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# Approaches to Teaching the “Multicultural Middle Ages”

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## Abstract

This essay discusses approaches to and strategies for teaching the “Multicultural Middle Ages” at undergraduate level based on a lecture course that we co-taught online in Fall 2020. We outline a few of our lectures (on “Modern Appropriations of the Crusades: Politics, Myths, and Reality”; “Trade, Commerce, and Cultural Exchange”; and “Multicultural Song”) before presenting some ideas for teaching comparatively across cultures. By way of conclusion, we showcase a selection of our students’ “blog post” responses to the course.

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In this essay, we discuss an introductory-level undergraduate lecture course that we co-taught remotely in Fall 2020 on the “Multicultural Middle Ages.” The course was first taught in Spring 2018 as a seminar, revised in Fall 2019,<sup>1</sup> and then redesigned and reconfigured as a co-taught online course. We briefly present its overarching aims and scope, outline some of our lectures, discuss some ideas for teaching comparatively across cultures, and showcase a selection of our students’ blog post responses to the course. At Yale University, in common with the broad aims of a liberal arts degree program in the United States, undergraduates initially explore arts and science disciplines, before majoring in specific subjects. English lecture courses are open to both majors and nonmajors, and commonly aim at enabling students to gain broad perspectives on a given topic in preparation for more focused, specialized study. Ordinarily, they involve two 50-minute lectures and one 50-minute discussion section, taught by a Teaching Fellow, per week.<sup>2</sup> But to create as rich an environment for remote learning during COVID-19 as possible, we opted instead for the following weekly schedule: two pre-recorded 25-minute lectures (we each independently designed and delivered 12 lectures in total); a 50-minute Q&A and small-group discussion (in Zoom breakout rooms); and a 50-minute section on assigned primary texts. In preparation for the Q&A and small-group discussion, students were requested to post on Canvas (a web-based platform for teaching and learning) a short blog response to assigned lecture-related questions. In collaboration with colleagues, we also organized virtual visits to the Beinecke Library and Yale Art Gallery.

The course had two main aims. The first was to discover a Middle Ages that is different from the one popularly projected in modern culture: primitive, obsolete, insular, homogeneous, bigoted, and sexist. As the United States and many other nations currently face up to endemic prejudice and racism, the course asked students to reflect on the reason why the remote past is invoked so often—and so distortedly—in discussions of cultural, religious, racial, and gender difference today. Moving between the era of the crusades and the twenty-first century enabled a range of productive conversations on the complexity, diversity, and heterogeneity of the medieval past, as well as its potential to help us now with issues of identity, prejudice, and difference. The other aim was to break the barriers between European and non-European traditions, canonical and non-canonical authors, and literature and history, focusing on mutual influences and exchange. We placed materials composed by European, north African, and west Asian authors in dialogue, focusing on genres—travel accounts, epic, romance, dream visions, mystical writing, the lyric, and autobiography—in which many cultures mingled. English translations were provided for all texts, which we encouraged students also to study (where possible) alongside their original languages. The idea was to enable discussions about cultural difference to be cognizant of language differences, even where knowledge of languages was inevitably limited. We found that students appreciated this element in the teaching, and we made sure to offer

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.yale.edu/2019/08/29/medieval-literature-without-borders-new-classes-rethink-middle-ages>.

<sup>2</sup> Our Teaching Fellows for Fall 2020 were Emily Ulrich and Celine Vezina. We want to thank the students who took this course for being willing to share their blogs in this article, and for their commitment and enthusiasm in a very difficult time, when we were all having to adapt to new teaching and learning conditions.

commentary on key terms in each of the texts (also solicited from students with specific knowledge of a language) to help collectively nuance the observations and analyses.

The topic of medieval cross-cultural encounters lends itself to exploring issues of religion, race, gender, and class from multiple perspectives and in all their intersectional complexity, enabling students to develop analytical skills with broad applications. It brings to light convergences between past and present societies, but also prompts critical reflection on the assumptions that we bring to bear on history based on our own identities and experiences. One particular challenge—and highlight—for our students is that the course asks them to consider the long history of issues that are pressing in the twenty-first century while avoiding two kinds of projection: of our own modern ideologies onto the medieval past, and the assumption that Western hegemony is a transhistorical constant. Over the course of the semester, students were introduced to key theoretical models and concepts (including world-systems theory, cosmopolitanism, cultural relativism, Orientalism, and religion- and culture-based race), whose relevance to medieval societies they were invited to ponder. Another highlight was to explore with students—via maps, objects, and texts<sup>3</sup>—the sheer diversity and interconnectedness of a medieval world which many of them had previously imagined to be fractured, insular, and lacking curiosity, as they indicated in their blog posts. In their assignments, students proved particularly interested in reflecting on how the massive increase in Afro-Eurasian contact that took place during the high and later Middle Ages impacted ways of living, writing, thinking, and feeling.

The semester was divided into six units: “What is Medieval,” “Travel and Trade,” “Crusades and the Erotic Other,” “The Device of the Foreign Observer,” “Trials of Identity,” and “Cultural Confrontation and History.” Within these units, we explored the accounts of English, Italian, Moroccan, and Syrian travelers, Christian and Islamic poetic responses to the crusades, tales of interreligious love and betrayal, the strange lives of female recluses and martyrs, the passionate writing of monks and scholars, and the sharp-edged brilliant comedy of Chaucer. More specifically, the materials upon which we focused most of our energies in lecture and seminar were the following:

- various world maps, including the Hereford, Psalter, al-Idrīsī, and al-Qazwīnī maps
- *The Man of Upper Egypt and His Frankish Wife* (included in the *Arabian Nights*)
- Marco Polo’s *Le Devisement du monde* [‘Description of the World’]
- *The Book of Sir John Mandeville*
- Usāma ibn Munqidh’s *Kitāb al-l’tibār* [‘Book of Contemplation’]
- al-Mas‘udi’s *Kitāb al-tanbīh wa al-ishrāf* [‘Book of Notification and Verification’]

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<sup>3</sup> We included the Vinland map, and the work in progress on re-dating its parchment and inks, as well as some 10-15 Beinecke manuscripts ranging from world maps, travel books including a pilgrimage account with expenses of a Tuscan monk, some books of science, philosophy, and world history, a book of chivalry, the Delamere Chaucer, and a book of hours with a female inscription. From the Art Gallery, we focused on a Parisian ivory sculpture of a Virgin and Child carved from an elephant tusk, a marble panel c.950 with a tree of life flanked by animals that showed a Near Eastern motif passing into Mediterranean culture and then Europe; a panel of Cosmatesque inlaid mosaic showing Byzantine craftsmanship that flourished in Rome and was brought to Westminster Abbey in England in the thirteenth century. The use of ivory most probably from Sub-Saharan African elephants was a detail of great interest and concern to several in the class. The final object was a fifteenth-century tin-glazed enamel dish of Hispano-Moresque workmanship that fused Islamic and Gothic styles.

- Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s *De proprietatibus rerum* [‘On the Properties of Things’]
- Riccoldo da Monte di Croce’s *Liber peregrinationis* [‘Book of Pilgrimage’]
- Ibn Battuta’s *Rihla* [‘Journey’]
- a selection of anonymous *jihād* poems
- the *ghazals* of al-Qaysarānī on European women
- the *chanson de geste* of *Fierabras*
- *Nūr al-Dīn and Miriam the Sash-Maker* (included in the *Arabian Nights*)
- Honoré Bovet’s *Apparicion Maistre Jehan de Meun* [‘Apparition of Master Jean de Meun’]
- La Comtessa de Dia’s “A chantar” [‘To sing’]
- Bernard de Ventadorn’s “Can vei la lauzeta mover” [‘When I see the lark moving’]
- al-A‘mā al-Tuṭīlī’s “dam‘un masfūḥun wa-ḍulū‘un ḥirār” [‘Tears That Are Shed’]
- Augustine’s *Confessiones* [‘Confessions’]
- Peter Abelard’s *Historia calamitatum* [‘The Story of My Misfortunes’]
- *Le Roman de la Rose* [‘The Romance of the Rose’]
- the Middle English life of Elizabeth of Spalbeek
- Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations*
- *The Book of Margery Kempe*
- Dante’s *Inferno*
- Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*
- the *Ordene de Chevalerie* [‘Order of Chivalry’]
- Ridley Scott’s *Kingdom of Heaven*

Many of the above texts are available in modern English translations (some as parallel-text editions), a small number of which the students were requested to purchase, while the rest were posted as pdfs on Canvas. The materials currently unavailable in English were discussed in the lectures to provide a context for the assigned weekly readings.

The course was cross-listed in English, French, Comparative Literature, and Humanities, but also attracted students majoring in other departments, including Economics, African American Studies, and History. The diverse interests, experiences, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds of our students considerably enriched the literary discussions. Below are brief summaries of two lectures on aspects of the crusades that were delivered in Weeks 1 and 2, followed by summaries of some later topics and an explanation of how various threads across the course were woven into the reading choices. These reflections come together in a section that presents some ideas for teaching across cultures. By way of conclusion, we turn to the question that we posed in the first week, “what is medieval?”. Students were asked in the final week to reflect on what they had written in response to this simple question in the first week. At the end of this essay are excerpts from some of their final blog posts. While this course was designed as a lecture course, many of the materials and approaches discussed in what follows can be adapted to other forms of teaching, including small groups and seminars.

## Sample Lecture 1

### Week 1, Lecture 2: Modern Appropriations of the Crusades: Politics, Myths, and Reality

The first portion of this lecture discussed some of the ways in which the crusades have been invoked and reimagined since the nineteenth century, when the first modern histories of the subject were written and European monarchs celebrated their colonial conquests by comparing their troops to victorious crusaders. This period witnessed the rise in currency of a narrative that would prove tenacious: that the crusades were a foundational episode in an ongoing ‘civilizational clash’ between West/Christianity and East/Islam. In the twenty-first century, ‘clash of civilizations’ rhetoric has held wide appeal among right-wing political extremists, who routinely invoke the crusades to mobilize their supporters and justify violence. Various examples were discussed, including the American activist Robert Spencer’s use of the crusades to spread Islamophobia and racist claims, the Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik’s manifesto, which advocates for a pan-European identity modelled on the crusading movement, and the imagery deployed during the white supremacist demonstration of Charlottesville, Virginia. A similar increase in crusade references was traced across the media platforms of the Islamist extremist groups al-Qaeda and IS.<sup>4</sup>

In light of the disquieting powers of “us vs. them” rhetoric in the present and in the past, it is important for us as scholars and teachers to foster critical reflection not only on what makes this rhetoric so effective, but also—and perhaps more importantly—on the complex realities which it aims at erasing. The crusades were certainly portrayed by some medieval authors, both Christian and Muslim, as categorical civilizational conflicts. Racial and religious hatred was harnessed to mobilize participation in crusade expeditions. But the ideals and experiential realities of crusading were frequently in tension. In this introductory lecture, we set the scene for other lectures to come by discussing some lesser-known facts about the crusades: that crusader armies in the Near East were often ethnically diverse; that crusaders and Muslims engaged in military and political alliances, shared sacred spaces, entered commercial agreements, and exchanged sciences, stories, and ideas; that there existed varying forms of tolerance and admiration across the religious divide; that support for crusade and *jihād* was far from unanimous in Latin Christendom and the Islamic world<sup>5</sup>; that Europe’s encounters with Muslims abroad prompted calls for moral, social, and political reform at home; and that crusading defeats caused Christians to doubt their faith and threaten to convert—or actually convert—to Islam. Indeed, students found it fascinating that almost every Levantine crusade launched during the core period of the movement (1095-1291) saw large numbers of crusaders crossing the lines for the purpose of converting to Islam.<sup>6</sup> Religious and racial boundaries were a lot more permeable and fluid during this period than is often assumed.

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<sup>4</sup> On modern political appropriations of the crusades, see e. g. Elliott; Throop; Paul; Wollenberg; and Mourad.

<sup>5</sup> The most recent study of criticism of crusading is Aurell. Muslim refusal to engage in *jihād* was often criticized by *jihād* apologists: see, for example al-Sulamī’s *Kitāb al-Jihād (Book of the Jihād)*.

<sup>6</sup> See further Elias, “Toward a New Model of Medieval Orientalism” (forthcoming).

## Sample Lecture 2

### Week 2: Lecture 1: Trade, Commerce, and Cultural Exchange

It has become commonplace in the twenty-first century to note the increasing globalization of the world: the interconnectedness of cultures and economies, and the transnational channels along which peoples, goods, and capitals circulate. Globalization is often perceived as a recent phenomenon, but it of course has a long history. This lecture introduced the Middle Ages as an era of “global intensification” (Moore 2016) via Janet Abu-Lughod’s *Before European Hegemony: The World System between 1250-1350*.<sup>7</sup> Abu-Lughod argues that before the Euro-centered world economy that developed during the early modern period and reached fruition in modernity, there existed a complex and prosperous medieval predecessor: a system of trade, commerce, and exchange that centered not on Europe but on the great civilizations of the Near and Far East. This system consists of three interlinked subsystems: China and the Arab world, which were more advanced; and Europe, which was drawn into this pre-existing network through the crusades. The crusades put Europe into closer contact with the Near East and north Africa, prompted the demand for goods available in these regions, and led to heightened local production (Abu-Lughod 1993, 76-80). Commerce and trade had a profound impact on ways of life in Europe and the Islamic Mediterranean. Europeans discovered oranges, bananas, rice, sugar, pepper, various spices, silk, and henna, and also purchased basics like dyes, glassware, metalwork, and raw goods. Buyers in Islamic lands acquired woolen cloth, some grains, silver, and especially wood and iron. New words were introduced into European languages as a result of mercantile interaction (in English, for example, commercial terms such as *cheque* and *tariff* are of Arabic origin, as is the vocabulary used to describe many of the purchased commodities—words such as *artichoke*, *aubergine*, *cotton*, *crimson*, *satin*, and *syrup*). In Iberia, Christians paid for merchandise with coins called *maravedí*, named after the Almoravid dynasty that produced them; in the Levant, the crusaders produced coins using Muslim models, sometimes replicating even the Arabic inscriptions (Cobb 2014, 172-73; Tolan, Veinstein, and Laurens 2013).

To illustrate the complexities of cross-cultural interaction around the Mediterranean, and to give students a sense of the provocative instabilities and contradictory currents that characterize so much literature on cultural and religious “others” of the crusader era, we then turned to *The Man of Upper Egypt and His Frankish Wife*, an anonymous Arabic tale set in the early thirteenth century, some years after the death of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, and preserved in the *Arabian Nights* (Lyons and Lyons 2008, 428-32; Rodriguez 2015, 418-22). Featuring a dark-skinned Egyptian merchant who falls in love with a fair-skinned “Frankish” woman,<sup>8</sup> *The Man of Upper Egypt* is a story about crossing lines and surmounting challenges: “distance, captivity, religion, and fear of divine power do not prevent amorous bonding from realization in the end” (Ghanim 2018, 33). Yet, for all its emphasis on porous religious and racial boundaries, the tale also works to reinforce some of the most common anti-Frankish stereotypes of the time. The Christian-held city of Acre is presented as a kind of titillating zone, where social regulations are loose. European women are portrayed as sexually promiscuous (see further Cobb 2014, 169-74). Moreover, whereas fear of divine anger prevents the merchant from initially sleeping with

<sup>7</sup> Abu-Lughod’s “The World System in the Thirteenth Century: Dead-End or Precursor?”, a chapter summarizing *Before European Hegemony*, was given as optional reading.

<sup>8</sup> On the term “Frank” (*Ifranj* or *Firanj* in Arabic), see Cobb 2014, 16; König, Ch. 6.



the woman he loves, she, by contrast, does not hesitate to relinquish her faith to be with him, bearing out the frequently aired claim that Christians lack discipline in the practice of their religion. A tale in which issues of religion, race, gender, and sexuality combine to create unique modes of narration and perception, *The Man of Upper Egypt* is particularly well-suited to introducing students to intersectional theory (it also has the non-negligible advantage of being short).

The final section of this lecture offered a glimpse of the transmission of learning and culture that took place during the crusades and that went mainly in one direction, from the Islamic world to Europe. We took medicine as a case study, using Usāma ibn Munqidh’s highly entertaining account of Frankish medical incompetence (Cobb 2008, 145-46) to illustrate the gap in medical knowledge between Europe and the Arab world (no doubt exaggerated by the author for memorable effect), and following this up with a brief discussion of the transnational success of Ibn Sīnā’s *Canon*. The dissemination of medical knowledge provided a useful backdrop for discussing the challenges of tracing the transmission of stories (which tend to evolve into other stories, undergoing an endless play of metamorphosis), a subject to which we returned in later lectures. To conclude, we circled back to Abu-Lughod’s *Before European Hegemony*, which theorizes that the demise of the Asia-centered medieval world system was caused by the so-called Black Death. Abu-Lughod argues that the pandemic catalyzed a series of geopolitical changes, including the collapse of the Chinese navy, which left a gap in sea trade that was subsequently filled by Europe’s emerging colonial powers—the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the English. Responding to a generation of historians and social scientists engaged in “tracking the upward trajectory of Western culture and society,” Abu-Lughod claimed that there was nothing inherent in the conditions internal to Europe that could have predicted its rise to a position of world dominance. Her theory, put simply, is that “the ‘fall of the East’ preceded the ‘rise of the West’ and opened a window of opportunity that would not have existed had matters gone differently” (Abu-Lughod 1993, 90 and 96). Abu-Lughod’s world system was fascinating to discuss at a time in which the long-term geopolitical effects of COVID-19 were and remain unknown, and proved particularly effective in unsettling assumptions that “the West” was always at the heart of global innovation and progress.

Though published in the late 1980s, *Before European Hegemony* is a work that we would highly recommend to instructors wishing to make a strong case for the importance of studying the Middle Ages *now*. Here are some short excerpts of student “blog post” responses to the lecture.

- “Abu-Lughod’s world system was definitely eye-opening to me. Prior to this course, it seemed common knowledge that it was the West that dominated the past. We think that it was Europeans that brought civilization to the uncivilized, that shaped what the present world is today. But it is clear now that this is due to the fact that much of what I was taught about history was through a Eurocentric view using stories, documents, and writings as told by Europeans.”
- “Learning from the lectures that many inter-regional interactions and exchanges occurred, that Europeans were not actually the leaders of the intellectual advancements of the period, and that situational factors such as the Black Death had a major impact on how history played out is definitely making me rethink the past and how it has influenced the present.”

- “This week’s lectures and readings challenged my beliefs about Eurocentrism and religious intolerance during the Middle Ages. Janet Abu-Lughod’s assertion that medieval Europe was inferior to the Arab world from a technological and economic standpoint reveals how global geopolitics are fluid and have evolved over the course of time. The traditional belief that the Western world has always been more civilized and technologically advanced is an argument that guided colonialism and imperialism for centuries. As an individual who was born and brought up in a society still healing from the scars left behind by colonialism, I believe it is incredibly important to unlearn these traditional ideas. This can only be done through an active understanding of the fluidity of global geopolitics and also grasping how interconnected the world has been since the medieval period.”

### Sample Lecture 3

#### Week 5: Lectures 1-3: Multicultural Song

In Week 5, we turned to song. Three lectures each introduced a broad interconnected historical and geographical space where song was produced: (i) Aquitaine, (ii) Antioch, (iii) the Iberian peninsula; and three song traditions: (a) the Occitan troubadour *canço* (Aquitaine and Antioch), (b) the Galician-Portuguese *Cantigas de Santa Maria* [‘Songs of Saint Mary’] (Iberian peninsula), (c) the Arabic *muwashshah* and *kebarja* (Iberian peninsula). This somewhat ambitious structure aimed to present medieval song as fully and deeply multicultural, crossing languages and styles of music. Encouraging the students to engage with songs from the Iberian Peninsula in both Galician and Arabic (if only in translation) was an opportunity to touch on ideas of harmony and disharmony, co-operation and irreconcilable difference.

The first lecture set the scene historically by introducing the figure of Eleanor of Aquitaine. The granddaughter of the first known troubadour Guillaume IX duc d’Aquitaine (1071-1126), she is a natural segue into the world and corpus of troubadour song. Troubadour song is so famous because it expresses and examines the poetic self with unparalleled brilliance through its witty and intricately crafted exploration of love, and the power dynamics of gender and sex. We discussed the ideology of the modern term “courtly love” and touched on the way troubadour song has figured for modern readers and audiences as a deeply entrenched symbol of Western versions of romantic love. From southern France we turned to Antioch, again using Eleanor as a pivot, since she not only ruled in England and Aquitaine, but travelled to Constantinople, Antioch, Acre, and Jerusalem with her first husband, Louis VII of France, during the Second Crusade. Building on the reading we had done on the crusades, we considered her remarkably active slander-filled life; reputed to have had affairs with her uncle Raymond of Antioch and the troubadour Bernart de Ventadorn, posthumous rumors even associated her (completely anachronistically) with Şalāḥ al-Dīn himself. Attention to Eleanor as a real historical figure enabled us to look at crusade songs both historically and poetically: thus we looked at her eldest surviving son’s famous prisoner’s lament, “Ja nus homs pris ne dira sa raison” [‘No prisoner will speak his mind’] written by Richard I of England while he was languishing as a captive on his way home from the Third Crusade and compared it with Jaufrè Rudel’s “Lanquan li jorn son lonc e may” [‘When the days are long in May’], a song of longing and despair from parting from a woman he has not yet seen (Goldin 1973, 376-79 and 105-7). It is accompanied in the manuscript by a *vida* identifying

the woman as the Countess of Tripoli. In the form of a miniature romance, the *vida* tells of Jaufre’s decision to take the cross and sail to see her, falling gravely ill and dying in her arms, upon which she became a nun “because of the grief she felt about him and about his death” (Egan 1984, 61).

The lecture concluded by discussing how the role of women in history and in literature requires very careful and delicate interpretation. Comparing the unparticularized ethereal passion and frustration of “*Lanquan li jorn*” with the tumultuous activity and heady gossip of Eleanor’s all too real life is a revealing exercise. Influential literature shapes how people think and therefore behave. Conversely, fiction can present an alternative world that artfully idealizes historical realities in a way that serves the ideologies of those in power. We see elements of this in the comparison between Eleanor’s historical subjection to imprisonment and incessant male verbal attack, and the male poet-lover of “*Lanquan li jorn*.” In the fictional world of the troubadour song, it is the male who is presented as weak and overmastered by a woman. But as we read more closely, we see it to be a sly refusal, through the bold act of the song itself, to be trapped by the passive logic of his own despair. In reality, Eleanor managed to fight back but only against all odds; in the song the complex helplessness of the male lover is idealized and even celebrated.

The second strand in week 5 involved moving our perspective from Antioch to the Iberian peninsula. A guest lecture by a 6<sup>th</sup> year PhD Candidate in Medieval Studies at Yale, Alexander Peña, a specialist in the historiography of medieval Iberia, introduced the complex multiculturalism of Christian-Muslim-Jewish relations in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. After briefly outlining the contributions of some important intellectual figures such as Ibn Rushd, Maimonides, and Petrus Alfonsi, Peña introduced the students to the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, a late thirteenth-century collection of 420 devotional songs composed in the court of Alfonso X, King of Castile (r. 1252-1284). They were composed in Galician-Portuguese, were influenced by Arabic musical traditions and, in turn, influenced later French traditions. Peña drew attention to the themes of love and violence in these songs in which devotion to the Virgin Mary is often expressed in terms of her being an intercessor on behalf of Jewish and Muslim victims through stories which simultaneously perpetuated anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim narratives.

The final lecture in this trio introduced yet another song tradition: the Arabic *muwashshah*, a genre of song central to al-Andalus or Islamic Spain. The goal was not to get too bogged down in detail with the language or form, but rather to enjoy close reading a selection of songs drawn from the various traditions we had covered. We compared two troubadour songs, one by Eleanor’s alleged lover Bernart de Ventadorn, “*Can vei la lauzeta mover*” [‘When I see the lark moving’], and one by a female poet-composer Comtessa de Dia, “*A chantar*” [‘To sing’]; two Arabic songs, al-A‘mā al-Tuḥīl’s poem “*dam‘un masfūhun wa-ḍulū‘un ḥirār*” [‘Tears That Are Shed’] and the anon. “*lammā badā yatathanna*” [‘When I saw my love away’]; and finally one of the Galician *Cantigas*: no.100 “*Strela do dia*,” Star of Day. We listened to modern performances of all these songs in highly varied styles, and thought about the extraordinary experiences of cross-cultural fusion and fission they provoked, from both a medieval and a contemporary point of view.

In some ways this Week 5 of the course was very demanding. The idea was to give the students an opportunity and a model for analyzing individual short poems in the context of much broader issues: historical conflict and social tension, cultural displacement (Eleanor in Antioch), and the complex religious triangle of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They were shocked and fascinated by

Eleanor, not only by the way she flouted stereotypes of the passive beaten down medieval female, but also by the relentless smearing of her reputation at the hands of male medieval historians. This provided food for thought when we came to read the *Historia calamitatum* of Abelard and Heloise, the opening and closing books of the *Roman de la Rose*, Canto 5 of Dante’s *Inferno*, and the momentarily connected lives of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. In each of these topics we reflected on the relationship between history and literature in the specific sense of how descriptions of social realities correspond to fantasies of desire in crafted texts. In the case of Julian, for example, we considered her life as an anchoress alongside her expressions of desire for Christ. It was illuminating to realize that religious and erotic love could be so closely allied in life and writing, in often overwhelmingly passionate and bodily terms. All these biographical and autobiographical pieces of writing (we also looked at Augustine’s *Confessiones*) proved to be an important route towards thinking about song texts that might otherwise have seemed autonomously “poetic.”

### Some Ideas for Teaching Across Cultures

In what follows, we discuss some texts and traditions that may be taught comparatively in a course on the “Multicultural Middle Ages.” Strategies that we found effective for relating works produced across different cultures include: identifying similarities in genre, mode, character, plot, theme, imagery, social dynamics, and/or broader cultural or political concerns<sup>9</sup>; selecting works that respond to the same event (e. g. a particular crusade) or to the same series of events (e. g. the Levantine crusades); and focusing on traditions that share common roots. Establishing a common ground will open up further avenues of enquiry, bringing to light new levels of similarity and difference that work to enhance students’ understanding of the paired texts or traditions. Instructors may also wish to invite students to reflect on the relevance to the selected materials of theoretical models or approaches such as anthropological theory, cosmopolitanism, Orientalism, critical race theory, distant reading, and comparative religion.

**Crusade and Counter-Crusade literature.** French *chansons de geste* and Arabic *jihād* poems may be productively placed in dialogue, for these traditions, as well as offering different perspectives on a common reality of holy war, share a number of broadly comparable themes, characterizations, and rhetorical concerns.<sup>10</sup> For example, both traditions make extensive use of emotional language to foster communal solidarity in their audiences, or to lament its lack—common tropes include sorrow for the afflicted, vengeance for wrongs done, and love and brotherhood among coreligionists. Both portray the Muslim/Christian other as polytheistic and idolatrous, offering a useful basis for discussing the complex genealogies of these images. One of our lectures involved tracing the development of one particular motif across the two literary traditions—that of the Muslim/Christian other who vents his military frustration on the holy figures of his religion. This motif took a different trajectory in Arabic and European literature. In *jihād* poetry, Christians—and only Christians—are portrayed as expressing divinely addressed despair after military defeats. In European literary texts, by contrast, from the late

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<sup>9</sup> The standard approach to comparative literature further developed and exemplified with regard to “world literature” by Damrosch, 46-64.

<sup>10</sup> On this *jihād* poetry, see Hillenbrand; and, especially, the full-length study by Latiff.

twelfth century onwards, this form of despair came to be increasingly ascribed to *both* Muslim and Christian characters. This development is the result of the crusaders’ declining military fortunes in the eastern Mediterranean: in the real world, the late twelfth through fifteenth centuries were a time in which Christians, not Muslims, were blaming God for failing to uphold his side of the “contract” and threatening to abandon their faith following military setbacks and defeats. The intertextual trajectory of this motif across the centuries illustrates the key role of global geopolitics in destabilizing binary, oppositional systems of religious and racial identity in European imaginative literature.

**Climate Theory in Europe and the Islamic world.** The common ancient Greek roots of body-centered theories of race in medieval Europe and the Islamic world provide an excellent foundation for thinking across cultures. In late antique Greece, people who lived in different climates were believed to have different bodies and different behavioral dispositions due to unequal climatic influence. Authors whose works are indebted to Greek climate theory include Gerald of Wales, Bartholomaeus Anglicus, Albert the Great, al-Mas‘udi, and Ibn Khaldun (Akbari 2009; Bartlett 2001; Hermes 2012). Instructors may discuss correspondences and divergences between the schemes adopted by these (and other) authors, as well as between medieval and modern body-centered notions of race. While finding their origins in ancient and medieval theories via the writings of Enlightenment authors such as Montesquieu, the body-centered ideas of race that developed during the era of modern European colonialism came to be increasingly based on “blood” rather than climate or environment (Akbari 2009, 140-41 and 282).

**Riccardo da Monte di Croce’s *Liber Peregrinationis* and Ibn Battuta’s *Rihla*.** Riccardo’s account of the Muslim “works of perfection” (*opera perfectionis*) and Ibn Battuta’s account of his stay in Constantinople work well in tandem, for both expose tensions between ideology and experience, offering fruitful reflection on the productive discomfort that can arise from confronting and thinking through other cultures and religions when abroad, far from home, and vulnerable.<sup>11</sup> In the course of the Constantinople episode, Ibn Battuta’s perception of Christianity changes from one of difference to Islam to one of similarity, as he increasingly finds points of connection (shared religious figures, sites of worship, and customs of welcome, for instance) on territory that initially seemed foreign.<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, Riccardo sees convergences between forms of devotion performed by Christians at home in Italy and by Muslims abroad in Baghdad—an analogical approach which, rather than working to erase difference, enables him to also express appreciation for practices in Islam, such as the *basmala*, that he found less familiar. Penned by a man better known for his virulent anti-Muslim polemics, the *Liber* is characterized by a rupture between the author’s theology of Islam as a corrupt law and the *opera perfectionis* (studiousness, devotion in prayer, mercy to the poor, reverence for the name of God, solemn demeanor, affability to foreigners, and concord and mutual love) which he observes Muslims performing not despite but because of their religion. These two accounts invite students to reflect on

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<sup>11</sup> We assigned the following excerpts: George-Tvrtković, 210-26 (“The Saracen Works of Perfection” followed by a six-point condemnation of the Qur’an); Mackintosh-Smith, 120-36. For Riccardo’s *Liber Peregrinationis* in Latin, see Kappler.

<sup>12</sup> An argument put forward by Chism. See also Dunn.

the all-too-often unfulfilled potential of religious devotion to foster not prejudice but mutual understanding and respect across confessional lines.

***Fierabras and Nūr al-Dīn and Miriam the Sash-Maker.*** These two works resonate with and against each other on a number of levels.<sup>13</sup> Both feature female characters—Floripas, daughter to the Emir of Spain, and Miriam, daughter to the King of France—who betray their families for the love of a man and relinquish their faith. Captivity is central to both plots. Floripas and Miriam are fighters who surpass their partners in initiative, ingenuity, and, in the case of the latter, strength, martial prowess, and fame. In both tales, religious conversion provides a site for the exploration of behaviors that transgress socially-prescribed gender roles. To elicit reflection on the complex relation of these tales to the socio-cultural conditions of their creation, we taught them alongside historical sources on women in holy war. For example, discussing the Islamic perspective, we focused on passages from al-Sulamī’s *Book of Jihād*, Usāma ibn Munqidh’s *Book of Contemplation*, and Imād al-Dīn’s account of the deeds of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn to give students a sense of the disparity between official views (that women were prohibited from participating in holy war) and the realities of the time (that women did engage in combat).<sup>14</sup> Through these and other historical documents, students developed an appreciation for the dynamic interplay between fiction and reality that made *chanson de geste* and Arabic folk literature so appealing, thought-provoking, and thrilling to audiences.

**The *Roman de la Rose* and the “Astonishing Women,” Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe.** Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe have become standard choices on many syllabuses that teach the Middle Ages for excellent reasons: they provide vivid examples of women who stood out among their contemporaries, both in life and in their writings. Teaching them in the wake of the *Rose* is a way of stimulating discussions about a wide range of connected topics: the nature of authorship, especially the specific case of male authors writing on behalf of or ventriloquizing female subjects (for which Julian is an important counter example), violence about and towards women in male-authored writing, and the role of women in the world as public figures. The addition (with due warnings) of some of the disturbing contemporary accounts of women who mortified their bodies in often extreme ways for the sake of following a path of holiness and spiritual devotion made for an intensive three weeks.

Students were very struck by the way the double-authored *Rose* changed their notions of authorship. As one acutely noted: “I found it interesting that while a lot of medieval texts (including some we read, like *Fierabras and Floripas*) suffer from a lack of a clear author, *The Romance of the Rose* is different in that it actually has ‘one too many.’” Another made this comment: “We often predicate our analysis of a literary text on continuity; continuity of authorship yields a continuous, cohesive landscape of themes, motifs, and symbols, which the author proceeds to develop and complicate throughout the text. The presence of two authors—particularly two authors who never discussed the text with each other—throws a wrench into our attempts to track themes and symbols throughout

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<sup>13</sup> We assigned the following excerpts: Newth, 45-161; Lyons and Lyons, 416-28. For the Old French vulgate *Fierabras*, see Le Person.

<sup>14</sup> See, for a discussion of these and other sources, Christie.

the narrative.” Such reflections fed into questions about authorship in Margery’s *Book*. Should we think of Margery’s male amanuenses as additional authors of her *Book*, or even as controlling her narrative through their power as scribes? And these questions in turn, were shaped by the very troubling narratives relating the actions of such women as Christina Mirabilis, Benvenuta Bojani, and Elizabeth of Spalbeek. We all wrestled with what one student called “the violence of the self-harm performed by holy women” and the feelings of “concern” they provoked. In wondering, conversely, about the element of self-staging described in the account, a further student commented: “As twisted as it may be, I think Elizabeth’s behavior could be viewed as a form of performance art. Devotion seems like such a private matter between oneself and God, yet it seems like Elizabeth is proving herself to her viewers.”

Such comparisons enabled the students to draw conclusions about Julian and Margery that went beyond analyzing them separately, or even together (though this also produced some very perceptive writing). They were able to take the further step of understanding how their stories demonstrated wider truths about religious women and their complex reception in society. One student provided the following thoughtful summary: “There are many similarities between Margery’s life and other holy women’s: she becomes celibate, expresses bodily manifestations of her devotion through fitful crying episodes, and centers a connection to God in most of her actions. What she lacked was an external structure to define her holiness. Elizabeth of Spalbeek worked in a regimented program for holy women designed by male superiors. Julian of Norwich carried out her life within the confines of a pre-determined role of an anchoress. Margery exhibited her relatively loosely structured devotion as a holy woman—and a stunning independence—outwardly, and it is what in part drew such disapproval, mockery, and sneering of her peers.”

### Conclusion

We found that our students engaged deeply with the readings, and often surprised us and themselves with the connections and ruptures they found between these materials from the distant past and our own contemporary perspectives. The visceral responses we all had to the suffering depicted in some of the texts by and for women led to a lot of reflection on the ways suffering is endorsed as well as endured in contemporary contexts our students knew well, such as ethnic groups in Sub-Saharan Africa or even modern athletics. Listening to different modern interpretations of Arabic song alongside contemporary reworkings of medieval compositions—such as the pop-flamenco phenomenon Rosalía who based her album *El Mal Querido* on a thirteenth-century Occitan romance called *Flamenca*, and Kaija Saariaho’s 2000 opera *L’Amour de loin* (based on Jaufré Rudel and premiered by the Metropolitan Opera at New York in 2016)—broadened the sense of ‘medieval’ many of our students had previously derived from modern fantasy and gothic genres. Drawing out not just continuities but discontinuities between medieval and modern East-West relations enabled richly generative conversations on moments of geopolitical fluctuation and formative intercultural influence that our Eurocentric historical macronarratives have tended to suppress. Watching Ridley Scott’s *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), a film loosely based on the events immediately preceding the Third Crusade (1187-1192), at the end of the course rather than using it as a way into it proved beneficial: the historical knowledge gained about the crusades was harnessed towards very sophisticated analyses of the film’s theological questions and Western “sanitized” portrait of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn that would not have

been possible had it been placed at the beginning. Teaching the course collaboratively was stimulating; we gained greatly from each other’s perspectives and skills, and found it productive and congenial to the aims of the course to teach it as a conversation between ourselves as well as with the students.

Perhaps the key merit of a course on the “Multicultural Middle Ages” is to provide students with a safe and stimulating environment for reflecting on how people in history have interacted with, understood, and defined themselves in relation to those perceived as different. Other worldviews may cut the ground from under one’s feet or solidify it. Cross-cultural interaction may consolidate group identity or expose the need for collective change. Analogical thinking may be harnessed to erase difference or, on the other hand, to foster kinship grounded in shared humanity. Oppositional forms of engagement, so often used to condemn, hierarchize, and racialize, may also serve to produce more accurate knowledge. Thinking through such questions is pressing in our own political moment and is integral to the larger pedagogical goal of liberal arts education.

### **Coda: A Selection of Final Student Blog Posts**

#### **‘What is Medieval?’**

1/ “Medieval” can refer to the period of history between 1100 and 1500. It’s a period that receives little more than a cursory glance in most high school history classes, a period that, to many people, is merely the gap between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the flowering of the Renaissance. Looking back at the so-called “Dark Ages,” people often conceptualize this time as a time of ignorance. However, though medieval people entertained multiple misconceptions—like countless people have and still do—that doesn’t mean that they didn’t have an interest in the world around them and in the world of the divine. Travel narratives of men like Riccoldo of Monte Croce, Ibn Battuta, and Mandeville reflect a desire to understand the unfamiliar, even if many of these narratives contain a bewildering blend of praising the “other” and condemning it. Using the device of the foreign observer and its illusion of objectivity, writers like Honoret Bonet sought to reveal the flaws of their own society. As well as clashing with the conception of the Middle Ages as a period of intellectual stagnation, this sustained inspection of one’s society draws on the principle of reason that eventually characterized the Enlightenment. Of course, this is not to say that the Middle Ages was a time of perfect truth and understanding. Multiple medieval genres, from the travel narrative to the *chanson de geste*, espoused antisemitism, Islamophobia, racism, and sexism: in other words, fear of the “other.” At the same time, interfaith relationships in the Middle Ages were more complex than modern media and hate groups suggest. Crusading defeats led Christians to question whether God favored Muslims over them, and it allowed writers like Riccoldo of Monte Croce to praise “the Saracen works of perfection, more to shame the Christians than to praise the Saracens.” For all the anxiety surrounding Muslims, interactions between the two faiths also took place outside the context of combat. Mandeville (or, at least, his literary persona) fought as a mercenary for a Muslim sultan, and a Christian king kissed Ibn Battuta’s feet because the Muslim had been to the Holy Land. As stories like *Fierabras and Floripas*, *Miriam the Sash-maker*, and *The Man of Upper Egypt and His Frankish Wife* suggest, interfaith marriage further complicated Christian-Muslim relationships. Far from always being antagonistic, this relationship could turn into one of love and even induce people to convert for the sake of marriage. Given modern stereotypes about the Middle Ages, medieval studies as a field can seem like



“the other”—an obscure, outlandish period which differs so much from our modern, advanced world that is hardly worth studying. The more we’ve explored the medieval, however, the more I’ve been able to trace similarities between this time period and our own. Centuries later, our society is still grappling with the dangers of othering and with tenuous relationships across religious and racial lines. But alongside the deluge of bigotry in both modern times and the Middle Ages, there have been moments when two sides engage and gain a glimpse of understanding.

2/ “What is ‘medieval?’”—It seems very easy to be reductive about such a question. There’s just too much pop-culture emphasis on the “dark” of the Dark Ages; violence, bigotry, tyranny, degradation, isolation, *unenlightenment* are terms that easily come to mind if one were to consume only popular media on the Middle Ages. But this class and its work—looking at relics and objects, reading extant works in many languages, our wonderful discussions and lectures—have convinced me that the Middle Ages were not/are not only dark. Much like today, along with the wars and hate, there were moments of cultural connection (thinking about the genuine, if sometimes hesitant, praise of Muslims in Riccoldo’s Book of Pilgrimage, for example), moments of cultural transmission and combination (the troubadour poetry and the Arabic/Spanish songs of love), and brave individuals who reached out across gender/cultural/religious/geographic lines of division to find new ways of living (Battuta, the Prior in *Apparicion Maistre Jehan de Meun*, “astonishing” women like Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe). Perhaps the fact that people project so easily onto the Middle Ages (in turn arguing that it was mono- or multi-cultural, bigoted or accepting, closed-off or well-connected) speaks to the more important truths that 1) it is such a wide-ranging, fruitful field of study that projections like these are even possible in the first place, and 2) people will attempt to appropriate these fields of study to fit political agendas, even if it means changing them beyond recognition. The job of a medieval scholar, then, is not just to continue researching, appreciating, and discussing the Middle Ages but also to fight back against those appropriations of it that seek motivation to needlessly pit people against each other. It’s not all darkness and hate. Light and love and acceptance are also historic. They had (and will continue to have) a place in the Middle Ages.

3/ My conception of what medieval is has changed drastically throughout the course of these past few weeks. While most media representation focused on a more Euro-centric depiction of the medieval period, I was always under the assumption that globalization, trade, and cross-cultural exchange were relatively recent phenomena and mostly products of colonialism. I was very intrigued by how complex and nuanced cross-cultural exchange was during the medieval times. The travel narratives that we read suggested how travel and exploration of different cultures were important facets of medieval intellectual life. Most of the time, the cultural Other was not represented as a simple figure of only evil or hatred or other negative qualities. Instead, medieval representations of the Other were far more intricate and revealed that while medieval attitudes were not completely free from bias, they were more tolerant than what I had imagined them to be. Finally, I was also very fascinated by the themes of femininity, sexuality, and religion in some of the texts that we read and how these ideas continue to shape and form our perceptions of these ideas even today.

4/ Last month, there was a viral movement that spread online called “No nuance November.” It involved people publicly claiming opinions that specifically lacked an acknowledgement of any kind

of subtlety—essentially, people made big statements about “true” opinions and sealed themselves off from a considerate discussion. Some points were more joking, and many were political. I don’t think I would normally engage with this type of activity, even if I agreed with the opinions stated. Because of this class, however, I was particularly jarred by the trend. This is because what has continually fascinated me about the Middle Ages as we have studied people, war, travel, stories, and more is precisely what this trend prohibits: nuance. I think there is something remarkable about the seeming unlimited potential to unlock the intricacies of cultural relationships, ambiguous authors, the motivations of holy women, and the interactions between travelers and their destinations as we have studied in this course. Even physical manuscripts—which have this element of the unknown in their faded pages, curious illustrations, and anonymous proprietors—seem to concretely represent this capacity for us to continually learn from the Middle Ages by mere observation. It is clear that the political and social constructions that followed the period, in some ways, caused a regression of our very interest in engaging at all in a dialogue with an Other, and caring to observe them to better understand them. It is such a shame that the Middle Ages are so often misrepresented—I held many of the misconceptions of my classmates prior to this class—because it seems like a ripe and crucial period to understand our social identities today.

5/ “Medieval” is muddying of boundaries—cultural, physical, religious, gender, and more. After going through this course, I now understand the “medieval” as a complex period in which exchanges and explorations were occurring both in the world and on the page. With the texts of Mandeville, Riccoldo, and Battuta, we are presented with nuanced representations of cultures different than the writer’s own culture. The medieval period was a time when norms were challenged by literary figures and travel narratives. Nothing was really black and white, there were “grey” areas in a variety of places. At the beginning of the course, I described the medieval period as a matter of perspective, depending on the function a modern viewer wants it to serve, that is what it will be. But at this point in the semester, I now understand the medieval period to be diverse—in thought, literature, relationships, and religion. People were way more connected in the medieval period than I previously knew of, and the constant challenging of boundaries and expectations is a testament to this crossing of borders.

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