

Editors' Introduction: The Case for a Medieval Barthes

This special issue reflects in two different ways on the notion of a “Medieval Barthes.”¹ On the one hand, it considers Barthes’s own engagement with medieval culture, in his reading of medieval authors and in his engagement with medieval styles of thought. On the other hand, it explores the uses of Barthes within medieval studies: what medievalists have learnt from Barthes; how Barthesian concepts can be adapted for different medieval contexts; how medievalists inflect and change the way we read Barthes’s texts. Barthes is not known for his interest in the Middle Ages. His literary tastes tend rather to lean towards French prose-writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in particular Stendhal, Jules Michelet, and Marcel Proust.² Yet these writers, and nineteenth-century French culture more generally, are at the same time potential conduits of the medieval for Barthes.³ Moreover, it is our particular contention — as the following essays illustrate — both that Barthes ought to be better known for his intermittent reflections on medieval concepts and that, more broadly, Barthes’s writings can be useful for medievalists in ways that have yet to be realized.

The Critical Landscape

Reflecting on Barthes and the medieval at the present time, our project benefits from and engages with several recent trends within Barthes studies: the emergence of new materials by Barthes published posthumously; publications about Barthes surrounding the 2015 centenary of his birth; increasing recognition of Barthes’s interdisciplinarity.

Firstly, there are the substantial posthumous publications that continue to emerge and that necessarily nuance and change our view of Barthes. These publications include notes

for Barthes's *Vita Nova* project, material which is not considered here due to its as yet incomplete publication, although its Dantean title and inspiration is a striking example of Barthes's engagement with medieval Italian poetry.⁴ Instead, we consider a different, more extensive, and more easily available set of posthumous materials, namely the lecture courses at the Collège de France, given by Barthes between January 12, 1977 and February 23, 1980, on three distinct topics: *Comment vivre ensemble* (*How to Live Together*); *Le Neutre* (*The Neutral*); *La Préparation du roman* (*The Preparation of the Novel*). The forms and editions of these lecture courses are discussed by Jennifer Rushworth in the present volume (see "Barthes and *Mouvance*"); suffice it to note here the relatively recent nature of the publication of this material, 2002 for *Comment vivre ensemble* and *Le Neutre* (see Barthes 2002a and 2002b) and 2003 and 2015 for two different transcriptions of *La Préparation du roman* (Barthes 2003; 2015b), with English translations adding a further delay (see Barthes 2005; 2011; 2013). These publications have provoked a lively debate amongst critics as to the value and significance of these materials, with reactions ranging from Jonathan Culler's avowed irritation at what he laments as Barthes's renegeing on previous theoretical positions concerning authorship and text in *La Préparation du roman* (2008) to the detailed engagement with the concepts and intertexts of these courses by Jürgen Pieters, Kris Pint, Lucy O'Meara, and others (Pieters and Pint 2008; O'Meara 2012). Our own position builds on the latter one, which considers Barthes's late lectures as "an invitation to return to his oeuvre" (Pieters and Pint 2008, 7, also cited in O'Meara 2012, 6). Distinctive to our volume is a broad-ranging approach to Barthes's oeuvre, establishing connections across the early, middle, and late Barthes.

Secondly, the centenary of Barthes's birth, celebrated in 2015, has been the catalyst for a wide range of Barthesian publications, including some of the posthumous material noted above — the second edition of *La Préparation du roman*, based on an oral

transcription of the lectures (Barthes 2015b), but also, in a similar vein, Éric Marty's *Album* of "inédits" (2015a; 2018) — in addition to Tiphaine Samoyault's biography (2015 with English translation 2017), memoirs of Barthes written by a number of his friends and fellow writers (Compagnon 2015; Sollers 2015 with English translation 2017), and Neil Badmington's study of *The Afterlives of Roland Barthes* (2016). From this material, we follow in particular Badmington's intuition that Barthes was "first and foremost a reader" (2016, 110), in our case both a reader of medieval texts and a reader of later readers of these texts. 2015 also saw the founding of the online journal *Barthes Studies* (<http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/barthes/>), with the French *Revue Roland Barthes* dating from only the previous year (<https://www.roland-barthes.org/revue.html>), as well as a special issue of *L'Esprit créateur* on *What's So Great About Roland Barthes?* (Baldwin, Haustein, and O'Meara 2015). It is clear that Barthes studies is flourishing in the new millennium (for a more complete though already dated "État présent," see Coste 2015), and our project draws on this rich and growing body of primary and secondary texts. We would like to highlight, in particular, the work of the *Barthes Studies* journal, which includes a desire to push Barthes into unfamiliar territory (the volume on "Roland Barthes and Poetry" edited by Calum Gardner [2016]) as well as encouraging consideration of Barthes's engagement with different pasts: first, John McKeane's "The Tragedy of Roland Barthes" (2015), then Rushworth (2018) on Barthes and Dante, and most recently a special issue on "Roland Barthes and Greece, Ancient and Modern" edited by Andy Stafford (2019).

Thirdly, we would like to single out one of the most recent publications within Barthes studies, a volume on *Interdisciplinary Barthes* edited by Diana Knight and published in 2020, though in fact deriving from a conference at the British Academy held in that same anniversary year of 2015. Knight's edited volume highlights the importance of understanding Barthes as an interdisciplinary thinker, and it is this understanding which underpins our belief

in his potential to have wide appeal for medievalists. Responding to this interdisciplinary Barthes, essays in this volume reflect upon history, photography, music, religion, and editorial practice, amongst other areas.

While the preceding discussion situates our project in relation to recent trends in Barthes studies, it remains true that connections between Barthes and the Middle Ages have been too infrequent and isolated within this critical landscape. Key exceptions, in this regard, are the writings of Carolyn Dinshaw (1999; 2012), Bruce Holsinger (2005), and Virginie Greene (2006).⁵ In different ways, these three have been very inspiring for our investigations.

Firstly, in *Getting Medieval*, Dinshaw proposes a queer way of reading and thinking that is about making “pleasurable connections” with the past, an affective and erotic sort of “touching across time” (1999, 36). For Dinshaw, Barthes’s method is suggestive of “a queer historical impulse” (40) that recognizes the role of both the body and desire in history and resists the teleology and essentialism to which all ages are prone. In her later book, *How Soon is Now?*, Dinshaw develops her queer reading of the Middle Ages to embrace present-day, amateur engagements with the medieval past. In this volume, the role of the amateur is considered by Matthew Salisbury in the context of Barthes’s engagement with music and his reflections on the meaning of *musica practica*. Meanwhile, Barthes’s corporeal Middle Ages are examined by Alexandra Ilina and Alexandru Matei as part of their investigation into the mediation of the Middle Ages via the nineteenth-century French historian, Jules Michelet. Michelet conceived of the writing of history as a form of bodily resurrection and in his reading of Michelet, Barthes highlights Michelet’s predilection for bodily imagery. Inspired by Michelet, Barthes has a tactile relationship with the Middle Ages, one which includes his own writing practice.

Secondly, Holsinger’s *The Premodern Condition* (2005) argues that key French theorists of the mid-twentieth century — in particular, Bataille, Lacan, Bourdieu, Derrida,

and Barthes — were closely engaged with medieval texts, concepts, and ways of thinking.⁶ As a result, for Holsinger bringing theory and the Middle Ages together is not a critical gesture that happens retrospectively, but rather a pairing that is interconnected from the start. More specifically to Barthes's case, Holsinger's book contains a chapter on *S/Z* which demonstrates Barthes's adaptation of the medieval fourfold interpretation of text and his tacit engagement with medieval writing practices in that work (2005, 152–94). As Holsinger shows, in this text Barthes does not openly acknowledge his debt to medieval (mainly scriptural) exegesis, yet his method is undoubtedly quite heavily marked by it, likely through the mediation of Henri de Lubac's multi-volume *Exégèse médiévale (Medieval Exegesis)* (1959–64 with English translation 1998–2009). In short, we can see medieval concepts and modalities at work in Barthesian texts even when there is no explicit acknowledgement of their presence. As Iliina and Matei argue, Barthes's approach to Michelet's œuvre through excerpting and commentating combines the four medieval authorial roles: copyist, compiler, commentator and author, figures Barthes will later mention in *Critique et vérité (Criticism and Truth)*.

Commenting on the figure of Barthes as *scriptor* in the 1960s, Holsinger also writes that “One can perceive in Barthes's writing from this period a sense of ‘practicing’ the Middle Ages as itself a kind of ‘response to the plural of the text,’ as he often described his broader critical mission” (2005, 175). Holsinger similarly cites Barthes as perceiving the collaborative, creative work of his fellow theorists in the late 1960s as being analogous to the medieval activity of *compilatio*. From this ensues an understanding of texts as complex, “braided” entities composed of multiple threads or codes (2005, 187, drawing on imagery from Barthes's *S/Z*) and which the reader has the pleasure of following and at times disentangling. This kind of anachronistic entanglement of different forms and voices is at the heart of our project to explore a “Medieval Barthes,” whether through the interaction between

medieval French prose style and Barthes on photography (as in Jane Gilbert's contribution) or through our placing of Barthes in dialogue with figures such as Petrarch and Augustine or with the medieval Galician-Portuguese *cantigas de amigo* (see the essays of Francesca Southerden, Francesco Giusti, and Simon Park respectively).

Finally, the richness of Greene's chapter aptly titled "What Happened to Medievalists After the Death of the Author?" (2006) makes up for the absence of an essay devoted to authorship in the present volume.⁷ Greene explores how medievalists were inspired by new attention to questions of authorship encouraged not only by Barthes's 1967 essay "La mort de l'auteur" ("The death of the author") but also by Michel Foucault's 1969 paper "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" ("What is an author?").⁸ For Greene, Foucault's essay — which is implicitly critical of Barthes's dramatic tone and certainly challenges the originality and even the necessity of his thesis — proves to be more productive for medievalists given its greater interest in historical context and in practical questions surrounding the author's name, the connection between an author and their attributed works, and the textual presence of different authorial figures. Nonetheless, Greene argues that "it would be unfair and untrue to underestimate Barthes's and Foucault's contributions to the renewal of medieval studies," and also suggests that "The peculiarities of medieval literature led medievalists to grant texts preeminence over authors, a move that can be seen as anticipating the general attack against the Author that erupted in the Sixties" (Greene 2006, 208 and 210). In short, Greene emphasizes how modern theory and medieval studies are very much involved in an ongoing, two-way critical dialogue, and proceeds to give examples of specific medievalists who have reflected on authorship before, during, and after Barthes and Foucault. Following Greene, Rushworth's article in the present volume takes up the question of the relationship between Barthes and Paul Zumthor in order to reflect on editorial issues surrounding Barthes's posthumously published lecture courses. In general, though, we have enjoyed exploring

Barthes's works beyond his ubiquitous essay — indeed, with a particular focus on his later writings, where, as Barthes himself admits, the author makes a return (see Barthes 2003, 275; 2011, 207; 2015, 380; on this question, see also Curran 2008).

Building on the insights of Dinshaw, Holsinger, and Greene, we argue for the productiveness of bringing the Middle Ages and Barthes into dialogue. We consider this dialogue to be a valuable addition to a critical landscape that is already highly theoretical but which has not yet reaped the benefits of a sustained, collaborative engagement with Barthes. Medieval studies has often previously turned to Jacques Lacan as well as to psychoanalysis more broadly.⁹ More recently, there has been an even greater diversity of critical frameworks, whether engagement with specific philosophers (such as Bruno Latour) or more topical approaches (including ecocriticism, postcolonial studies, and queer and transgender studies).¹⁰

Overall, we have been especially inspired by the concept of “diffractive reading,” which Manuele Gragnolati takes from Donna Haraway: “Diffraction patterns record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. Diffraction is about heterogeneous history, not about originals” (Haraway 1997, 273, cited in Gragnolati 2013, 11). Our investigation of “Medieval Barthes” is similarly attuned to histories of “difference” and “interference,” rather than a replication of “the Sacred Image of the Same” (as the quotation from Haraway continues). Moreover, these differences are not only the product of modern readings and rewritings (reading understood, following Barthes, as a form of rewriting: 2002e, 71; 1985, 189) but are already inherent within the Middle Ages, a heterogeneous, plural, and even paradoxical period (as highlighted, for instance, in Bynum 2001 and Newman 2013). The challenge of “Medieval Barthes” is, likewise, the challenge of knowing how to navigate two intersecting bodies of text and areas of knowledge, both of which are defined by their variation and variability.

The Shape of Return

As is evident from the preceding discussion, we are arguing both for a return to Barthes and for a return to the Middle Ages via Barthes.¹¹ We understand this return to take the form of a spiral, inspired by the following passage by Barthes from an essay on the painter Bernard Réquichot:

sur la spirale, les choses reviennent, *mais à un autre niveau* : il y a retour dans la différence, non ressassement dans l'identité (pour Vico, penseur audacieux, l'histoire du monde suivait une spirale). La spirale règle la dialectique de l'ancien et du nouveau ; grâce à elle, nous ne sommes pas contraints de penser : *tout est dit*, ou : *rien n'a été dit*, mais plutôt rien n'est premier et cependant tout est nouveau. C'est ce que fait à sa manière la spirale de Réquichot : en se répétant, elle engendre un déplacement. (2002d, 386)

on the spiral, things recur, *but at another level*: there is a return in difference, not repetition in identity (for Vico, an audacious thinker, world history followed a spiral). The spiral governs the dialectic of the old and the new; thanks to it, we need not believe: *everything has been said*, or: *nothing has been said*, but rather: nothing is first yet everything is new. This is what constitutes Réquichot's spiral: by repeating itself, it engenders a displacement. (1986, 218–19)

Likewise, Barthes's return to the Middle Ages "engenders" a comparable "displacement," and this is further complicated by multiplicity: on the one hand, the multiple returns made by

Barthes to medieval writings and concepts in different texts and at different times (in short: Barthes's own multiplicity); on the other hand, the multiple Middle Ages from which Barthes chooses and which we, in turn, can choose to place in relation to Barthes's ways of thinking. As in the Réquichot painting on which Barthes is commenting above, we are faced not with a single spiral but rather with multiple, overlapping spirals.

Contributions engage with a broad spectrum of Barthes's works, from the early texts (Gilbert engaging with *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (*Writing Degree Zero*) from 1953, Iliina and Matei on *Michelet* (1954)), through the middle period (with Iliina and Matei's reading of *Critique et vérité* (*Criticism and Truth*) from 1966 and Salisbury's analysis of Barthes's essay "Musica practica" from 1970) to the late Barthes: Park on *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (*A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*) from 1977; Gilbert and Giusti on *La Chambre claire* (*Camera lucida*) from 1980; Giusti also on the posthumously published *Journal de deuil* (*Mourning Diary*); Southerden and Rushworth on the lecture courses at the Collège de France, also published posthumously. If there is perhaps marginally less focus on Barthes's middle period here, this is made up for by existing criticism on Barthes and the medieval which has paid particular attention already to texts from this period (as noted above, Holsinger 2005 on *S/Z* and Greene 2006 on "La mort de l'auteur"). The late Barthes is particularly privileged here partly for its variety and openness to affect, but also, quite practically, because of the ongoing publication of editions and translations that call for reassessment. However, a distinctive aspect of our volume is also its desire to bring together the early, middle, and late Barthes, instead of their usual separation in critical readings, creating spiralling trajectories through his work.

The volume opens with a medievalist performing a close reading of a famous Italian poem by Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), informed by the Barthesian notion of idiorrhymy (see Southerden). Idiorrhymy is a concept inspired for Barthes by his reflections on

medieval monasticism, in particular as mediated by Jacques Lacarrière. In the lectures of *Comment vivre ensemble* it is connected to the fluid and shifting interaction between one individual and the wider group and recognizes the vital role of gaps, digressions, and interruptions for preserving a space in which eros can flourish. Reading Petrarch through Barthes enriches our understanding of what desire is for the medieval poet in the same way that reading Barthes with Petrarch allows us to extend Barthesian concepts to other literary forms and modes (here lyric poetry) and thereby interrogate their possibilities and limits.

The second essay, by Gilbert, undertakes a reading of Barthes's first and last books, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953) and *La Chambre claire* (1980), as a framework for understanding the shift from verse to prose in writing in French in the early thirteenth century. Gilbert argues that this formal shift can be understood in light of what Barthes calls "zero-degree writing" (that "neutral," "transparent" writing style exemplified for Barthes by Camus) as well as by analogy with the shift from painting to black-and-white photography. Reacting to students and critics who have found medieval French prose colorless, Gilbert suggests instead, following Barthes, that this new style offers nothing less than a new vision of the world. Her essay concludes with a beautiful reading of *La Chambre claire* as a Grail romance, and in this way shows both the productiveness of Barthesian paradigms (of writing, of photography) for thinking about the Middle Ages and the way in which medieval narratives and structures can also enlighten Barthes's texts.

Salisbury explores the concept of "musica practica," in Barthes's essay of the same name, for how Barthes borrows but also adapts and even misunderstands the medieval term. Salisbury reflects on how Barthes came to the medieval term, particularly through André Boucourechliev, Barthes's piano tutor and the editor of the special issue in which Barthes's essay first appears. Salisbury shows that we gain a better understanding of the essay by reading it in light of its original context, which was in fact a special issue devoted to

Beethoven. In this respect, it is unsurprising that the medieval term takes on new meaning in Barthes's usage.

Iliina and Matei show that Barthes's engagement with the Middle Ages is not direct but rather mediated by his early study of the works of Michelet. As such, their essay opens up the broader question of which authors may have acted as mediators of the medieval for Barthes (such as Lacarrière, as Southerden explores). Iliina and Matei also stress the plurality of Barthes's Middle Ages, which they connect to Michelet's plural Middle Ages (the latter as claimed in particular by Jacques Le Goff [1974 with English translation 1980]). Finally, if other contributors show how Barthes writes in a medieval way through his focus on particular concepts or themes, Iliina and Matei demonstrate that this medieval way of writing is also a matter of form, style, and structure. In particular, they read Barthes's *Michelet* as engaging in medieval writing practices in light of Barthes's delineation of the four medieval author-functions in *Critique et vérité: scriptor, compiler, commentator, and auctor*.

Giusti's article focuses on the relationship between mother and son, and its implications for temporality, in Augustine's *Confessions* and Barthes's *La Chambre claire* (*Camera Lucida*) and *Journal de deuil* (*Mourning Diary*). In both cases, Giusti considers the mother to act as a temporal "hinge," that is, as a mediator between, on the one hand, the time of the subject (the son, in each case, in particular the time after the mother's death) and, on the other hand, the past before the subject's birth that can be accessed only through the mother. This access to the past is the basis for the confessional writing of Augustine and, in Barthes's case, is achieved through the Winter Garden photograph in *La Chambre claire*. This encounter with what Giusti calls the "reality of the past" through the mother offers both Augustine and Barthes a way into writing. For Barthes in particular, this way into writing is also a way out of a melancholic experience of indifference, which Barthes labels with the medieval term *acedia*. Giusti's reading of Augustine is informed by Jean-François Lyotard,

and also tempered by a contrast between Barthes and Jacques Derrida as readers of Augustine. Whereas Barthes shares with Augustine a kind of epiphanic encounter with the mother and the past that she represents, Derrida — as Giusti shows — explores his relationship with his dying mother in “Circonfession” (“Circumfession”) on much more unstable ground, emphasizing distance, desire, and impossibility.

Park offers a comparative study of amorous discourse in Barthes’s *Fragments* and the medieval Galician-Portuguese lyric texts known as the *Cantigas de amigo* through a creative-critical approach. Park boldly creates two new fragments based on imagining a Barthesian reading of the *Cantigas de amigo*, inspired by Barthes’s invitation to add to the *Fragments* and by Barthes’s own thesis in *Critique et vérité* that “le critique ne peut que continuer les métaphores de l’oeuvre, non les réduire” (the critic can only continue the metaphors of the work, not reduce them: 2002b, 797; 1987, 87). In this way, Park gives new life to a particular corpus of medieval poetry that he suggests has at times been underappreciated as conventional and formulaic.

Finally, Rushworth argues that the Zumthorian notion of the *mouvance* of medieval texts is a productive and even a necessary way of understanding the different versions of Barthes’s late lecture courses. Rushworth highlights the differences between the written lecture notes, the oral recordings, and the transcriptions of the oral lectures, in order to suggest an inherent instability in these texts, which resonates with Paul Zumthor’s definition of *mouvance*. As such, the example of Barthes suggests that *mouvance* may be at play not only in anonymous medieval texts, as Zumthor suggests, but even in the case of a named author where technology has preserved a text’s oral performance for us.

In the end, we hope with this volume to *lancer un défi* or issue a challenge, one which stems from the premise that medievalists have not yet engaged adequately with Barthes’s numerous and diverse writings and that these have not yet been mined in sufficient depth and

breadth for the insights and challenges that they offer to medieval studies. At the same time, we also aim to show how medievalists, with their own diverse interests and expertise, might encourage new ways of reading Barthes that illuminate the methods and concepts animating his modes of critical inquiry. The essays in this volume suggest a number of different, provocative ways in which “Medieval Barthes” can be appropriated and explored. Our hope is that our readers will want to add their own voices and their own examples to this conversation.

¹ The editors would like to take this opportunity to note that this special issue has its roots in a one-day conference on “Medieval Barthes” kindly hosted by the Institute of Advanced Studies at UCL on March 26, 2019. External funding for that conference was generously provided by the Modern Humanities Research Association and the Society for French Studies, to whom we remain grateful. We would also like to thank Manuele Gagnolati (Sorbonne Université; ICI Berlin) for leading the roundtable discussion on *Comment vivre ensemble (How to Live Together)* at the conference, although our debt towards him is much more profound and long-lived. In particular, his vision of a Middle Ages open to theory has been our constant inspiration. Finally, we are grateful to *Exemplaria* for welcoming this special issue and to their anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful feedback. We would like to express our particular gratitude to Jessica Rosenfeld for her care and generosity in the path to publication.

² See the edited volume on *Les XIXes siècles de Roland Barthes* (Diaz and Labbé 2019). From the extensive critical literature on Barthes and Proust, see for a recent account Baldwin 2019.

³ On nineteenth-century French medievalism in general see at least Bernard-Griffiths, Glaudes, and Vibert 2006; on Proust's medievalism see Bales 1975 and Duval and Lacassagne 2015; on Barthes and Michelet see Iliina and Matei in the present volume.

⁴ On Barthes and Dante see Rushworth 2016 and 2018. On Barthes's *Vita Nova* project, see Knight 1997 and 2015; Coste 1999; Zorica 2009; Samoyault 2015, 649–85 and 2017, 470–91. For a recent discussion of the contents of the archive and plans to make it available online in future, see Messenger 2021.

⁵ See also Klosowska Roberts 2005, 145–63, in which the author acknowledges the importance of Barthes's *Le Plaisir du texte* (*The Pleasure of the Text*) as a guiding work for the project.

⁶ See also, most recently, Corbellari 2021 for reflection on the related question of the contribution of medievalists to developments in twentieth-century French theory.

⁷ Our original conference was also enriched by a paper on “The Death and Return(s) of the Medieval Author” by Cristian Bratu (see, at least, Bratu 2019, 46–51).

⁸ Let us note, incidentally, that the title of Barthes's essay has been recognized as a medievalist pun on the fifteenth-century text “Le morte d'Arthur” (see, for instance, Ziolkowski 2018, 86).

⁹ For Lacanian readings, especially in medieval French and Occitan literature, see Kay 1999, as well as Labbie 2006; Gilbert 2011. For psychoanalytical readings, see for example: Strohm 2000; Scala 2002; Uebel 2007.

¹⁰ On the former, see especially the special issue of *Romanic Review* on *Category Crossings: Bruno Latour and Medieval Modes of Existence* (Desmond and Guynn 2020). On the latter, of the many works that might be cited, see for recent examples of each approach Nardizzi 2013; Lampert-Weissig 2010; Spencer-Hall and Gutt 2021.

¹¹ The section title here is taken from a conference at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry organized by Francesco Giusti and Daniel Reeve on “The Shape of Return: Progress, Process, and Repetition in Medieval Culture,” 29–30 September 2017: <https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/the-shape-of-return/>.

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