curiously, as a palatable moderate alternative to the excesses of mid-century fascism. The medieval past is here clearly being packaged for an anticipated shake-up of the National Front to make it a party with broader appeal. While the medieval history here does not stand up to any detailed scrutiny by a historian, Verrall does present a fairly eloquent overview of English constitutional history, and reflects, perhaps, a determination among British nationalists to find a fascist pathway distinct from European models forty years previously. In my classroom experience, so far students have found this a difficult article to analyse. Often they lack confidence in their ability to critique its breezy assessment of English constitutional history. Generally, I advise them not to get too caught up on historical details in their initial approach. Instead, I ask them to use their close reading skills to pick up on the rhetorical devices Verrall uses to persuade his readers. They usually take note of his air of assumed authority on matters of medieval kingship, and wonder how many readers of *Spearhead* may otherwise have had very limited education in medieval history.

This leads naturally onto the next set of sources we use in the classroom, which helps students engage with the question of what kind of history lessons may have been available to *Spearhead* readers. We analyse the “Great Britons” series, which began in issue 10 in 1966 and offers a very simplistic, chest-thumping summary of various English heroes of the past. Several of the examples of “Great Britons” were medieval men, from Alfred the Great through to Henry V, and despite using the title “Briton”, the accounts are all very much about establishing a new English history; Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish history do not feature in this far-right vision of the past. Henry V’s entry, for instance, frames his campaigns during the Hundred Years War in familiar fascist terms. “He regarded France as the natural field of English expansion”, wrote Pendragon, in a language evocative of the Nazi ideology of *Lebensraum* (7). In no. 15’s June 1967 issue the entry for Shakespeare was subtitled “For the Schools” (11), so my impression is that these bite-sized versions of English history were intended for the education – or rather indoctrination – of children.¹⁶ We consider in class how readers of the magazine might have used these materials to supplement the education in medieval history their children received at school; they may have also been intended to provide rudimentary education in English history for adults too, of course. We speculate that children that grew up with these “insights” into medieval history might have grown up to read Verrall’s 1975 account of England’s past, and may have seen it as a natural continuation of the material they consumed via their parents in the late 1960s.

As evidence of the wider enculturation of *Spearhead* readers into a shared fascist understanding of England’s premodern history, the 1967 “Great Briton” entry for Sir Francis Drake in issue 14 sits next to a poem, “A Cautionary Tale”, which bemoans the decline of the British Empire. In the first stanza, the author “D.A.P.” imagines English history prior to the degenerate modern present as a pastoral paradise populated by brawny, brave men:

This story tells of what was once a great and happy land.
An isle set off the Western coast, mid sea and rock and sand.

¹⁶ Stephen Vertigans (2007) gives an interesting assessment of how American far-right groups worked similarly in the 1980s and 1990s to indoctrinate children.

A sturdy folk live thereupon, a strong and able band,
By sweat of brow and pick and plough they made their island grand. (10)

In this passage, the distinction between time periods collapses. In this imagined past, there was a centuries-long stretch of glorious muscular and pastoral history before the emergence of liberal democracy, which destroys empire through immigration and through shame in English achievements. Toward the end of the poem, a small band of brave men hacks the “anti-National Serpent” to death with broadswords, seeing off the threat to the English nation – but the poem closes by asking the reader if they have learned the lesson of the poem, “can we ever slay the serpent till the rest of us unite?” (10). While the body of the poem has made it seem as if the defeat of the Serpent has already been achieved, the last stanza collapses the temporal distinction between the past and imagined future, making the Serpent’s defeat a preordained vision: a future in the past tense.

In the classroom, I of course do not immediately share all this analysis with my students; I think it is important for students to engage with primary sources with enough context to make sense of the material but without using my authority as teacher to prompt responses that repeat my opinions back to me. Instead, after a short introduction to the material – both its historical context and appropriate warnings for its themes – they work in small groups to analyse the sources, addressing a range of questions I set in advance, which we then discuss with the class as a whole. For example, as a starter question I ask students to look at a selection of “Great Britons” and consider what is being framed as “great”. Students have been able to draw threads of connection between the different entries in the series, and regularly commented on themes of English unification, expansion and racial purity as core components of these articles. Students have proved able to connect the discussion to previous weeks’ learning about the World Wars, in particular to First World War propaganda and Nazi myth-building, and I help contextualise their conclusions by connecting them to wider scholarship on fascism and medievalism. So far, despite many of these conversations having had to take place behind computer screens and away from the archive, the outcomes have been fruitful and students have been enthusiastic about the value of these exercises. I hope that in the coming academic year I will be able to take students into the archive itself and see the original documents, rather than working with PDF scans, which will also open up the opportunity to use further documents that are not currently digitised.

In this brief essay I hope I have made the case that medievalism, as an ethos and as a lens through which the past is understood, should be a vital part of any medieval history curriculum, and suggested ways in which a small number of sources may bring to vivid life the central role medieval history plays in the fascist imagination. In a world where politics is increasingly chaotic and extreme, it is a moral as well as intellectual imperative for medievalists to talk to our students about how our period of specialism is weaponised by the far right. We must go further than telling them to be wary of using Viking runes or to rethink their use of the name “Anglo-Saxon”, which are the simplest takeaways from a much richer and more complex scholarly and activist conversation; instead we owe it to our

students, and to our field, to analyse more deeply the central place that the medieval occupies in the fascist imagination.¹⁷

Works Cited: Printed

- Bar-On, Tamir. 2019. "Richard B. Spencer and the Alt Right." In *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy*, edited by Mark Sedgwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 224-241.
- Bishop, Adam M. 2019. "#DeusVult." In *Whose Middle Ages?: Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, edited by Andrew Albin et al. New York: Fordham University Press. 256-264.
- Bjørø, Tore, and Jacob Aasland Ravndal. September 2019. *Extreme-Right Violence and Terrorism: Concepts, Patterns, and Responses*. ICCT Policy Brief. The Hague: International Center of Counter-Terrorism.
- Diebold, William J. 2019. "The Nazi Middle Ages." In *Whose Middle Ages?: Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, edited by Andrew Albin et al. New York: Fordham University Press. 104-115.
- Donner, Fred M. 2019. "Who's Afraid of Shari'a Law?" In *Whose Middle Ages?: Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, edited by Andrew Albin et al. New York: Fordham University Press. 58-68.
- Elliott, Andrew B.R. 2017. *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer.
- Ford, John C. 2021. "Once More into the Breach!: Allusions to Agincourt and the Medieval Past in Cross-Channel Political Reporting of Brexit." *Studies in Medievalism* 30: 52-72.
- Griffin, Roger. 2003. "Il nucleopalingeneticco dell'ideologia del 'fascismo generico'." In *Che cos'è il fascismo?: Interpretazioni e prospettive di ricerche*, edited by Allesandro Campi. Rome: Ideazione editrice. 97-122.¹⁸
- Goebel, Stefan, 2007. *The Great War and Medieval Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaeuper, Richard W. 2016. *Medieval Chivalry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Koselleck, Reinhart. 1979. *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Young, Helen. 2019. "Whitewashing the 'Real' Middle Ages in Popular Media." In *Whose Middle Ages?: Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, edited by Andrew Albin et al. New York: Fordham University Press. 233-242.
- Paul, Nicholas L. 2019. "Modern Intolerance and the Medieval Crusades." In *Whose Middle Ages?: Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, edited by Andrew Albin et al. New York: Fordham University Press. 34-43.

¹⁷ On runic writing and the far right, see the ADL's guide to hate symbols, "Runic Writing (racist)" and Adam Myiashiro (2020). As a clear introduction to the problems with the term Anglo-Saxon, see Rambaran-Olm and Wade (2021), and for a deeper dive, Myiashiro (2019) eloquently explains how the "Anglo-Saxon myth" plays into the settler colonial model.

¹⁸ For an unpaginated English translation of this chapter see <https://www.libraryofsocscience.com/ideologies/resources/griffin-the-palingenetic-core/>.

- Teter, Magda. 2019. "Blood Libel, and a 'Lie and its Legacies'." In *Whose Middle Ages?: Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, edited by Andrew Albin et al. New York: Fordham University Press. 44-57.
- Lobrichon, Guy. 2020. "Making Ends Meet: Western Eschatologies, or the Future of a Society (9th–12th Centuries). Addition of Individual Projects, or Collective Construction of a Radiant Dawn?" In *Cultures of Eschatology Volume 1: Empires and Scriptural Authorities in Medieval Christian, Islamic and Buddhist Communities*, edited by Veronika Wieser, Vincent Eltschinger and Johann Heiss. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg. 25-44.
- Michaud, Eric. 2004. *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, translated by Janet Lloyd. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Miyashiro, Adam. 2020. "Reading the Runes: 'Anglo-Saxon Studies, Race and Colonialism.'" In *Disturbing Times: Medieval Pasts, Reimagined Futures*, edited by Catherine E. Karkov, Anna Klosowska, and Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei. Santa Barbara: Punctum Books. 321-325.
- Soros, Alex. 2018. "Nietzsche's Jewish Problem: Between Anti-Semitism and Anti-Judaism, by Robert Holub." *Intellectual History Review* 28 (2): 344-348.
- Vertigans, Stephen. 2007. "Beyond the Fringe?: Radicalisation within the American Far-Right." *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8 (3-4): 641-659.
- Whitaker, Cord. 2020. "The Problem of Alt-Right Medievalist White Supremacy, and Its Black Medievalist Answer." In *Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History*, edited by Louie Dean Valencia-García. New York: Routledge. 159-176.
- Williams, Maggie M. 2019. "'Celtic' Crosses and the Myth of Whiteness." In *Whose Middle Ages?: Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, edited by Andrew Albin et al. New York: Fordham University Press. 220-233.

Works Cited: Online

- Anti-Defamation League. 2022. "Runic Writing (Racist)." ADL, 5 March 2022. <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/runic-writing-racist>
- Clark, Cristopher. 2015. "Time of the Nazis: Past and Present in the Third Reich." *Geschichte und Gesellschaft. Sonderheft* 25: 156-187. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24770041>
- Department of Education, and Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP. 2019. "Education Secretary Calls for End to Low Value Degree." Government UK, 29 May 2019. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/education-secretary-calls-for-an-end-to-low-value-degrees>
- Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1937-1944 (GDK Research). <https://gdk-research.de/>
- History UK. 2022. "Statements on the Latest Course Closures and Redundancies in the Arts and Humanities." History UK, 28 May 2022. <https://www.history-uk.ac.uk/2022/05/18/statement-on-the-latest-course-closures-and-redundancies-in-the-arts-and-humanities/>
- Illing, Sean. 2017. "The Alt-Right is Drunk on Bad Readings of Nietzsche. The Nazis Were Too." 17 August 2017, updated on 30 December 2018. <https://www.vox.com/2017/8/17/16140846/alt-right-nietzsche-richard-spencer-nazism>

- Jaeger, Vanessa. 2021. "Eating Up the Enemy: Teaching *Richard Coer de Lyon* and the Misrepresentation of Crusader Ideology in White Nationalist Agendas." *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 2 (2): 39-48. <https://doi.org/10.5070/NC32254941>.
- Kim, Dorothy. 2018. "The Alt-Right and Medieval Religions." *Berkeley Forum* 5. 5 November 2018. <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/the-alt-right-and-medieval-religions>.
- . 2017. "Teaching Medieval Studies in a Time of White Supremacy", *In the Middle*, 28 August 2017. <https://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2017/08/teaching-medieval-studies-in-time-of.html>
- . 2019. "White Supremacists Have Weaponized an Imaginary Viking Past. It's Time to Reclaim the Real History." *Time*, 15 April 2019. <https://time.com/5569399/viking-history-white-nationalists/>
- Miyashiro, Adam. 2019. "Our Deeper Past: Race, Settler Colonialism, and Medieval Heritage Politics." *Literature Compass* 16 (9-10). <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12550>
- Rambaran-Olm, Mary. 2022. "Sounds about White: Review of Matthew Gabriele & David M. Perry's *The Bright Ages* (Harper Collins, 2021)." *Medium*, 28 April 2022. <https://mrambaranolm.medium.com/sounds-about-white-333d0c0fd201>
- Symes, Carol. 2017. "Medievalism, White Supremacy, And The Historian's Craft." *Perspectives on History* 55 (5A). <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2017/medievalism-white-supremacy-and-the-historians-craft>
- University College London. 2020. "Creating Safe Spaces for Students in the Classroom." UCL, 27 April 2020. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/publications/2020/apr/creating-safe-spaces-students-classroom>
- University of Northampton. "Searchlight Archive." <https://www.northampton.ac.uk/about-us/services-and-facilities/the-searchlight-archives/>
- Whyte, Max. 2008. "The Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche in the Third Reich: Alfred Baeumler's 'Heroic Realism'." *Journal of Contemporary History* 43 (2): 171-194. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036502>
- Wollenberg, Daniel. 2014. "The New Knighthood: Terrorism and the Medieval." *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 5 (1): 21-33. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pmed.2014.1>