

Mirabile dictu!

The Newsletter of the Center for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (CMEMS) at the University of Colorado



Dungeons & Dragons and the Medieval Historian

by Professor Scott G. Bruce

Mirabile dictu!

My apologies for the late arrival of this issue of *Mirabile dictu!* The months of December and January were unusually busy for me and my family, as we prepared to embark on an eight-month trip to England to take up residence as Derek Brewer Visiting Fellows at Emmanuel College in Cambridge. I have decided to take a break from writing this newsletter during my time on leave, but I wanted to close out 2014 with one more issue, with

an editorial on a topic close to my heart and some exciting news about events coming up on the CU Boulder campus this coming year. I will be back in touch again in the late spring with our 2015/2016 calendar of CMEMS activities. All the best for a safe and productive spring semester and thank you warmly for your support of CMEMS!

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Announcing the First Annual Doug Burger Lecture in English

On March 10, David Aers (Duke University) will speak on periodization and literature.

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Call for Papers for "Religion and (the Master) Narrative"

Join us in October 2015 for an interdisciplinary conference on premodern belief and practice.

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Professor John Van Engen (Notre Dame) will speak at CU Boulder on October 22!

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SPEAKER PROFILE: DAVID AERS

David Aers is the James B. Duke Professor of English and Religious Studies and Historical Theology at Duke University, who works on medieval and early modern theology, ecclesiology, politics and literature in England. He is the author of many books, most recently *Salvation and Sin: Augustine, Langland and Fourteenth-Century Theology* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2009); *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2004); and *Faith, Ethics and Church: Writing in England, 1360-1410* (Boydell and Brewer, 2000). His current research continues to develop his interests in Christian traditions, theology and political culture while also engaging with some issues raised by prevailing grand narratives of modernity.

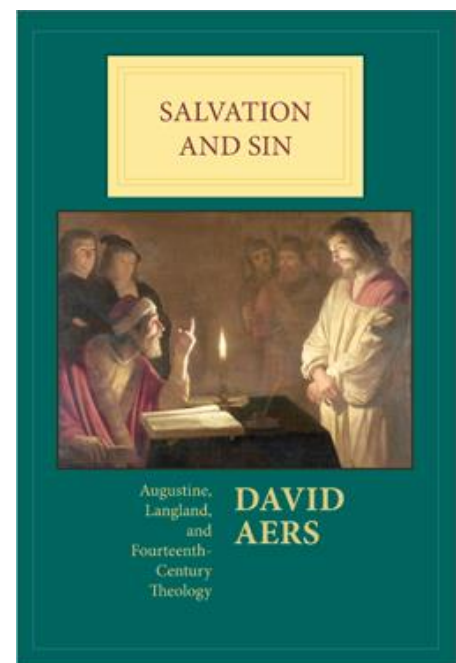
Professor David Aers (Department of English at Duke University) is a specialist on medieval and Reformation literature and theology

Professor David Aers is a path-breaking scholar of premodern literature. Starting with his first book, *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory* (St. Martin's Press, 1975), and eloquently argued in his essay "A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists, or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the 'History of the Subject,'" in *Culture and History, 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing* (Wayne State University Press, 1992), Professor Aers' research has challenged our perceptions about periodization and literary history between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period.

During his visit to Boulder, Professor Aers will deliver the First Annual Doug Burger Lecture in Medieval and Early Modern Literature, entitled "Beyond Reformation: An Essay on Langland and Constantinian Christianity." This new public lecture series in premodern literature honors Professor Doug Burger, a much beloved teacher who retired from the English Department at the University of Colorado in 2009. Please encourage your graduate and undergraduate students to attend this provocative, interdisciplinary lecture. We look forward to seeing you all there!

On Tuesday March 10 at 5pm, Professor Aers will present a lecture entitled "Beyond Reformation: An Essay on Langland and Constantinian Christianity."

On Tuesday March 10 at 5pm, Professor David Aers will deliver the First Annual Doug Burger Lecture in Medieval and Early Modern Literature on the Boulder campus of the University of Colorado. The venue for the lecture has not yet been announced. Please contact Professor Katie Little directly for this information (see p. 3 for her email address). This talk will be of interest to a wide range of faculty and students in the Departments of English, History, Philosophy, and Religious Studies. As always, this event is free and open to the public. Students are especially welcome to attend.



CFP: Religion and (the Master) Narrative: An Interdisciplinary Conference on Belief and Practice

In 22-24 October 2015, CMEMS is proud to sponsor another interdisciplinary conference in conjunction with our Third Annual James Field Willard Lecture in Medieval History, which will be presented by Professor John Van Engen (see p. 6). Like last year's very successful Medieval Materiality Conference, this meeting will be organized by Professors Anne E. Lester (History) and Katherine C. Little (English). Please consider submitting a paper proposal for what promises to be a stimulating discussion of religion in medieval and early modern Europe and the New World. We look forward to hosting you on the Boulder campus of the University of Colorado!

Recent scholarship on medieval and early modern religion has begun to question fundamental categories and ideas about religious narratives in the past and to destabilize the meaning and chronological divisions marking medieval Europe from Reformation Europe, the Christianized from the pre-Christian. A more complex and nuanced portrait of belief and practice has emerged. Where there was once a monolith – the homogeneity of medieval and Catholic Christianity – now we have a sense of the vitality of popular movements (cults of saints, poverty movements, Apostolic and women's movements), interfaith exchanges (among Jews, Muslims, and Christians), and heresies (Wycliffites and Cathars). In addition, the Reformation has come to be seen less as an end to the Middle Ages than inextricably connected to it as another manifestation of religious reform. This conference seeks to bring together scholars from a wide range of disciplines to ask about how we might better understand medieval and early modern religion and the narratives generated to explain religious change and continuity. Given the legacy of the Middle Ages and Reformation in our own time, this topic is pressing and particularly timely. As globalization and religious plurality influence our contemporary world, we are compelled to ask deeper questions about the role of belief and practice, narrative and representation, plurality and coexistence in the past. To this end, bringing medieval and early modern ideas about religion in conversation with modern issues is one of the overarching goals of this conference.

We invite abstracts for papers 20-minutes in length. Potential lines of inquiry may include: changing narratives of religious reform; the process of interpreting religious texts; dialogue, debate and exchange of religious ideas and knowledge; the creation and proliferation of images and material objects as a means of religious proof or as descriptions of the divine; the meaning and process of translations of sacred texts; the role of religious drama; new ways of defining or redefining the Reformation; the relationship between gender and religious practice; dialogue between Jews, Muslims, and Christians; the dissemination of doctrine and theology among elites and non-elites; narratives that define or defy heresy; and the role of narratives of religion in the early modern New World. We will also welcome papers that address how narratives about medieval and early modern religion continue to inform our contemporary moment.

Plenary speakers at this conference include: John Van Engen (History, University of Notre Dame); Sarah Beckwith (English, Duke University); Nina Rowe (Art History, Fordham University); and Kenneth Mills (History, University of Michigan).

Abstracts (of 300 words) accompanied by a brief biographical statement should be sent to: Anne E. Lester (alester@colorado.edu) OR Katie Little (Katherine.C.Little@colorado.edu) The deadline for abstracts is **15 May 2015**.



(continued from p. 1)

For an entire generation of gamers, the image on the front cover of this issue is both iconic and terrifying. Painted by Erol Otus, it represents a hidden corridor that leads to the lair of an undead wizard in a classic Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) adventure module called *Tomb of Horrors*. Few images evoke the character of D&D as well as this one: it is first and foremost a game in which players cooperate to explore a fantasy environment that draws its inspiration from the literary works of J. R. R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard, and Michael Moorcock. D&D made me a medievalist, but not for the reasons that you might expect.

1980: The Dark Ages

The world of 1980 seems so far away that it might as well be the Middle Ages. In terms of media, it was certainly a Dark Age, especially for teenagers. There were no computers, no DVD players, no cell phones. To be sure, our family had a television, but most of the time it was in the control of my older siblings who preferred reruns of vacuous sitcoms like *Three's Company* and *Gilligan's Island* to the imaginative fare that I enjoyed: the original *Star Trek* and *The Twilight Zone*. Worst of all, there were precious few books in the house. My father read the newspaper, my mother read *Reader's Digest*, and my brothers had a box of wrestling magazines. My saving grace was comic books, which introduced me second-hand to the pulp literature of the 1920s and 1930s: science fiction, high

fantasy, and sword and sorcery. When I wasn't outside playing street hockey or hide-and-seek with my friends, there was a good chance that I was curled up in some corner of the house reading comics.

Unearthed Arcana

D&D was the perfect gift for a reader like me. The game is not simple and the early rulebooks (*The Players' Handbook*, *The Dungeon Master's Guide*, and the *Monster Manual*) were massive hardcover tomes with hundreds of pages of arcane rules, intricate tables, and sage advice about running the game. After receiving the Basic Set as a birthday present, I must have spent months reading and rereading the rules in the hope that one day I would find someone to play with. D&D is in essence a game about fellowship. It has no "solo" content. A group of players create fantasy characters (Player Characters or PCs) modeled very closely on character types common in fantasy literature: wizards, thieves, warriors, rangers, priests, etc. The referee

of the game (the Dungeon Master or DM) is the narrator of the story and plays the part of every potential ally and foe that the PCs meet. The DM does not play against the players, but rather frames the story by describing the setting and prompting the players to respond. The DM's refrain "So what do you do now?" is common in all D&D sessions. The responses of the players shape the story of the game. Players use multi-sided dice to determine the outcome of combat and skill-related actions. D&D stories (called campaigns) can stretch out over months and years and no two are ever the same. Depending on the choices that they make, every group of adventurers that braves the perils of exploring the Tomb of Horrors will have a different experience because no group of players will ever make the same choices or bring the same personal dynamic to the gaming table. Veteran players love to retell the stories of their D&D campaigns with great nostalgia and gusto, especially their narrow escapes.



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D&D and the Medieval Historian

In its early years, the mastery of D&D required a commodity that few young people have today: time. Before the media revolution of the 1990s, children like me had plenty of time on their hands. Once and a while, serendipity would reward me with a Sunday afternoon showing of the original King Kong or a Godzilla movie on TV, but for the most part there were endless idle hours, especially in the summer months, to ruminate on D&D and its inviting, open-ended stories of fellowship and adventure. Once I did finally find a group of older kids to play with, I was hooked, first as a player and then later as a DM: a weaver of stories, an invoker of imaginary places. Over the past three decades, I have followed the fate of the game, from its improbable rise to popularity in the 1980s to its influence on the fantasy video games of the 1990s and 2000s (most notably Blizzard Entertainment's financial juggernaut *World of Warcraft*, the massively multi-player online fantasy game that has boasted over 10 million subscribers worldwide, including me) to the appearance in 2014 of a new edition (the 5th) that returns the game to its story-telling roots.



While the fantasy trappings of D&D may have attracted us to the game as teenagers, its relevance to adult players and its tenacity as a cultural phenomenon have more to do with the appeal of cooperative problem-solving and the power of story-telling, two of the most fundamental skills for medieval historians. As my friend and fellow medievalist Mike Ryan (Department of History, University of New Mexico) put it, "the game ... taught me how to think creatively and critically, work with others to achieve an objective, and ultimately have a lot of fun." D&D also exercises another fundamental skill for the practicing historian: empathy. Cooperative play around a table with real human beings (rather than computer avatars) requires clear articulation, careful listening, and the ability to negotiate, all for the purpose of achieving goals as a group that we cannot achieve on our own. These are skills that serve us equally well in the classroom, in the faculty meeting, and in the public forums where we present our research.

Servus,
SGB

About the Director: Professor Scott G. Bruce, Department of History



Scott G. Bruce earned his B.A. in History and Latin *summa cum laude* (1994) at York University in Toronto, Canada. He pursued his M.A. (1996) and Ph.D. (2000) in History at Princeton University, where he concentrated on topics in religion and culture in the early Middle Ages and wrote his dissertation under the supervision of Professor Giles Constable.

A specialist on the history of the abbey of Cluny, SGB has published widely on many aspects of medieval monastic culture and literature. He also serves as an editor of *The Medieval Review* (TMR) and plays an active role in the Medieval Academy of America (MAA). For more information, including a complete list of publications, please visit: www.colorado.academia.edu/ScottBruce

Professor John Van Engen to Deliver the Third Annual James Field Willard Lecture in Medieval History in October 2015

We are very pleased to announce that Professor John Van Engen (Andrew V. Tackes Professor of History, University of Notre Dame) will deliver the Third Annual James Field Willard Lecture in Medieval History at the University of Colorado on Thursday, October 22, 2015. Professor Van Engen is a world-renowned historian of culture, intellect and religion during the European Middle Ages, who works on cultural and intellectual renewal in the twelfth century, religious movements in the later Middle Ages, and notions of Christianization in medieval European history. His books and essays deal with monasticism, women's writing, schools and universities, inquisition, canon law, notions of reform, and medieval religious culture generally. His most recent book, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) has won several major awards, including the 2013 Haskins Medal from the Medieval Academy of America. Professor Van Engen's Willard Lecture will serve as the keynote to an interdisciplinary conference on the challenges of writing the history of premodern religious experience in the modern era. Please see p. 3 of this newsletter for the formal Call for Papers for this conference.



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IMAGE SOURCES:

The image by Erol Otus on the front cover appeared on the back of S1 Tomb of Horrors, a D&D adventure module published in 1981 by TSR Inc.

The sculpted couple on p. 3 are from the Musee de Cluny in Paris.

The image on p. 4, also by Erol Otus, appeared on the back of B1 Keep on the Borderland, a D&D adventure module included in the Basic Set between 1979-1982.

The image of the phoenix to the right can be found in a medieval bestiary in the British Library (Harley 4751, fol. 45).

Postscriptum: This issue of *Mirabile dictu!* will be the last one for the next little while. You can expect an announcement about our 2015/2016 event schedule later in the spring, but *Mirabile dictu!* will not resume again until August 2015. I am looking forward to taking a well-deserved break, but I am equally excited to share all sorts of news about premodern studies at CU Boulder and abroad when I return in the late summer!

