

Kisha G. Tracy: Why Study the Middle Ages? Leeds: ARC Humanities Press, 2022. 118pp. \$17,95. ISBN 9781641891974 (broschiertes Buch)

Medievalists have been asking themselves periodically why their work might be impactful and relevant, and Kisha Tracy has selected this sempiternal question as the topic of her concise volume for the PastImperfect series, a series that aims to take on key issues in medieval studies “in provocative and accessible language.” While her book is not geared towards a general audience, it is certainly accessible to a broad range of students and colleagues with a serious interest in reading about the value of medieval studies for higher education. And the book might be called provocative in its focus on two relatively recent interdisciplinary threads in the field, disability studies (“such as disability representation in literary texts, accommodations, and museum representations”) and diversity studies (“such as (mis)appropriations of the Middle Ages by white supremacists, scientific and DNA studies, and what a Global Middle Ages looks like”). The cover image, a close-up of the statue of St. Maurice from Magdeburg Cathedral, Germany, is programmatic: The black knight and saint, represented in Magdeburg to buttress the authority of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen by proclaiming his empire’s cosmopolitanism together with Christian universalism, has over the last two decades become a figurehead for ushering in a more inclusive view of the Middle Ages.

Medievalists can often be characterized as inhabiting space in between pastist and presentist approaches to their subject matter. Extreme pastism, which dates back to the beginnings of the modern university, would prefer to study the “real” Middle Ages, from a safe scientific distance, and without the contaminating impact of contemporary attitudes. Radical presentism would joyfully claim the psychic unity/continuity of humanity across time to understand the construction of subjectivity as a historical process. Kisha Tracy, in finding useful continuities between contemporary and medieval humanity, art, and culture, leans more towards presentism, but a presentism tempered by respect for a certain degree of otherness palpable in most medieval texts, artifacts, and practices. She ends her introduction, which finds parallels and differences in a motley mix of sources and analogues from Hugh of St. Victor’s early 12th-century through Fareed Zakaria’s 21st-century, to demonstrate that medieval studies continues to be a vital part of the liberal arts, but needs reclaiming from the widespread Eurocentric and nationalist appropriations since the nineteenth century. Tracy postulates that studying the Middle Ages can be harnessed “to push back” against such appropriations and various forms of “propaganda” (p. 20) and she proposes a culturally and historically inclusive notion of the Middle Ages because the period was much more diverse than has been assumed and, in the words of Lisa Fagin Davis, “full of humans being human.”

Small wonder, then, that Tracy begins her deliberations with the role of medieval studies in the humanities, which includes fields that deliberately center on exploring the workings of human subjectivity. In addition to mentioning examples of medievalisms investigated by humanities scholars (romanticizing; glorification of the Crusades by sports teams), I was pleased to read that, unlike too many secularist scholars, she acknowledges that “faith,” albeit not “the unquestioning belief that is often misattributed to the period,” is “an aspect of studying the Middle Ages that deserves

and demands recognition” (p. 23). This recognition is important for a full understanding of medieval approaches to disability; just as the inclusion of African medieval texts and artifacts by diversity studies supports a better understanding of African history and culture, even before Europeans changed its course. A case study on “domestic abuse” rounds out the chapter. A careful reading of Marie de France’s romance *Yonec* provides evidence that, against expectations, such abuse was not necessarily “acceptable” in the Middle Ages (p. 42).

The chapter on “The Middle Ages and STEM” (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) begins a little like one of the numerous attempts at righting the reputation (at least since the Reformation and the French Revolution) of the medieval period as a dark age when it comes to science and technological innovation. Tracy’s claim that many STEM fields have recognized “their foundations in the medieval and can return to the medieval to advance their current research” is certainly correct (p. 44), but her example of using ancestral technologies to combat climate change in two Peruvian communities may not be sufficiently impactful to drive large numbers of STEM students and faculty to reconsider the Middle Ages as central to their endeavors. Similarly, while Tracy offers several interdisciplinary collaborations between medieval studies and medical science (leprosy; MRSA bacteria) and ethnic diversity (Viking DNA; nun’s involvement in book production), I doubt these episodes constitute sufficient evidence of the emergence of new subfields, at least not outside the well-established history of science.

Tracy’s chapter on “The Middle Ages and the Social Sciences” is almost entirely dedicated to how medievalists need to battle the resurgence of the use of the Middle Ages to justify “white nationalism, racism, ableism, misogyny” in American culture (p. 69). The history of how Richard III’s scoliosis was exaggerated, from the Tudors and Shakespeare through 2012, when his remains were found in a parking lot near Leicester Cathedral, offers an illustrative example of the stigma of disability, then and now. Similarly, the racist exclusion of actors of color in medievalist fantasy narratives like *Game of Thrones* needs public correctives from medievalists in the social sciences and cultural studies. Tracy also mentions several illustrative examples of activist “myth-busting” when it comes to combatting prevalent prejudice about mental health, disability accommodations, and other generalizations about disability in the Middle Ages.

Chapter 4 is basically Tracy’s plea to her readers to: “Examine initial thoughts,” “explore public scholarship,” “question preconceptions,” “confront prejudices,” “do the deep research,” and “decide for yourself.” She is writing to a mixed audience here, and some of her recommendations sound more appropriate for undergraduate and graduate students, others clearly for faculty. The chapter commences with the conversion experience of Derek Black, whose academic study of history successfully challenged his originally held white supremacist biases. While I agree that we medievalists can sometimes change the hearts and minds of some of our students and, if lucky, those of our non-academic readers, the Derek Black episode may create some unrealistic expectations about how much change academic medievalists can bring about.

The volume ends with some helpful observations on the important work to be done to unravel misconceptions on gender and gender identity in medieval culture, misconceptions introduced in a large part by modern medieval scholars replicating

their own cultural value systems in what they included and excluded in their research and teaching.

Why Study the Middle Ages? is an inspired and inspiring read. It exudes an infectious kind of enthusiasm about how medievalists' work can be enhanced by, and can enhance, diversity studies and disability studies, and thus it is bound to bring about new and different audiences for the study of medieval culture. It is well balanced when it comes to appreciating presentist and pastist perspectives, and it understands that faith and religion need to remain part of a convincing and responsible future medieval studies. Finally, it practices what it preaches about the need for a globally inclusive medieval studies by adducing global medieval and postmedieval sources and research throughout. Therefore, I recommend it warmly as a vademecum to colleagues who teach introductory courses as well as to all those looking for practical ideas about how to add diversity and disability modules to their courses.

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Eingestellt am 08.08.2023 [3 Seiten].