

Gail Ashton, ed., *Medieval Afterlives in Contemporary Culture*

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Review

Medieval Afterlives in Contemporary Culture represents a second masterful effort of editor Gail Ashton to grow the literature surrounding ‘medievalisms’ — that is, modern ‘attempt[s] to reimagine or reinvent the medieval’, conscious or otherwise (p. 3). While her 2012 essay collection, *Medieval Afterlives in Popular Culture*, supplies fourteen essays with a focus on what, in most other scholarly volumes, might simply constitute an afterword, the new volume touts an impressive array of contributions from twenty-nine international scholars. The breadth in origin of these offerings corresponds to the brief contributors were given: ‘to celebrate and talk about a representative range of contemporary medievalisms in its diverse contexts’ by ‘offer[ing] survey, personal experience and/or opinion, critical-cum-theoretical investigation — in any combination — and in a clear and lively style as free of academic apparatus as they could make it’ (p. 5).

Ashton’s own contributions to the volume — the introduction and an essay on contemporary poets’ reappropriations of medieval texts and their interaction with popular culture — follow the brief to a T, interspersing detailed textual analysis with personal anecdote and cultural commentary. This makes for a serious, but enjoyable and accessible read for those both within and beyond academia. Contributors who take a cue from Ashton often provide the most engaging essays. Particularly notable are Jeff Massey and Brian Cogan’s sweeping tour of Monty Python’s *Spamalot* and its medievalist past, and Fiona Tolhurst’s examination of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe’s roles as contemporary cult figures, interrupted by narrative accounts of Tolhurst’s pilgrimages to Norwich and King’s Lynn. A number of the essays (see Chapters 3, 4, 12, and 18) follow the format of

literary or performance reviews, usually enriched with theoretical or cultural criticism, or a consideration of the medieval underpinnings for these modern reimaginings. Still more offer surveys of particular genres of medievalist texts or performances (see Chapters 2, 9, 13, 15, 19, 22, 23, and 27); while occasionally somewhat less compelling, these essays nonetheless hold much-needed bibliographical value for those looking to familiarize themselves with or expand their knowledge of the genre in question. In a volume of this sort, one might expect to find an essay offering insight on current advances in the digital humanities and its implications for medieval manuscript studies; such an essay, here provided by Wendy Scase, is not lacking (see Chapter 29, 'Afterlives of Medieval Manuscripts').

By Ashton's admission, the book purposefully lacks any 'over-arching thesis or pivotal principle of organization', and instead takes its shape from section headings which playfully give homage to tracks on Roxy Music's 1987 record, *Avalon* (e.g. 'To Turn You On: The Pleasures of Texts — Film, TV, Gaming' and 'Avalon: Icons and Artefacts'). If there is a persistent strand to be found across the essays, however, it lies in the recurrent suggestion that, whatever the medium, quality, or 'authenticity' of a contemporary 'medievalist' text, it bears rich potential both as a lively nexus between 'the relatively closed world of academia' and popular culture, and as a tool to reinvigorate and inspire medieval scholars and students alike, even as (or precisely because) it helps us 'render a version that is then "more medieval than the medieval"' (p. 3).

While the volume itself lacks a conclusion, which might serve to tie together some of the themes and observations from across its vast scope, Maggie M. Williams and Lauren C. Razzore's chapter on medieval memes seems as apt a way as any to end. Taking medieval memes as 'a venue for imagining the past in creative and humorous ways', their chapter explores many of the questions and concerns at issue throughout *Medieval Afterlives*: How do we define 'medievalisms'? Does it matter how 'authentic' contemporary medievalisms are relative to their medieval pasts?

How are medieval scholars particularly posed to engage with medievalist texts that surface in 'open and collaborative' spaces like the internet? Although commenting specifically on medieval memes, Williams and Razzore offer a closing insight that applies to all medieval afterlives: 'The medieval becomes what we make it — some fact, some fiction, some funny. And really, isn't that all we have of the "real" Middle Ages?' (p. 330).

Since the book and accompanying website, as Ashton writes, 'are conceived *together*', a word on the latter: Consistent with her insistence in the introduction to the print volume that scholars participate in contemporary 'democratic electronic dialogues' which occur in the 'para-academic sphere', with the website, she offers a growing archive of medievalist posts, written in the same intimate, conversational style as her book contributions (pp. 4–5). Posts range from commentaries on current news pieces of medieval interest to detailed meditations on Ashton's own medievalist pursuits — whether a search for a particular Chaucerian edition or a modern-day pilgrimage to a medieval church in Wales. Much like the print volume, the website is designed to be browsed, dipped into. In this way, perhaps intentionally, Ashton contrives a fruitful multimedia, nonlinear reading experience just as 'medievalist' or 'neomedieval' as the diverse texts and 'medievalisms' at the center of *Medieval Afterlives in Contemporary Culture*. We are meant to read contemporary medievalisms in the same way we are meant to read the book — in Ashton's words, 'mindful of how to ride two horses at once: the scholars' steed with its academic armour and heavyweight heraldry, and the unicorn flickering through the trees, into a fantastic, medieval-ish past' (p. 7).

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