INTRODUCTION: WEAPONIZING HISTORY

> There is no reason, I feel, to object when antiquity draws no hard line between the human and the supernatural: it adds dignity to the past, and, if any nation deserves the privilege of claiming a divine ancestry, that nation is our own.
>
> —Livy, *History of Rome*, c. 27–25 BCE[1]

During ancient Rome's Golden Age, from 27 BCE to 180 CE, Augustus Caesar enacted a series of reforms focused on regulating Roman family life. He passed what became known as the Julian marriage laws, which criminalized adultery for married women. Fathers could kill adulterous daughters, and husbands who did not divorce cheating wives could be prosecuted. Augustus's laws also encouraged people to produce more Roman citizens: he gave money to families with three or more children, and he levied taxes against unmarried Romans. He also banned women from attending gladiatorial fights and athletic events to keep them "pure," even exiling his own daughter and granddaughter for "vice."

Augustus's reforms were meant to take Rome back to a time that he imagined was simpler, and better. But his reforms were also reactionary, part of a backlash against rising female power in Rome. By Augustus's reign, some women had begun to reject arranged marriages. They could own property, get divorced, and even participate in politics in limited ways. Some women gave public speeches, others agitated to be gladiators. Thus, Augustus's new laws aimed to limit the threat that women's liberation presented to both patriarchal and aristocratic power. (After all, when women are free to choose their sexual partners, family dynasties tend to fall apart.)

Augustus also argued that women's immodesty jeopardized the Roman state. Fresh from his victory over Mark Antony and Cleopatra, the emperor warned his people that Rome had almost fallen under the influence of a willful woman—and a foreign one, at that. He proposed that in order to restore its greatness, Rome should go back in time, to its simpler, more virtuous, male-dominated past.

Although Augustus lived in ancient Rome, he relied on myths about *even more ancient* Rome for his notions of ideal femininity. He praised the Sabine women who, according to legend, were raped by the first Roman men but stayed with them for the sake of their children. He also touted the bravery of Lucretia, who was raped by the son of a tyrannical king and killed herself in shame, a tragedy that led to the establishment of Rome's Republic. Augustus, in short, wielded Rome's past—or at least, his mythical version of it—as a weapon. He used it to control what the Roman people, especially Roman women, could do with their lives.

The blissful, simpler Rome that Augustus hoped his moral reforms would bring back is not what you or I would consider historical. There was no bold line in the ancient world between myth and fact. As our epigraph suggests, some ancient Romans believed it was more important for history to teach people lessons in the present, or to confirm a nation's illusions about itself, than it was for history to be factually true.

That just goes to show you: there's no story about the past too early, or too implausible, for people to turn it into propaganda.

MISUSING HISTORY

Augustus is far from the only person who weaponized "history" to punish and control people. This book will show you many of the ways history has been used to oppress others, spread hatred and fear, and even lead people into war.

And oftentimes, those who use history to incite violence and discrimination misrepresent the past, or sometimes outright lie about it, in order to sway public opinion.

We tend to think of the past as rigid and fixed, simply a collection of things that happened. But *history* isn't the same thing as *the past*. History is our way of rendering the past into stories. Our whole view of an event can shift depending on who becomes the main character of the story, which perspectives we decide to look through, or even which perspectives are available to us. For example, the Bayeux Tapestry—one of the primary narratives of the Norman Conquest—was once considered a relatively unbiased account of William the Conqueror's conquest of England in 1066. But recent historians realized just how skewed the tapestry's perspective actually is when they learned it may have been commissioned by William's half-brother.[2] The Bayeux Tapestry is a perfect visual representation of the old cliché that history is written by the victors.

Even when historical bias isn't quite this obvious, when history is unclear or incomplete, or when we have competing narratives of what happened, people tend to prefer stories that flatter their illusions about themselves or their ancestors. For instance, in Augustus's time, there were at least two competing Roman origin stories. There's the one you probably know, in which the brothers Romulus and Remus—raised by a she-wolf and favored by the god of war—battled to the death for control of the city they founded. But another version was that Rhome, a Trojan woman who fled the destruction of Troy with other survivors, got tired of sailing around and talked everyone into settling in Latinum. The new city was called Rome in her name. Take one guess which founding legend the warlike, patriarchal Roman government decided to promote.

Yet, although history has multiple perspectives, that doesn't mean all we can do is throw up our hands and decide the past is just a matter of opinion. Finding the truth means sifting through all those perspectives to figure out what really happened. And the stories we choose to tell or to omit matter very much in the present. For instance, some people in

the United States refer to the American Civil War—some in jest and some in all seriousness—as the "War of Northern Aggression." The name is part of what's known as the Lost Cause account of the Civil War, an attempt to rehabilitate the Confederacy that claims slavery was a benevolent institution and that the Civil War was caused by economic factors, not slavery. The Lost Cause narrative isn't just some fringe conspiracy theory: it made its way into some states' history textbooks and had been, until recently, the dominant narrative in many southern classrooms. And while this may be the way Confederates viewed things during the war, that doesn't make it true.[3] Ignoring the suffering of millions of enslaved Americans doesn't make them disappear.

When we're presented with multiple perspectives on history, we can determine whether someone is misusing the past or wielding history as a weapon not just by checking the facts (although that can be useful), but by examining which stories they choose to tell, the purpose behind their stories, and the effects those stories have in the present day. History has many uses. It helps us understand ourselves and each other. It helps us feel connected to a wider world, and it can give our day-to-day actions meaning. It can even inspire us to fight injustice. But when histories are rewritten or ignored, when common misunderstandings are manipulated, or when the past is used to promote prejudice, oppression, and complacency in the face of injustice, these are misuses.

As we illustrate in the following pages, the misuse of the past is rarely innocent. Far from being just "another version" of a story, the misuse of history can get people killed.

THE DANGERS OF "HISTORY"

The weaponization of history doesn't always involve actual facts about the past. It can rely on a foggy perception of history: a general, impressionistic sense of how things were, or even how they always have been. Sometimes it relies on

what we now consider myth and legend. But accuracy does not always matter to people who are so attached to their ideas about the past that those myths are part of their identity.

Murky historical narratives can offer toxic ideologies a patina of tradition or timelessness that make them seem natural, correct, or inevitable. And once that occurs, misconceptions can be difficult to shift. That's why misuses of the past are so important to recognize and rectify. For instance, resistance to tearing down Confederate statues in American cities comes from the myth that the statues are politically neutral, merely a way to remember a war and honor the dead. But the truth is, most of these statues were erected in the twentieth century by groups with explicitly white supremacist agendas—like the United Daughters of the Confederacy, who promoted the Lost Cause narrative and even built a monument to the Ku Klux Klan. As the mayor of New Orleans, Mitch Landrieu, said in a speech on 19 May 2017 about the decision to tear down his city's confederate monuments:

> These statues are not just stone and metal. They are not just innocent remembrances of a benign history. These monuments purposefully celebrate a fictional, sanitized Confederacy; ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement, and the terror that it actually stood for.[4]

Augustus's narrative of a simpler, better Rome "back then" conflated foggy history with myth and legend, and he wasn't the only historical personage who misused the imagined past to fuel his imperialistic goals. The English used the myth that they were descended from King Arthur (who probably didn't exist, or if he existed, may only have been a general)[5] to justify waging war on the world: enslaving Africans, colonizing India, and murdering Native Americans, First Nations, and other Indigenous peoples. Germany followed a similar path of myth-propelled destruction in World War II. The fantasy of the "Aryan race," created by German historians and folklorists, held that white Germans were descended from a group

of prehistoric Indo-Europeans who created all of humanity's religious and cultural achievements (including those in India and ancient Greece). This was easily proven false, but that hardly mattered. Nazi propaganda weaponized the historical myth of Aryan superiority to attack its neighbors and commit one of the worst atrocities in human history, the Holocaust. In fact, if you look at any murderous regime, odds are good that it is using a warped version of history to justify its crimes.

THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD HISTORY OF ALL

If history has always been misused, why are we focusing on the Middle Ages specifically? To some degree, that's because this is our specialty. But the medieval period is also particularly murky in the modern imagination. It is one of the most popular—and one of the most deeply misunderstood—eras in world history. It's the historical moment that people either love to love, or love to hate. And as violent, authoritarian regimes rise up around the world, medieval "history" is making an unfortunate comeback. From the neo-caliphate of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh) to white supremacist terrorists with crusader slogans in their manifestos and on their guns, myths about the Middle Ages are being forged into weapons that threaten everyone in the twenty-first century.

Modern people have strange ideas about the so-called Dark Ages. Many of these ideas come from both popular culture and a long history of dismissive scholarship. People imagine that medieval life was filthy, backwards, and rife with random acts of murder and torture; that medieval men were "real" men and that medieval women were utterly powerless; that everyone was a religious zealot and that faith and superstition governed every aspect of daily life. These sweeping generalizations make the Middle Ages less a historical past and more a mythological past. The fact that many fictional worlds are

set in someone's idea of the Middle Ages both illustrates the problem and contributes to it.

Today's medievalist scholars will jump at the chance to tell you that there is no such thing as the "Dark Ages."[6] The myth of a supposedly ignorant set of centuries taking up space between the bright, glorious ancient world and the sparkling intellect of the Renaissance is a wildly inaccurate image of the past that distorts hundreds of years of human history. But like the other myths we have mentioned so far, it is a hard story to kill because it makes people feel better about themselves. "I'm so glad I didn't live back then," we tell each other, or we might say, "that idea is *practically medieval*…." when we want to feel smarter than someone else. And because we believe the Middle Ages were simpler times, with simpler people, they are a landscape we like to imagine ourselves conquering—whether in comical stories about modern people tumbling into the medieval past, like Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, or as avatars in the digital world swinging swords and winning castles of our own.

On the other hand, people who are disenchanted with the innovations of modern society often idealize the Middle Ages as natural and pure, the "original" condition of humankind. These people see the Middle Ages as a landscape for heroism, passion, and legendary deeds. When emerging industrial capitalism created new heights of human misery in the nineteenth century, the Middle Ages came back into vogue as an idyllic, rural counterpoint. The Middle Ages have also been wielded as a weapon when traditional power structures are threatened: in Victorian England, when so many colonized peoples struggled to free themselves from British rule, during Reconstruction in the United States, and throughout the movement for women's suffrage on both sides of the pond. The fantasy of a pure, orderly patriarchal and monarchical medieval past in which everyone knew his or her place gives people the "historical" evidence they think they need to resist social progress. Using the Middle Ages this way is not just wrong, it is also *wrong*. By that, we mean it's not just morally reprehensible—it's also historically inaccurate.

With this book, we hope to expose and challenge the many dangerous fantasies—past and present—that are based on misperceptions of medieval history. We do this not because we want to ruin people's fantasies, and not because we feel the Middle Ages is some sacred, pure space that needs to be protected, but because myths about the Middle Ages have a long and terrible legacy of being used to hurt people. Medieval history is too often wielded by the powerful to justify their opposition to positive changes in the world, or to feed their prejudices about people they deem inferior. As medievalists, we are passionate about challenging these uses of the Middle Ages whenever and wherever we find them, and equally passionate about helping people explore the real history of a diverse, rich, and complex medieval world.

Whether you are reading this book in your history class or in your favorite armchair, we hope it will give you a clearer vision of the medieval past and make it easier for you to separate fact from fiction. Because the Middle Ages are not going away anytime soon. History is too powerful a rhetorical tool for people with violent agendas to ignore it. But hopefully, after reading this book, you'll be better equipped to disarm their propaganda.

1

THE MIDDLE AGES: FOUNDATIONAL MYTHS

> The Middle Ages are at the root of all our contemporary "hot" problems, and it is not surprising that we go back to that period every time we ask ourselves about our origin.
>
> —Umberto Eco, "The Return of the Middle Ages," 1986[1]

Popular culture sends a lot of mixed messages about the Middle Ages. Some books, movies, and video games represent it as an era of heroic knights and epic battles, while others portray the medieval past as a dark, dangerous time when anyone who stepped out of line would be burned as a witch. Despite these dramatic differences, there are a few things contemporary people consider "common knowledge" about the Middle Ages: that medieval lives were nasty, brutish, and short; that this part of the past was a white, Christian man's world; and that medieval people were so religious and superstitious that they would throw their neighbor on the pyre for using her broom a little too often.

The problem is, common knowledge is wrong.

Take the witch trials, for instance. They're considered a medieval phenomenon, but they were far more prevalent during the Renaissance, when they became official legal practice. The Church didn't even officially recognize the existence of witches until the end of the Middle Ages, around 1484. The witch trials took off when a treatise called the *Malleus Maleficarum*—which translates into English as *The Hammer of Witches*—was published in 1487. Written by former Inquisitor Heinrich Kramer (who was fired from the Inquisition for being overzealous, if you can imagine that), the *Malleus Maleficarum* taught people how to identify and torture witches and advocated for their execution.

Thanks in part to the invention of the moveable-type printing press, which significantly sped up the transmission of texts and ideas in Europe, the *Malleus Maleficarum* grew wildly popular after Kramer's death. Rampant, violent persecutions of accused witches spread across Europe and the colonies. This lasted for centuries (including, famously, the Salem witch trials). The 1600s, the height of the Renaissance, saw mass executions of suspected witches. Hundreds of people were murdered in a single German city.[2]

Why does it matter if people think the witch trials were a few centuries earlier than they actually occurred? It may seem harmless when people get history wrong like this, but it can be dangerous too. If we believe witch trials are one of the defining features of the Middle Ages, we can imagine that "civilized" cultures left torture and religious persecution behind in the Dark Ages. We can pretend that torture was a phenomenon cured by science and the Enlightenment—completely ignoring the torture and executions still going on today, such as the "enhanced interrogation" practiced by the United States.

INVENTING THE PAST

Why do medieval people have such terrible reputations? How did the Middle Ages become the dumping ground for all of humanity's bad behavior? This view of medieval people has been with us since the Middle Ages were invented. And, yes, the Middle Ages were invented.

Italian humanists in the fifteenth century were the first to describe history in the three-part system (ancient, medieval, and modern) we know today. Leonardo Bruni called 476–1250 CE a "middle period" in his 1442 *History of the Florentine People*;[3] Flavio Biondo chose the dates 410–1400 CE in his 1483 *Decades of History from the Deterioration of the Roman Empire*.[4] Giovanni Bussi preferred the more poetic *media tempestas*—"middle season" in the 1469 preface to his

edition of the works of Roman writer Apuleius.[5] Clear in each of these designations is the sense that the years we know as the "Middle Ages" are *in between* two more important, more monumental eras. Renaissance humanists considered the medieval past an interruption between their own enlightened time and the classical Greek and Roman eras they revered.

Thanks to the preservation and translation of ancient Greek and Roman texts by medieval Jewish, Muslim, and Byzantine scholars—and thanks in part to the printing press—Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries gained increased access to classical philosophy, art, literature, science, and history. Inspired to draw on the wisdom of ancient Greece and Rome to enrich their own cultures, scholars began to call the period between the classical world and their world a "Dark Age." Thus, the Middle Ages were born out of resentment, seen as the centuries that broke Europe's connection to a glorious, ancient past. With the stroke of a few quills, the lives, experiences, and accomplishments of millions of people over hundreds of years were consigned to the trash heap of history, and the idea of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages has been with us ever since.

Most scholars today don't use the term *Dark Ages*, thanks to being corrected by generations of angry medievalists. But the concept persists, in part, because the idea of a time so much worse than our own allows us to feel superior. In fact, myths about the Middle Ages are so persistent that scholars have developed methods for thinking, and talking, about the way the medieval period is used and abused. We use the term *medievalism* to describe the way filmmakers, game designers, artists, musicians, and even everyday people at your local Renaissance faire imagine the Middle Ages.

Life in the twenty-first century can make the medieval world seem very far away, but we still live in a world full of popular medievalisms: video games franchises like *Crusader Kings*, *Dragon Age*, *The Witcher*, and *The Elder Scrolls*; never-ending movie adaptations of King Arthur and Robin Hood; and wildly popular television shows like *Vikings* and *Game of Thrones*. Weekend warriors don handmade medieval

outfits for historical reenactments or cosplay, and writers keep spinning out medieval-themed fantasy novels for your Kindle. You could spend a lifetime playing in the Middle Ages without once setting foot in a museum or on a historical site.

As widespread and varied as it is, medievalism also tends to court historical inaccuracies. And these aren't just meaningless errors. They can tell us a lot about ourselves. Italian philosopher and writer Umberto Eco wrote that "the Middle Ages have always been messed up in order to meet the vital requirements of different periods."[6] In other words, how we imagine the past—and the way we *mis*remember it—can be a window into the present. Our view of the past reveals our understanding of the world, our highest hopes and our darkest fears.

What people get wrong about the Middle Ages, and why they do it, are questions we hope to answer in this book. But first, in this chapter, we'll debunk some of the most common misunderstandings of the medieval world. And as you'll see in the rest of the book, these misconceptions are far from harmless. They fuel some of the most dangerous movements in the world today.

MYTH: MEDIEVAL PEOPLE'S LIVES WERE NASTY, BRUTISH, AND SHORT

It's hard to find a version of the Middle Ages in popular culture where the knights aren't rusty brutes, the peasants aren't covered in mud, and the landscape isn't ravaged by war. Just turn on Netflix or HBO. Life in the Middle Ages just seems harder: plagues swept the world, dramatic climate change led to food shortages, unstable political power created unpredictable violence, religious prejudice and superstitions were common, and no one had invented a single iPhone. Terrible. But the truth is, the medieval period wasn't radically different from other historical eras. You'll often hear facts thrown around like, "Medieval people only lived to be 35!" But claims like this fall apart upon closer examination. Life

expectancy is an average, and it includes infant mortality. While many more infants and children died in the Middle Ages (and throughout all historical periods until modern medicine), the average person who survived the vulnerable years of childhood lived to be in their 70s, just as they do today. And, just like today, wealth and access to health care tended to be determining factors.

The medieval period is also considered a uniquely violent era, and it's easy to assume that widespread war—the Hundred Years' War, the Mongol invasions, the early Muslim conquests, the Crusades—cut most medieval people's lives short. But war is one of the horrifying constants of human history. It is not uniquely medieval. And while the hand-to-hand combat that is the hallmark of much of medieval warfare may feel more brutal and savage than, say, a drone strike, the murderous capability of the latter far outstrips the former. The Geneva conventions outlawed the intentional targeting of civilians in war, but they were enacted in 1949, after the worst civilian massacres in history: the bombings of Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. None of the death tolls in any medieval battle can compare to these tragedies.

The medieval plague seems to stand out as a particularly horrific historical phenomenon, in part because it seized the imagination of one of the medieval world's most famous writers: Giovanni Boccaccio, whose *Decameron*, a collection of short tales told by noble characters quarantined during the Black Death, was so popular that his stories were translated and adapted by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Tennyson, Keats, and even contemporary filmmakers like Pier Paolo Pasolini and Jeff Baena.[7] But most of humanity—not just medieval people—lacked the ability to fight infections or even understand how they spread for much of history. England during the Renaissance suffered regular deadly outbreaks of plague, smallpox, syphilis, typhus, malaria, and a mysterious illness called "sweating sickness." Upon contact with Europeans, upwards of 95 per cent of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas were killed by European diseases. Plagues even ravaged the twentieth century: from 1918–1920, half a *billion*

people were infected with the Spanish Flu global pandemic, which killed between 50 and 100 million people. And let's not forget that we are currently living with the global pandemic of HIV/AIDS.

Medieval people's supposed ignorance and filth is blamed for these waves of disease. *Monty Python and the Quest for the Holy Grail* and "gritty" television dramas like *Game of Thrones* teach us that medieval people were constantly covered in muck. But real medieval people enjoyed bathing regularly, especially medieval Vikings. English chroniclers remarked on the Vikings' cleanliness and suave attire, and worried that they would seduce all the English women because of it. Soap—which medieval people made and used regularly (there were entire guilds of soapmakers)—would not have saved anyone from the Black Death. Only penicillin would. For that, humanity would have to wait until 1928.

The myth that medieval people lived horrible, short lives persists because we believe that we are more advanced, more sophisticated, more civilized, and frankly, better than the people who have come before us. But this historical chauvinism easily slips into racism and xenophobia when it is applied to the modern world. People often use the word *medieval* to describe the developing world, or accuse the people in these countries of being "stuck in the Dark Ages," suggesting that they are "backwards," uneducated, or unusually violent. In these cases, "medieval" is almost always a racist insult hurled by inhabitants of majority-white nations who believe their own culture is superior. Politicians and pundits will also use the word *medieval* to refer to anything they want to portray as backwards, barbaric, or stupid. This allows their audiences to think they are better than those terrible medieval people: torture is "medieval torture," despite the fact that your own country might practice it. Rape is "medieval," despite the modern world having globalized the practice of human trafficking.[8]

You can see this kind of rhetoric in the wars waged in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, and in anti-immigration rhetoric flung around the United States and Europe.[9] Calling

something modern "medieval" is a rejection, and can cause us to mock people's pain, dismiss their deaths, invade their countries to "liberate" them, and lock them up when they cross international borders or ask for refuge. In short, calling people "medieval" suggests that they—along with historical medieval people—are less human than we are.

MYTH: MEDIEVAL PEOPLE WERE UNEDUCATED, ILLITERATE, AND IGNORANT

When public figures want to accuse each other of being ignorant or authoritarian, they say their opponent is "from the Dark Ages" or "practically medieval." But why do we believe that medieval people's intellectual capacity was so radically different from our own? Part of the problem is the outsized assessment of just how much the world changed in the Renaissance.

It's quite clear that *something* big happened in Europe over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In fact, several big things did. Around 1439, Johannes Gutenberg introduced the moveable-type printing press to Europe, giving average people access to books that had previously been available only to scholars or the wealthy. In the late 1400s, European explorers sailed to Africa and the Americas, setting out on a program of slavery, genocide, and destruction that would turn European nation-states into maritime empires. And in 1517, a German monk named Martin Luther published his *Ninety-Five Theses* (though he probably did not nail them to any doors) and launched the Protestant Reformation.

Each of these events is used to mark the moment of European modernity, the spark of intellectual and national growth that separated the Middle Ages from what came afterwards. These discoveries supposedly allowed Europe to advance out of the "Dark Ages" and move into the light. But before we talk about the intellectual accomplishments of the Middle Ages—which, contrary to popular opinion, had

a light of their own—it's important to note the darkness that followed some of modernity's most noted developments.

The Protestant Reformation, for instance, may have resulted in a more accessible faith, but it was also a violent and destructive revolution. People were executed over minor theological disagreements like the doctrine of transubstantiation, monasteries were raided and burned, churches were whitewashed, wiping centuries-old art off their walls, and sculptures and artifacts were smashed in systematic raids—not unlike the path of historical devastation ISIS waged against art and architecture in the Middle East. Moreover, the Renaissance saw the beginning of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. Explorers like Christopher Columbus devastated and enslaved whole populations in search of plunder, not to prove anyone wrong about the earth being flat.

By the way, the flat-earth story promoted by Columbus fans is a flat-out lie. And more than that: it's a lie that shows just how dependent our modern sense of self is on the myth of an ignorant past. Medieval people were well aware that the earth is round. Medieval Muslim scholars, for example, knew the earth was spherical and developed trigonometry to measure its geography and determine their distance from, and direction to, Mecca. Medieval Christian scholars knew the earth was round too: thirteenth-century astronomer Johannes de Sacrobosco wrote a treatise called *De Sphaera Mundi*—Latin for *On the Sphere of the World*—that discussed the spherical nature of the earth in its first chapter. And this wasn't some sort of academic secret. Popular medieval writers like the author of *Mandeville's Travels* casually referenced the round earth. Columbus did not sail west because he believed the world was round when others thought it flat—he did so under the misguided belief that the world was much smaller than astronomers had calculated. This is why he thought he had landed in India rather than on another continent. Columbus wasn't a maverick. He simply didn't trust the experts.

In fact, apart from a few flat-earth conspiracy theorists over the years, people have known the earth is round since ancient times, all the way back to Aristotle. And that brings

us to another point about the intellectual culture of medieval Europe: although many more classical texts flooded Europe during the Renaissance, medieval people had access to classical literature and philosophy too, thanks in part to the efforts of medieval Muslim and Jewish scholars and translators. These translations ushered in what is known as the Twelfth-Century Renaissance, a period of flourishing art, literature, science, and philosophy in medieval Europe, and one of many "mini-renaissances" that happened thanks to intercultural exchange.

Medieval people were just as intellectual, just as curious about the world, and just as adept at complex mental tasks as you are (and that's not an insult). Just because they did not have some of the same technological or cultural developments at their fingertips did not change their interest in, or capacity for, learning. For example, many of the intellectual pillars of society that we enjoy today were invented during the Middle Ages, like universities, which have been around since at least the ninth century. The University of al-Qarawiyyin, in Fez, Morocco, was established by Fatima al-Fihri in 859 CE. Europe saw its first universities in the eleventh century in Bologna, Paris, and Oxford. And while these universities were often centers of theological education, contrary to popular belief, medieval scholars did not spend their time contemplating the number of angels that could fit on the head of a pin. Medieval universities were dedicated to teaching law, medicine, and the arts in addition to theology, and cultivated some of the greatest minds of the Middle Ages.

And yes, the Middle Ages did produce some truly staggering intellects, like Ibn Sina (also known as Avicenna), an eleventh-century Persian polymath who developed systems of formal logic and scientific inquiry, and whose works *The Book of Healing* and *The Canon of Medicine* became the standard texts for nearly 500 years. Medieval medicine was far more involved than leeches, magic, and prayer. Medieval doctors developed chemical processes for the distillation of medicines and intricate surgical procedures as difficult as removing gallstones and cataracts. Albertus Magnus, a thirteenth-century philosopher whose writing brought

Aristotle's ideas back into medieval Europe, developed scientific treatises on logic, astronomy, minerology, physiology, law, morality, and geography. And women participated in medieval intellectual culture too, like Hildegard of Bingen, whose twelfth-century medical and theological texts influenced generations of scholars.

These institutional and textual methods of sharing knowledge were not the only education medieval people had. Myths about uneducated medieval people tend to privilege written wisdom over other means of transmitting information. Some medieval peasants may not have been literate, but that didn't make them fools. People have always shared information, discoveries, and history orally. This includes knowledge of stories, song, art, architecture, medicine, and even agricultural and cooking techniques. The fetish for the written word as the height of knowledge is part of what led Western scholars to ignore the history of cultures other than Greece and Rome for centuries, and it's also partly to blame for the bizarre modern racist conspiracy theory that ancient cultural achievements were secretly built by aliens. It is hardly good historical practice to dismiss entire groups of people just because they could not read.

MYTH: MEDIEVAL PEOPLE HAD NO INDIVIDUALITY

If you've ever watched a movie about the Middle Ages, you might believe the medieval period was an era of all-powerful kings and nobles who ruled with iron fists. And don't get us started on popular perceptions of the medieval Church, which is usually imagined as a cross between a dystopian surveillance state and the mafia. Political and religious power was far more diffuse and diverse in the Middle Ages than popular culture would have you believe. For one thing, the "divine right of kings"—a theory that kings ruled with direct approval from God, and thus were not subject to contradiction by popes or parliaments—was a post-medieval phenomenon. It wasn't until

after the Middle Ages that European kings consolidated legislative, judicial, and executive power into their own person; *they* were the tyrants who could (and did) have people executed on a whim. Medieval rulers were far less powerful. Despite what various iterations of the Robin Hood legend might tell you, they did not collect revenues simply by shaking down peasants. In Norman England, the king's income came from rents on the lands he personally held, the obligations owed to him by the lords and knights who swore fealty to him, income from tolls and fines, and property taxes. But even these taxes were notoriously easy to avoid and collected inconsistently—wealthy people dodging taxes has an unsurprisingly long history.

A medieval king's power was often limited, and managing a kingdom could be an exercise in herding ambitious, heavily armed cats. Medieval chronicles are filled with examples of knights and lords ignoring royal dictates, or even pledging their loyalty to more than one ruler, which caused difficulties when these rulers went to war with each other. For example, the fourteenth-century *Chronicle of Hainaut* tells the story of Jacques of Avenses, a knight who found a way to game the system by pledging loyalty to several different local lords, then collecting castles from most of the landowners in the region. Each of these lords eventually got fed up with Jacques and had to spend considerable time and resources going to war with him to get their castles back.

Some medieval people were not ruled by monarchs at all. Take Iceland, for example. From its foundation in the tenth century until it fell under the dominion of the King of Norway in 1262, Iceland was ruled by what was called an *Alþing*. The *Alþing* was a general assembly of sorts, where a group of the land's most powerful and wealthy leaders gathered to make laws and decide legal questions. While not a democracy exactly (it is best understood as a type of oligarchy—rule by a small group of privileged people), it had democratic elements: all free men were permitted to attend the *Alþing* and plead their cases, and the rulers (called the *goðar*) were influenced by the popular opinions of their friends and neighbors. Even after Iceland became a subject of Norway in the thirteenth

century, the Norwegian king's power was limited on the island. The *Alþing* continued, but became a coequal legislative branch of government.

England did have kings before the Norman Conquest in 1066, but it also had a system of government that prioritized local power over state power. The English developed law by committee, first in the village *moot* (meeting); then in a *hundred moot* with nearby villages, presided over by a thane; then by a *shire moot* presided over by an earl or his representative; and then by the *witana gemoot*, a parliament that advised the king. The medieval Italian peninsula had a wide range of independent city-states that were run as republics. Even the Holy Roman Empire was never actually an empire, but instead a complex confederacy of smaller kingdoms, principalities, duchies, counties, free cities, theocratic prince-bishoprics, and random patches of land ruled in other ways. Its emperor was actually *elected* by a council of the highest-ranking noblemen.

The Middle Ages featured as much diversity in political systems and leadership as any other historical period. Many historians nowadays question whether the term *feudalism* is even useful, because in reality, there was not one "feudal system" to which everyone ascribed, but instead a patchwork of agreements among powerful people based as much on local custom and tradition as adherence to some larger ideal.

But what about religion? you might be thinking. *Surely every medieval person was told what to think by the Catholic Church?* On the contrary, religious diversity was a predominant feature of the Middle Ages. First of all, the Middle Ages were not only limited to western Europe. Scholars disagree on where the geographical boundaries of the Middle Ages are (or if there indeed are any such boundaries),[10] but suffice it to say that medieval studies have regularly included areas like modern-day Greece, Turkey, and the Middle East, North Africa, Sicily, Spain, the Balkans and Scandinavia—and the scope broadens every year. Each of these areas had significant populations of Muslims, Orthodox and Coptic Christians, Jews, Hindus, and people of other faiths. But even if we limit ourselves to looking only at Catholic-dominated Europe, not

only were communities of Jews living alongside the Christians, there were significant differences in religious beliefs and practices even within the same faith.

Medieval Christians expressed a range of relationships and attitudes toward the Church. Theologians like Marguerite Porete rebelliously wrote that God is love and was burned at the stake for it. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are full of corrupt, sexually rapacious monks and friars alongside a devout, morally pure parson. The Robin Hood ballads feature a hero who chops the heads off of monks after he prays to the Virgin Mary. Iceland had been converted to Christianity by the time the sagas were written down, but many Norse poems, like the Eddas, record the exploits of the Norse gods, not the Christian one. Moreover, for some people, religion may have entailed a set of cultural practices more than an expression of personal zeal. For Christian writers like Dante and William Langland, faith is the topic of the text. Muslim and Jewish writers brilliantly blended the religious and secular to produce some of the world's most beautiful poetry. But for other writers, religion is either an incidental part of the background or is absent entirely.

Despite all this, even scholars have been slow to recognize medieval people's individuality. Up until recently, many history books would tell you that medieval society was fundamentally different from our own: more collectivist and less liberated.[11] Medieval people, we were told, did not think of themselves as individuals, but as part of family or social groups, cogs in a much greater machine. The Renaissance was thought to be the era in which the "individual" was born.

Scholars who study the Middle Ages today know that this assessment is completely wrong. Medieval people were writing vivid autobiographies as early as the twelfth century, and we have countless stories of people from all walks of life who asserted their independence from their families and local communities. Many of them may have felt the social pressures of those communities strongly—you can see the same thing in many religious, geographic, or cultural communities today. But that does not mean that people who feel social pressures have no individuality.

This is important, because thinking of medieval people as "cogs in a machine" is a condescending way to view them. Medieval people, like modern people, experienced life through their own subjective encounters. While those experiences were, in important ways, different from our own, medieval people themselves were more like you than you might care to admit.

MYTH: IMPORTANT MEDIEVAL PEOPLE WERE STRAIGHT AND MALE

Being a woman in the Middle Ages was undoubtedly more difficult than being a man. There were no equal rights for women enshrined into law (although it might be noted that women's rights are not enshrined in American law either, since the requisite 38 states have yet to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment).[12] Medieval women were forbidden from certain occupations, like the priesthood. When women were abused or raped, the law gave them some recourse, but not much. The power behind a woman's word largely depended on her social status. The punishment for raping a woman also varied quite a bit: it might be castration, execution, or a simple fine. But medieval women were far from powerless. They were not the damsels locked in towers that you find in fairy tales. And while many may have found themselves in difficult situations, as with any oppressed population, they found ways to prosper within or resist the system.

Women were active in a number of professions in the Middle Ages. They joined guilds, brewed beer, ran inns, governed land, made and sold textiles, farmed, cooked, and cleaned for a living. There were female blacksmiths, artists, poets, and traveling bards (the men were known as troubadours, the women as trobairitz). Medieval women were not full-time stay-at-home parents, and "housekeeping" often included farming, manual labor, and business endeavors like making candles, soap, or ale. Even the wealthiest women did

not live lives of total leisure. Many medieval noblewomen were highly educated. They read and wrote, and some joined the Church as nuns and abbesses, becoming scholars who had a great deal of power and influence. In fact, despite the modern belief that the Church was a fundamental agent of women's oppression in the Middle Ages, more than a few women joined the Church so they could evade marriage and motherhood, preferring instead a life of education, politics, or travel. There was even something of a crisis in twelfth-century France when too many women were choosing to marry the Church rather than a husband.

You might know about a few extraordinary medieval women who led battles, like Joan of Arc, or who led countries, like the Empress Matilda. But you probably missed Olga of Kiev, who led armies to destroy her late husband's enemies and helped bring Christianity to Russia, or Æthelflæd, who fought off the Vikings in Mercia, or Raziya, Sultana of Delhi in the 1200s. Women practiced medicine in the Middle Ages too. Female physician Trota of Salerno wrote important medical treatises on everything from wound treatments to gynecology.[13] As medicine became increasingly professionalized (and elitist) with the establishment of universities, women were gradually pushed out of the profession, but they still practiced their skills as village healers or midwives well into the Renaissance.[14] And the medieval midwife wasn't just responsible for helping women give birth: she had the skills to heal a number of different ailments.

Medieval women were also influential in literature and the arts. Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter Marie de Champagne were responsible for sponsoring the Courtly Love movement and helped bring us the Arthurian legends that are still popular today. Marie de France gave us books of *lais* (short chivalric poems), fables, and a story of Saint Patrick. Murasaki Shikibu wrote the world's first novel, *The Tale of Genji*, in eleventh-century Japan. Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Siena were also important writers and theologians.

We could go on and on, but our point is that medieval women doing things that seem "extraordinary" in a patriarchal

time is the rule, not the exception. Moreover, medieval women were well aware that they were treated unfairly, and they analyzed and critiqued their own oppression. Christine de Pizan wrote an extensive defense of women called *The Book of the City of Ladies* in response to one of the world's most misogynistic poems, *The Romance of the Rose*. Hrostvitha of Gandersheim, a prolific tenth-century writer, rewrote the ancient comic Terence's plays to make the female characters more heroic and virtuous.

Finally, not all medieval women, and not all medieval men, were straight. Although sexual identity did not exist in quite the same way that it does now, same-sex attraction, love, sex, and relationships were very much a part of the Middle Ages. Records of same-sex relationships can be found across the entire medieval world, from the Middle East to the shores of Iceland and everywhere between. And in some of those places, you can even find examples of same-sex unions formalized by Christian rites. Of course, we don't always know what medieval people were doing behind closed doors. But in some cases, we do—such as in the relationship between King Edward II of England and his lover Piers Gaveston. Al-Hakam II, the second Caliph of Cordoba, married a woman and had two children, but also openly kept a harem of men. And same-sex love wasn't limited to the nobility: in the Middle Ages, priests were issued manuals to help them receive confessions and assign appropriate penances for same-sex acts.

We also have evidence of medieval people who lived as a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth. Some monks and even several saints—such as Saint Marinos—lived their lives as men even though they were born female. Stories have also emerged from court records of men living as women, such as fourteenth-century John Rykener, an English person who sometimes dressed and lived as Eleanor and slept with both men and women. But because we only have the words of the court, we don't know if John preferred being Eleanor or switched between genders as they wanted. We do know that the court doesn't quite

know what to make of the situation, and thus, neither do we—except to know that not all medieval people accepted a simple gender binary.

Literature also gives us stories of people living outside normative gender rules—*Yde et Olive* is an old French chivalric story of a girl who becomes a knight, marries a princess, and, by the end, through an angel's intervention, conceives a child with their wife. *Silence* tells the story of a girl who becomes the best male knight in all the realm in order to subvert an unjust law that disinherited women.

History has privileged the stories of straight, cisgender men for so long that it is important to call attention to stories that do not conform to that expectation. Otherwise, people feel as though those with less power in a society don't matter—not just that their stories will be forgotten, but worse, that they deserve to be forgotten.

MYTH: THE MEDIEVAL WORLD WAS WHITE AND CHRISTIAN

Most medieval-themed books, games, and shows take place in a generic, castle-and-dragon-strewn, white European setting. But during the historical Middle Ages, a massive hemispherical trade network emerged between Europe, the Middle East, China, Africa, and many points between and beyond. Centers of learning, industry, and culture developed across the Middle East and Asia. The bulk of the world's political, military, economic, and technological power existed outside Europe, which, relatively speaking, was a backwater—a fascinating backwater worth ample study, but a backwater nonetheless.

Medieval Europe itself was far more diverse than most people know. Inevitably, when shows like the BBC's *Merlin* or movies like *Thor* cast non-white actors as characters drawn from European legends, or when shows like *Outlaw King* or *1066: The Battle for Middle Earth* place Black people in medieval Europe, the backlash is as fierce as it is predictable.[15]

Internet trolls converge to complain, claiming either that medieval Europeans were all white or that non-white people were such a small proportion of medieval Europe that they should be ignored in depictions of the period. To people who cling to the myth of an all-white Middle Ages, anything to the contrary is "revisionist" or the work of "social justice warriors." But if anything, excluding people of color from depictions of medieval Europe is the revisionist work, which relies on an outdated perception of medieval Europe as a place that did not change, had no contact with the outside world, and whose people were homogenous.

How many people of color lived in medieval Europe? That is impossible to know for certain. We do have many accounts of people of color in medieval Europe, depictions of people of color in medieval art, and records of regular travel between Europe and the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. For example, Santiago de Compostela in Spain was (and still is) one of the most popular pilgrimage destinations in Europe. And, helpfully for us, we have some records of the names and places of origin of visitors to the site. Many are from Europe, but some are from places like Nubia, Turkey, and from even further afield.

Most of the people who came to European countries from other places were travelers and traders, meaning that any depiction of medieval European urban centers like Rome, Constantinople, Paris, or even far-flung London should include racial diversity. Their appearance would not surprise anyone along popular merchant roads or pilgrimage routes. In order to find places where medieval people of color did not travel or live in Europe, you have to look at small, provincial places. You would have to exclude anywhere the Vikings settled, since their trading empire, at its height, stretched from the Middle East to the Americas. You would also have to exclude Italy and Spain, which had regular interaction with Arabic cultures.

Religious diversity existed in the Middle Ages as well. Medieval Christians were very familiar with people who did not worship the way they did—and not just because of

the Crusades. In Al-Andalus (the Arabic term for medieval Iberia), Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived alongside one another. They also lived side by side in the Byzantine Empire and in cities like Damascus and Baghdad. "Saracen" (a medieval term for Muslim) heroes can be found across medieval literature. In fact, several of King Arthur's knights are Saracens—Sir Palomides, Sir Safir, and Sir Segwarides were Muslim. And at least one Arthurian hero, Sir Moriaen, was Black.

We will never know exactly how many people of color visited and lived in medieval Europe. But we do know that even the western Middle Ages were much more diverse than you were led to believe, especially in southern Europe, which was a cosmopolitan center of racial and religious diversity. The fantasy of a white, Christian medieval past is a dangerously antiquated myth that has more to do with what some white people *want* the Middle Ages to have been than what they actually were.

MYTH: THE MIDDLE AGES ARE ANCIENT HISTORY

As we hope you've realized by now, the Middle Ages still have a lot of relevance today. Maybe too much relevance. In fact, the rest of this book will examine the ways people use myths about Middle Ages to promote retrograde and horrific ideas in the present. Nationalists pretend the medieval past had secure, impenetrable borders, static populations, and firm identities. They use these myths to attack people they label outsiders. Racists idealize an all-white medieval world that never was. Sexists try to lock women up in metaphorical towers by arguing that medieval princesses were the happiest girls of all and that being out of the workforce and stuck at home is a woman's natural place. Religious fanatics think they're following in medieval footsteps when they attack people of other faiths and argue for theocratic government.

None of these myths have very much to do with the Middle Ages. But they have everything to do with the people who interpret the Middle Ages and imbue them with meaning. To some degree, that's part of the power of the Middle Ages: it's a thousand years of the past, containing millions of lives and countless stories. Just as the term *Middle Ages* is, in fact, plural, there was no one, singular, identifiable medieval time. This is true of other time periods as well. But no other time is mythologized in quite such stark terms as the medieval period. No one else in history is seen as so pure, or so filthy. No period has been made so monolithic, so one-dimensional, so "epic." That is why studying the Middle Ages, with all its richness and complexity, can be so rewarding—and why playing with the Middle Ages has so many pitfalls.