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Musings on the Medieval: An Interview with Caroline Bergvall

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Musings on the Medieval: An Interview with Caroline Bergvall

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Abstract

This interview focuses on Caroline Bergvall's medievalist works: *Meddle English* (2011), *Drift* (2014), and *Alisoun Sings* (2019). Bergvall discusses interrelations between her own work and medieval (literary) practices, her handling of medieval source material, and how the term 'retelling' relates to her texts.

Versatile and notoriously uncategorizable, Caroline Bergvall’s oeuvre includes (but is not limited to) performance art pieces, installations, texts, and interweaves, often within a single work, various media, forms and genres, languages and intertextual references. One recurring element in her body of work is a transhistorical dimension that finds its expression in an interplay of allusions to historical periods and an experimental use of language that merges modern colloquialisms and linguistic features of older stages of English. The French-Norwegian writer’s medieval-inspired poetic works—*Meddle English* (2011), *Drift* (2014), and *Alisoun Sings* (2019)—are prime examples of this transhistorical approach. All three draw on medieval English and engage vigorously with medieval texts, first and foremost Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and the Old English elegy *The Seafarer*.

Because of her complex and multifaceted engagement with the medieval, Bergvall has become a household name in medievalist circles and has entered into a fruitful and sustained dialogue with the field, reading, for instance, from her work at the 2021 Expo of the New Chaucer Society and collaborating on an edited volume dedicated exclusively to her medievalist work, *Caroline Bergvall’s Medievalist Poetics: Migratory Texts and Transhistorical Methods* (Davies and Bergvall forthcoming 2023). Indeed, her “medievalist trilogy” (Hadbawnik 2022) has received increasing scholarly attention in recent years (see e.g. Edmond 2019; Hadbawnik 2022; Skoulding 2020; Turner 2023), and this interview, too, is intended as a contribution to the discussion of Bergvall’s handling of medieval material.

Bergvall has managed to strike up a vibrant conversation between the contemporary and the medieval, showcasing how the one can illuminate the other. In the Preface to *Alisoun Sings* (2019), she writes: “Tales lead to more tales. Stories get woven from multitudes of stories. Voices call up other voices” (n.p.). Inherently dialogic, Bergvall’s trilogy consists of such tales and voices firmly embedded in a vast network of reception texts. In the context of this special cluster, those passages that belong to the realm of retelling, that is, passages where Bergvall works closely with her medieval source material, are of particular interest. The tendency to retell, but also the frequent combination of the spoken and the written word, and the performative element of her work, arguably mark Bergvall out as a writer who is firmly situated within certain medieval literary traditions.

We conducted this interview in written form, after an initial meeting via Zoom, and entered into dialogue with the writer, inviting her to share her thoughts and reflections on the pleasures and challenges of working with medieval source material and the practice of retelling medieval tales.

Medieval Influences and Contemporary Retellings

Eva von Contzen and Sophia Philomena Wolf: What sparked your interest in medieval texts, and why do certain medieval texts speak to you? Why do you opt for medieval source material rather than sources from a different period?

Caroline Bergvall: I suppose there are certain traits that connect me to that vast and rich period as a writer. It really started with my spending time on Dante’s first tercet and my curiosity for the great number of translations of the *Inferno* that had been coming out in the English language. You could say that to want to look at the micro differences of a three liner across styles and epochs, and to turn that

into an exercise in variations, a fugue, a ghost song is a very contemporary approach. Yet it bears similarities to the deep application to literary games so present in troubadour poetry or Chaucer's polyvocality, for instance. This playfulness and formal curiosity at the root of the medieval poetic process are crucial to me and certainly a reason why I've continued exploring medieval texts.

I think that my focus on various historical forms of English from Chaucer's *Tales* to the Old English *Seafarer*, goes hand in hand with my own commitment to the English language in my writing and identity, and to my interest in the deeply resistant and flexible workings of language per se. It allows me to tap into larger themes of language mutation and contextual politics, like the current ongoing splintering of the English language into many new hybrid and decolonial formations around the world as well as the slow revalorization of regional and ancient languages that have somehow managed to survive colonial imposition and violence. This is reflected in the many different multilingual explorations at work in a lot of contemporary literature. It is difficult to ignore the current accelerated loss of linguistic diversity that we are witnessing around the world. This goes hand in hand with an ultimate form of colonial violence, the aggressive environmental devastation from ongoing industrial greed, often with political blessing. The severity of this is really starting to affect my work. How to use language in a heavily deforested, drowning, aphasic world? This is the quest at work in my current nocturnal text and performance, *Nottsong*.

Looking back as well as forward, there is something very special in the pre-European era with the rise of vernacular literature pitting itself against the universal impulse of Latin as the dominant religious and political language—and the kinds of writings and new connections and needs that emerge or get reaffirmed or perhaps just profiled through this localisation. This is something Edouard Glissant also points out about his interest in the medieval period.¹

In many ways I write with the languages that emerge from the texts as much as with their literary model or value. To be able to follow the development of a language such as English from a few of its surviving Old English texts and then the rich and varied period of Middle English and its regionalisms from the vantage point of someone living and working with it at the start of the twenty-first century is just fascinating. The fact that contemporary writers such as Edouard Glissant, Christa Wolf, or Anne Carson have all worked very profoundly with different spatio-temporal worlds has inspired me and deepened the way I value working transhistorically when grappling with today's seismic transitional changes.

In 2016, I started on an outdoor sunrise performance work "Ragadawn." For this I turned to another strong medieval heritage: the Occitan troubadour poets and their celebration of dawn, love, and language. For the centrepiece, I wrote a "Canso" in honour of dawn and lovers and ancient-inspired dawn figures, such as Usha, the wonderful life-enhancing Vedic Dawn Goddess who rides in on a chariot, and I wove my own lines in and out of collated lines or phrases from "alba," poems by mostly Occitan troubadour poets, but also some Galician, a Mozarabic, and Medieval Hebrew reference, even a regional English song. It was a just wonderful pool of sounds and texts to work with. I contacted the British composer Gavin Bryars, who often works with ancient European songs and who agreed to write for it. He wrote a totally stunning composition for solo soprano.

¹ See e.g. Glissant with Leupin 2008.

EvC and SPW: From the combination of words and images to the performative elements of your work and your collaborations with people who have specialized skills in other artforms (e.g. photographers and musicians)—the medieval seems to wind its way through your texts in multifarious ways. To what extent have medieval ideas and practices of writing and receiving texts been springboards for your projects?

CB: The first obvious connection is with the orality or semi-orality of medieval literature, the fact that it would have been read aloud. That musicians might be involved. Performance and collaborating with musicians are very longstanding aspects of my poetic work and its manifestation. Even to read aloud solo is a moment, is a show, can be immersive, can take you on a journey.

We have come full circle in our own epoch. This development is really exciting to me. It implies the presence of an audience, of direct response, of communal delivery, whatever the platform used. It also means the rise of different types of literacies. Here perhaps also lies the pedagogical potential of my work.

I have also always had a special fascination and love for handwriting, works based on handwriting, the whole art of calligraphy and the painstaking task of copyists, or contemporary facsimiles of handwritten journals or first drafts by Joyce, Stendhal, or Woolf, or the drawn writings of Henri Michaux, and recently Renee Gladman. I find the gestural and embodied aspects of it intriguing. It is the closest to witnessing a writer's process one can get. I've always loved how Kamau Brathwaite took back his own books and redesigned them with his own visual script system to reclaim and imprint in the reading process, a hieroglyphic African imagination as a constitutive part of his Caribbean poetics.

Material culture really matters to me. For instance, the damage of time on manuscripts, archival accidents, copyists' mishaps, unstable spellings across texts. All in all, even before one tries to read a manuscript, just facing an ancient or medieval work or early printed text is an extraordinary moment. Anne Carson's translation of the Sappho fragments, which utilizes brackets to incorporate the imagination of papyrus into her translation, is a genius response to this: "Even though you are approaching Sappho in translation, there is no reason you should miss the drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half...brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure" (2003, xi).

EvC and SPW: With regard to the Old English poem *The Seafarer* you comment on the inaccessibility of the language. How did the strangeness and, to some extent, unknowability of medieval texts and cultures affect your work?

CB: The strangeness and inaccessibility of the Old English reminded me of the obvious: how not knowing a language cuts one off from its world; yet how applying oneself to it very slowly can open up many hidden or previously unchecked associations, real or needed. I wanted to engage with these levels and I needed to be patient, stay open, accept my ignorance and my blind spots.

Working with *The Seafarer* was so much tougher than working with Chaucer given that we're here dealing with a much older period in the history of the English language. How would I navigate it, find my way when, at first, I could grasp so little? I took me two years, including a full-time fellowship in Cambridge and the haunts of its libraries to get at it, to trace some routes with it. In the process, I discovered so many meanings of what 'getting lost' can mean.

EvC and SPW: Lists abound in medieval texts, and they also feature in your own work. What intrigues you about the list form and how do you utilize it in your work?

CB: The sheer indulgence they often allow and the lack of progressive narrative are intriguing to me. A list can be a way of showing off great heaps of ridiculousness and cumulative knowledge. They're pleasurable to write and to read. I'm thinking, for example, of Georges Perec, Sophie Calle, and Lewis Carroll, to name but a few. A list also stops time, has no temporality, and in that sense can be used in more threatening, authoritarian ways. Pierre Guyotat's *Eden, Eden, Eden* is a hone sentence book that details the horrors of the French-led Algerian war. It can pretty much be read as a long and unending list of brutality punctuated by commas: it is an inferno no-one was meant to be coming out of.

EvC and SPW: At the moment, there's a strong interest in retelling the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*. What were your reasons for focusing on this particular Chaucerian text for *Alisoun Sings*?

CB: Yes, there is, and I find this very exciting. On the back of her recent release *The Wife of Bath: A Biography*, Marion Turner invited Patience Agbabi and myself to chat about the book for a radio show. It was fabulous to hear how Patience had imagined her as a Nigerian business woman, and how "Alison" in fact now largely functions as a cultural container and a pretext for addressing larger-than-life cultural models along with many needed issues and perspectives.

I also think that the global #MeToo Movement and the fact that the Black Lives Matter Movement was started by three African-American women confirmed why I had needed to pick up the chaplet *Alyson Singes* and continue working on it. So there was a renewed urgency in me and I tried to make use of the rich and contradictory voice of Chaucer's Alisoun to get to grips with some of these complex issues. I wanted to unpack this female and re-gendered voice in as many figures as possible, and place her with some of the models she would have represented for me in my life. I wanted to see how far I could stretch this voice, the struggles, and the traumas, what narratives and language work would arise from it. I made her Chaucerian and contemporary, full of words, ideas, and attitudes for spearheading change. I placed her in multiple conversations with other like-minded warriors, fighters, and writers. They prepare and deepen her convictions.

Oh yes and, once you sail past the text's at times extravagant spellings, you'll see that I made her funny. After all, this is how she survived as one of the stars of the *Tales* for some six hundred years!

Retelling as a Practice

EvC and SPW: In one log entry of *Drift*, you ask "How can I free myself from the original text..." (143). What is inhibiting about working with a preexisting text?

CB: I think it is liberating rather than inhibiting. I recognise that the question I ask was framed in negative terms, and I remember how exhausted and at times defeated I felt. But I think the passage was still all about the struggle to engage with the medieval material in a way that would also allow my own processes of writing and of writing as translating to come to the fore. I think this is also why I started drawing the thorn sign, just to place myself inside a shape and work from that.

EvC and SPW: Texts that overtly engage with other, antecedent texts are frequently labelled ‘rewritings,’ ‘translations,’ or ‘adaptations.’ We ourselves have chosen the term ‘retelling’ to describe the texts our special cluster centres on. To what extent does your work fit into or defy these categories?

CB: I like your word “retelling.” The way I hear it, it implies contextualised narration. Being connected to an action of ‘telling’ or speaking/narrating rather than translating, it sort of also implies the possible yarn and unreliability of oralised telling, and I do recognise some of my own narrative leaps into this. Also, it meets my interest for different modalities of address, from printed text to live performance to recorded sound or installation. The term also blurs the hierarchy between outputs. The way I work with source material is often with its poetic structures and the language of the text rather than respecting the detail of its narratives. It is heteroglossic in the Bakhtinian sense of letting multiple voicings exist in the text, some of which are explicit narrative borrowings, many not.

A retelling can in that sense perhaps be a process. I refer to a lot of my methods as translative practices. They involve processes of friction, of rubbing different linguistic realities against or into one another, different semantics and contexts. So that the textual coherence becomes articulated through its openness to being distracted, to going down another path, to being guided by what appears and what feels important there and then, at this textual juncture. This has been especially strong in my latest book-length version of the *Wife of Bath, Alisoun Sings*. That multiplying voice had so much yearning for yarning and for being heard through many stories that I sometimes struggled to keep up!

EvC and SPW: At the beginning of *Meddle English*, in the section entitled “Middling English,” you comment, broadly speaking, on your engagement with the past. How does this essay encapsulate your writing and reception practices?

CB: It took me more than a year to write that poetic essay, and in many ways, it has acted as my *ars poetica*. It engages with my sense of what writing can lead from and travel through and lead to. I organise it in four shorthand points: midden, middling, middle, and finally the pro-active and engaged meddle. I was inspired in this by the linguist Roman Jakobson’s wonderful alliterative title: *Six Leçons sur le Son et le Sens* (“Six Lessons on Sound and Sense”).

I never let it be forgotten that the poem you are listening to or reading comes from a range of literary places and linguistic times, but I do write it in such a way that the listener or reader hopefully can identify with it as addressing and being written with my own time in mind. The epigraph to my first *Wife of Bath, Alisoun Sings*, is a quote from Christa Wolf’s introduction to her *Medea*. It’s a rich and fascinating take and also a caution and a guide to practice. She calls it “addressing our need” when engaging with “the ancients.”²

² The full quote and Bergvall’s epigraph reads: “Do we let ourselves go back to the ancients, or do they catch up with us? No matter. An outstretched hand suffices. Lightly they cross over to us, our strange guests who are like ourselves. We hold the key that unlocks all epochs, sometimes we use it shamelessly, darting a hasty glimpse through the crack of the door, keen on quick, ready-made judgements, yet it should also be possible to get closer, a step at a time, awed by the taboo, unwilling without great need to wrest away a secret from the dead. Confessing our need—we should begin with that” (Wolf 1998, 1).

EvC and SPW: How do you select your source texts? What considerations go into the selection process?

CB: I think they choose me usually. And I try and let the whole process guide me throughout, and this always enriches and also challenges my writing process. Narratively, this is how I end up from the desolations and calling of *The Seafarer* to ancient Irish saints' quest poems, the *Guardian* headline, the harrowing yet revelatory work by Forensic Architecture, the wonderful book by poet and regional scholar Bill Griffiths around birds and fish in the North East of England, the fogs of Icelandic sagas, the word Hafville, Sara Ahmed, and my own checkered, at times threatened, yet largely protected personal story as a multilingual and queer female being.

I'm currently working with the Old Norse prophetic poem "Voluspá" for my nocturnal work *Nottsong*. This has led to my investigating Scandinavian and notably New Norwegian translations of it, and has also slowly taken me towards Nordic shamanic traditions and improvisational vocal practices. So the detours or meanders can go very far into other processes of living and learning before I am able to distil it back into the writing.

EvC and SPW: Can you tell us something about your writing process and the choices involved when working with medieval sources? How do you decide what to incorporate and what to omit? What would be the most important or typical steps of your (re-)writing process?

CB: It is only very slowly that I get to the details of the text in its original language. I love interlinear translations. They can be misleading but they're a starting point. I do a lot of wandering and filling up of my bag before I get to the main party in a sense. As I have said, I love the stories but I'm more concerned with the linguistic details, the structural aspects of the texts, and how I can spin off from there and develop writing methods out of these.

For instance, regarding Chaucer: my interest in Chaucer was fuelled by an invitation from Charles Bernstein and David Wallace for the Fifteenth Congress of the New Chaucer Society in New York in July 2006, and it ended up changing my entire writing life.

It was the first time I had ventured into *The Canterbury Tales*, and I was looking for ways into it that would qualify as a process of reading rather than a translation. I came up with four distinct ways of working: observing the text and keeping a healthy distance. I kept the text in its original Middle English for the surfed banquet of "The Host's Tale." For "The Summer Tale," I slowly enter its glossary and narrative frames through explicit doublings, double takes, and shadowing the narrative with contemporary events: the BBC reporting on the Pope's visit to Poland. The third tale, the "Franker Tale," was the most ambitious one. It's a take on religious power and the moral degradation of rape, and how this brutal thread is traced up in various tales in *The Canterbury Tales* and pursued by Chaucer (allusion intended).³ Beyond the linguistic work and freer glossary play, and temporal confusions, I inserted a contemporary collective clamour as a sort of accountability refrain. I had noticed similar exclamations in the *Franklin's Tale's* retellings of gang rapes and tribal misogyny. After

³ Documents recently found by Euan Roger and Sebastian Sobecki suggest that Chaucer was not accused of rape, as a document releasing Chaucer from the charge of *raptus* seemed to indicate. Rather, the accusation was the result of a labour dispute. For more information on the legal case and the recent find, see Roger and Sobecki 2022.

the reading, a couple of people came up to me clearly moved by that piece. For the first time in my writing life, I experienced how, when writing brings up personal experience, it can also create bonds. On the spot it deepened the purpose of my work. For the final tale, the “Not Tale,” I had noticed the emotionally charged and very beautiful repetition structure Chaucer had used for Arcite’s funeral, and I replicated it. The four texts became the “Shorter Chaucer Tales,” and to this day I’m really proud of this effort.

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