

**“THE LIGHTER SIDE OF THE MIDDLE AGES”  
PROGRAMME  
A.D. HOPE BUILDING, ANU, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2010**

**9.00-10.30**

**JESSICA MILNER DAVIS** *USYD - Letters, Art, and Media*

The Fool and Topsy-Turvydom: A Social Heritage from the Middle Ages

**PHILIP SHELDRIK** *ANU - Humanities Research Centre*

What Have the Middle Ages Ever Done For Us?

*(with Jenny Huang and Brenna Harding)*

**JOHN TILLOTSON** *ANU - History*

The London Drapers Hold a Feast

**10.30-11.00 MORNING TEA**

**11.00-12.30**

**JANET HADLEY WILLIAMS** *ANU - English*

Verse Satire on Pilgrimage in Late Medieval Scotland

**ELIZABETH KEEN** *Independent Scholar*

Political Animals: Emblems and Satire in Late Fourteenth-Century England

**MAXWELL J. WALKLEY** *USYD - French*

Light-hearted Amusement or Comic Aggression?: English Mocked in Two Old French Fabliaux

**12.30-1.30 LUNCH**

**1.30-3.00**

**LOUISE D'ARCENS** *U of Wollongong - English Literatures*

Scraping the Rust from the Joking Bard: Chaucerian Wit in the Eighteenth Century

**AMY BROWN** *USYD - Centre for Medieval Studies*

Tournaments and Tweens: The Maiden with Small Sleeves Episode as Domestic Comedy

**SABINA RAHMAN** *USYD - English*

The Serious Side of Merry Men: Early Robin Hood Ballads and Humour

**3.00-3.30 AFTERNOON TEA**

**3.30-5.00**

**HELEN APPLETON** *USYD - English*

Schadenfreude and Amusingly Shaped Vegetables - Ambiguous Humour in Old English Poetry

**ANYA ADAIR** *UMELB - Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Studies*

Light Hearts in the Monastery: Hidden Delights in the Old English Advent Lyrics

**CHRIS BISHOP** *ANU - History*

Beowulf: The Monsters and the Comics

## “The Lighter Side of the Middle Ages”

### Abstracts

**JESSICA MILNER DAVIS** *Letters, Art and Media, University of Sydney*

#### **The Fool and Topsy-Turvydom: A Social Heritage from the Middle Ages**

The tradition of the Fool and his/her permitted licence is by no means exclusive to Europe – in fact the earliest written records are found in Chinese Court biographies from the state of Qi 齊 during the Warring States period (471-221BCE). Its probable origins in all cultures are embedded in religious ritual (eg Zuni Indians’ Koyemci fools, the Roman Saturnalia, Japanese warai rituals and other festivals of inversion). On one line professional or “court fools” descend. On another, via mass participation in the rite, the licence for “topsy-turvy-dom” and mockery flows outwards from the Fool as designated holder to embrace by-standers and the general public. Abuses (however defined) can easily follow if social control is not strictly enforced. In the Western mediaeval Church, such disorders eventually earned proscription for the Feast of Fools, with its unruly processions of the Ass, ritual braying, censuring with black puddings, old shoe-leather etc.

Suppression of these popular rituals encouraged the rise of new forms of professional enactments of Folly, on stage as well as at Court and in the marketplace. This personal licence carried its own dangers, as indicated all too clearly by records of punishment of jesters and court fools. In the process of the rebirth of drama during the late Middle Ages (after the death of the public theatres of the Roman Imperium), secular fools flourished across Europe. Fairground “clowns” differed from their more literate brothers at Court, but both were professional specialists, and fooling their livelihood. In England at least, court fools moved between private sponsorship and commercial theatre, with the theatre extending its own license of privileged time and space to the act(ing) of secular fools. Over time, European comedy evolved a myriad specialist varieties of comedian/iienne – in farce, mime, burlesque, stand-up, circus, music-hall, comedy and satire, on film and television etc. Mediaeval fools founded in fact a tradition of exposing hypocrisy and pretentiousness, sometimes with reforming zeal, sometimes in good humour, that continues to evolve new forms in the modern age.

**PHILIP SHELDRIK** *Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University*

### **What Have the Middle Ages Ever Done For Us?**

The new Australian Curriculum devotes an entire year’s work to the study of the Middle Ages. Why? Obviously because it is important, but also because it is fun, engages young minds and is wonderful for extending more able students.

The students of St George Girls High School in Sydney, a selective girls’ school with a very high academic reputation, spend time in Year 8 exploring the role of women in the Middle Ages, from saints to mystics and even heretics, addressing the common misconceptions that most people have about medieval women.

The most fundamental misconception is that the Middle Ages was a dark and bleak time characterized by rampant misogyny and therefore by an almost complete lack of female “agency.” Others are simply misconceptions about people in general who lived during the Middle Ages.

So, from three different perspectives, that of a teacher, a junior student and a senior student we will tell you what the inclusion of the Middle Ages in our curriculum has done for us and why it is even more important now to re-discover the Lighter Side of the Middle Ages!

**JOHN TILLOTSON** *History, Australian National University*

### **The London Drapers Hold a Feast**

In 1522 Cardinal Wolsey, the king's minister, listed to the reluctant taxpayers of London the signs of prosperity that indicated to him their ability to pay: “sumptuous buildynges, plate, riche apparel ..., fatte feastes, and delicate dishes”. [Edward Hall, *Henry VIII*] My paper will examine the “fatte feastes” held over four days by the London Drapers Company annually at the feast of their patron saint. It was then that the elections of the company's officials, the Master and four Wardens, were held. Detailed records of the festivities survive from 1516 onwards. They permit researchers to reconstruct the menus of the feasts and the elaborate ceremonial of the occasion. Food (like other aspects of life, such as clothing) was used as an important indicator of social status. The guest list at the main banquet of the festival could be long, in excess of 150 persons, and extended

invitations beyond the Drapers' own livery to leading members of other merchant companies, London officials, lawyers and judges, royal councillors, and heads of local religious houses. Clearly the feast was an expression of the dignity and prestige of the Drapers' Company, a celebration of the fraternity but also a means of networking with other merchants, the rulers of London, the City aldermen, and establishing useful contacts with the royal council itself. Finally, I will look at tantalizing evidence of the entertainment provided to the guests. Minstrels were normally present, and companies of players were hired.

**JANET HADLEY WILLIAMS** *English, Australian National University*

### **Verse Satire on Pilgrimage in Late Medieval Scotland**

James III of Scots wished to be a pilgrim, trying three times to make such a journey abroad, but he was prevented by a cautious parliament. Nonetheless, he commissioned a medal for the shrine of St John the Baptist at Amiens, and encouraged his knight, Anselm Adornes, to become his pilgrim-proxy on a journey to Mount Sinai, Jerusalem and the Holy Land. James IV, similarly, did not fulfil his plans to travel to either the Holy Land or the shrine of St James at Santiago de Compostela. But the continued royal focus on foreign pilgrimage had its impact within Scotland. Feast days of native saints were increasingly marked; pilgrimages to local shrines were popular, and endorsed by James IV himself; hermits and holy men were highly-respected figures.

Writers, too, responded to the intense focus on pilgrim-piety. Several poems did so with an unexpected irreverence, even cynicism, concentrating on the pleasures of the here-and-now rather than those of the life to come. A poem called “Sym and his bruder” is written in this spirit. The anonymous work begins as if it were a chivalric romance, claiming to be a story equal to Hary’s *Wallace*. Surprisingly, its heroes are not warriors, but two begging pilgrims. Dressed for the occasion, the scallop-shell “proof” that they had reached Compostela already sewn onto their sleeves, they set out on foot from St Andrews. A later poem by Alexander Scott, “Of May”, includes pilgrimage in its lightly satiric survey of the pleasures of the spring season. A third poem, written by a young Alexander Cunningham, before he became Earl of Glencairn, is cast as a letter, sent by the hermit of the popular shrine of Loretto near Edinburgh, to his brothers, the gray friars. This poem is darkly comic. The hermit points out the threat posed by “thir Lutheriens

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rissen of new” and with his “brethers” makes entertaining, if highly self-revealing, arrangements to eliminate the impending evil.

These poems have the anti-fraternal themes and the variety of literary forms found in the work of Chaucer and others before them, but they also have a pungent directness and an increased specificity. Cunningham’s speaker, for instance, is no fictional character, but (purportedly) the well-known hermit, William Doughty, whose shrine flourished in the 1530s and ’40s. These poems on the lighter side also offer tiny insights into the literary, religious, social and political culture of their time.

**ELIZABETH KEEN** *Independent scholar, Braidwood*

### **Political Animals: Emblems and Satire in Late Fourteenth-Century England**

The late reign of Edward III (d.1377) and the subsequent reign of Richard II (d.1400) cover a troubled era in England. There is evidence that the three estates were at loggerheads amid general dissatisfaction with church and government, and that economic stress and disruption caused by war, famine and Black Death culminated in the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 and in the deposition of Richard in 1399. A range of polemical and satirical literature is extant from this time expressing fear, hostility and anger at the disturbances of social order and at the inadequacies of the governing ranks: for example, John Gower’s *Vox Clamantis* (1381), in which the poet depicts a nightmare vision of the commons as beasts over-running the fertile garden of the land.

But it is not all doom and gloom. There’s a lot of evidence that animals and birds could represent human targets at which ridicule might be aimed from a safe remove. It is often hard, though, for a modern audience to know just what role these animals are playing, what the jokes are, and how light-hearted or ambiguous the humour might be. In my illustrated talk I suggest that the more we know about the multiple and sometimes conflicting sources of animal imagery used by writers and artists at this time, the better we can appreciate the humour embedded in, for example, Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, and the anti-Ricardian poem *Mum and the Sothsegger*.

**MAXWELL J. WALKLEY** *French, Medieval Studies, University of Sydney.*

### **Light-hearted Amusement or Comic Aggression? : English Mocked in Two Old French Fabliaux**

For the “lighter side of the Middle Ages” in France, the relatively short verse narrative texts, composed in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries and referred to currently as “fabliaux”, spring first to mind. Chaucer himself, of course, was inspired by the medieval French fabliaux in some of his “Canterbury Tales”. A fabliau aims at the provocation of laughter in the audience, a fact reflected in Joseph Bédier’s classic definition of the genre: “des contes à rire en vers”. Robert Guette prefers to underline the “divertissement” (recreational) aspect of the fabliaux, rather than the jocular one, thus accommodating more successfully in the genre many stories which include a moral. Amongst the 150–odd texts recognised to-day as surviving fabliaux, procedures of inciting laughter vary from the simplistic to the sophisticated, although it must be admitted that most plots border on the slapstick and the verbal humour is often most kindly described as “basic”. Canvassing of all the themes occurring in the fabliaux is obviously not a practical option for this short paper; however, a close examination of the features of two fabliaux, “La Male Honte” and “Des Deux Anglois et de l’anel”, will allow the highlighting of both general characteristics of the fabliaux genre and a specific theme: that of mocking and even satirising the English.

**LOUISE D’ARCENS** *English Literatures, University of Wollongong*

### **Scraping the Rust from the Joking Bard: Chaucerian Wit in the Eighteenth Century**

Accounts of the post-medieval adaptation of medieval literature tend to move swiftly from Spenser to the nineteenth century, passing lightly over the eighteenth century in a way that situates it as a kind of plateau, or at best a bridge, between two great eras of revivalism. The scholarly work that does exist on eighteenth-century literary medievalism, moreover, most commonly focuses on the early forms of nationalist and romantic developments, such as antiquarian historicism and Gothic narrative. But an examination of eighteenth century Britain, with its taste for mock-heroic and serio-comic writing, also has much to offer a genealogy of the comic Middle Ages. This paper examines the

Enlightenment reclamation of Chaucer as the “Joking Bard” and the elevation of the medieval writer’s satiric style as a foundational example of what was taken in the Enlightenment to be an essentially English form of humour: wit. Examining Enlightenment theories of wit, the chapter will focus on a number of Alexander Pope’s more neglected Chaucerian works – his “Imitation of Chaucer”, “January and May”, “The Wife of Bath her Prologue”, as well as his better-known “Temple of Fame”, contextualising these within the broader reception of Chaucer and medieval verse by Pope’s contemporaries. It will explore in particular the tension between this period’s medievalism and the anti-medievalist presentism underpinning the widely-held eighteenth-century conviction that Chaucer’s “rusted” wit could only be rescued by divesting it of its “unpolish’d” versification and its ribald excesses – that is, of its “medievalness”.

**AMY BROWN** *Medieval Studies. University of Sydney*

### **Tournaments and Tweens: The Maiden with Small Sleeves Episode as Domestic Comedy**

One of the most charming episodes in Chrétien’s *Conte du Graal* is the encounter between Sir Gawain, en route to face trial by combat, and the Maiden with Small Sleeves. The Maiden – who seems to be below the age of marriage and is certainly not presented as a romantic partner for Gawain – persuades him to fight in a tourney in order that she might be vindicated in an argument with her elder sister.

In this paper, I will look at the Maiden with Small Sleeves episode as both comedy and social instruction. The conflict between the Maiden and her sister (and all the ladies of court who must put up with their bickering) is entertaining in its slapstick elements, amusingly familiar to anyone who’s ever had siblings, but also notable as one of the few episodes in the *Conte* in which we encounter more than one woman at a time. This episode, with its lighthearted tone, makes a striking contrast with the later episode in which we meet Gawain’s mother and sister: that episode is darker, although it has its own comic elements; I will consider the possibility that the Maiden with Small Sleeves episode functions as an example of healthy (and hilarious) familial relationships among women.

**SABINA RAHMAN** *English, University of Sydney*

### **The Serious Side of Merry Men: Early Robin Hood Ballads and Humour**

As the medieval ballads of Robin Hood are often examined with regards to his antagonistic behaviour and his anti-church stance, the comic nature of the ballads themselves can get lost. This paper proposes to examine the lighter side of Robin Hood and suggests that it has its own serious implications. I will examine three ballads in this paper, namely “Robin Hood and the Monk”, “Robin Hood and the Potter” and “A Gest of Robin Hood”, paying close attention to the comic elements contained within the text, and suggest that these episodes serve as a means by which to criticise the political mores of the later medieval society by providing a space for politically charged discourse while masking the anti-authoritarian, and particularly anti-class, sentiments contained therein.

**HELEN APPLETON** *English, University of Sydney*

### **Schadenfreude and Amusingly Shaped Vegetables – Ambiguous Humour in Old English Poetry**

Tom Shippey has observed that Anglo-Saxon humour often delights in the discomfort of others; in this paper I will explore that observation and consider whether in Old English texts the uncertainty of laughter means that the discomfort is often also the reader’s own. Old English literature has a reputation for gravity, which is in many respects entirely deserved. However, the absence of any obviously comic tale does not preclude the presence of humour. Anglo-Saxon literature may deal with high-minded heroic and theological subjects rather than the light and frivolous; but just as serious texts sit next to ribald riddles in the same manuscript, grand heroic poetry is peppered with wry humour. The salacious riddles, positioned amongst their more innocent brethren seem designed to make their readers squirm, and give those who know their solutions an opportunity to laugh at others’ expense. The paper will explore the construction of humour in these riddles, particularly their delight in ambiguity and inappropriate amusement. I will then consider the presence of the same uncertain, uncomfortable humour in heroic poetry, particularly in those works dealing with religious subjects, exploring the presence of comedy in those texts and the Anglo-Saxon predilection for ambiguous humour.



**ANYA ADAIR** *Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Studies, University of Melbourne*

### **Light Hearts in the Monastery: Hidden Delights in the Old English Advent Lyrics**

The Advent Lyrics have traditionally been taken to be primarily didactic poetry, written to express in the vernacular crucial theological concepts related to Christ’s Advent; they have also been called “meditations” on the nature of Christ. Such readings focus upon the lyrics’ use of biblical and patristic source texts, their detailed typology, and their sometimes dense and apparently dry theology. But the Advent Lyrics have another and very different aspect: one which rejoices freely in the certainty of salvation and looks with delight and surprising wit to the imagined kingdom of heaven.

The central joys expressed in the Advent Lyrics depend for their poetic success not upon detailed theology, but upon earthly truths expressed in vivid and concrete language. These moments of delight, moreover, borrow freely from a secular poetic tradition: the joys of heaven are drawn according to a metaphoric plan taken from the warrior’s hall, rather than from the study of the monk. Light, life and the bliss of heaven fill the lyrics, enlivened by archangels who jostle one another in their endeavour to be the closest to God, and riddling and risqué images of keys that unlock doors and virgins with equal ease. Hidden in the metaphors of the lyrics are earthly, as well as heavenly delights: the lyrics ring with the echoes of monkish laughter.

**CHRIS BISHOP** *History, Australian National University*

### **Beowulf: The Monsters and the Comics**

At first glance, the mid-70s comic series *Beowulf: Dragon Slayer* bears little resemblance to its West-Saxon antecedent. The story starts off conventionally enough with the Geat champion making his way to Castle Hrothgar in “Daneland” to fight the monster Grendel, but a detour to the Underworld sees Beowulf rescue a Scylfing Amazon (Nan-Zee), before being sucked through a dimensional gateway that leads to adventures with a mysterious “Lost Tribe of Israel”, Ulysees and his Achaean warriors, some human-hunting aliens that look like Egyptian deities and the lost city of Atlantis. To complicate matters further, a secondary plot sees Grendel mixed up in a dynastic conflict for control of Hell—originally

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enthroned as Satan’s heir, Grendel is forced to fight with Dracula for control of the Fiery Realm. Small wonder, then, that the series only made it to six issues...

A more detailed comparison, however, illuminates a number of mutual resonances. Trans-temporal considerations of honour, loyalty, and masculinity abound. Cultural ownership is contested and defined. Relative values of popular literature are underscored. Most importantly though, a few awesome heroes get to waste some totally scary monsters...

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### Presenters

**Jessica Milner Davis** (PhD) is an Honorary Associate in the School of Letters, Art and Media at University of Sydney. A former President of the International Society for Humor Studies (1996 and 2001), she co-ordinates the Australasian Humour Studies Network, which holds its 17th Colloquium in Hobart next February. Her research interests include the history and theory of comedy, humour-styles across cultures and multi-disciplinary research on humour and laughter. Her first book (on farce as a genre) appeared in 1978.

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**Phil Sheldrick** (MA) is Head Teacher at St George Girls High School in Sydney. He is also working on a PhD Thesis in history at ANU's Humanities Research Centre. The Thesis examines the process by which Queen Victoria's image took on a life of its own beyond the reality of her person. **Jenny Huang**, Year 11 St George GHS, is talented public speaker and **Brenna Harding**, Year 8 St George GHS, has already built up an impressive acting CV with roles in tv series such as *My Place* and *Packed to the Rafters*.

**John Tillotson** (PhD) was a lecturer in History and Medieval Studies at A.N.U. from 1969 until his retirement in 2004, and remains there still as a Visiting Fellow. The late Middle Ages in Britain, and more particularly the English Church and monasticism, are his research field; but since retirement he has shifted focus to the final years of the medieval Church and begun a study of the wealthy London draper John Rudston (d. 1531), mayor of the City, whose probate papers provide insights into the relations of the wealthy laity with their religion at this liminal time.

**Janet Hadley Williams** (PhD) is a Visiting Fellow in English, School of Cultural Inquiry, ANU. She is a member of Council of the Scottish Text Society, and President of the Sir David Lyndsay Society. Her most recent publication, co-edited with Priscilla Bawcutt, is *A Companion to Medieval Scottish Poetry* (Cambridge, 2006, 2010).

**Elizabeth Keen** (PhD) has a BA (Hons) degree in English Language and Literature from the University of Bristol, and a doctorate from the Australian National University’s School of History (2002). Her research centres on the 13<sup>th</sup> century compilation of knowledge *De proprietatibus rerum*, its late-14<sup>th</sup> century translation into Middle English, and associated texts. She was a Visiting Fellow in the History Program at ANU from 2003 to 2009; her publications include *The Journey of a Book: Bartholomew the Englishman and the Properties of Things* (ANU EPress 2007) and “Shifting horizons: the medieval compilation of knowledge as mirror of a changing world”, in *Encyclopedias from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, ed. J. König (CUP, in press).

**Maxwell Walkley** (MA) studied Old French under the aegis of Professor Keith Sinclair in Australia, and then at the *Seminaire des langues romanes* at the Université de Neuchâtel, with Professor Jean Rychner. His research interests have included the translators Jean Daudin and Robert Gaguin, but he has concentrated his research on the *Exemplaire des petis enfans* of Jean Gerson. In relation to the *fabliaux*, he has published 1) *The fabliaux as a guide to “Lifemanship” in medieval France* (1979) and 2) *Jehan de Journi’s last fabliau?* (2008). Having retired in 2005, he is now an Honorary Associate at the University of Sydney in the departments of French and of Medieval Studies.

**Louise D’Arcens** (PhD) teaches medieval and modern literature in the English Literatures Program of the University of Wollongong. She is author of *Old Songs in the Timeless Land: Medievalism in Australian Literature 1840-1910* (Brepols 2011), and has published numerous articles and book chapters on medievalist literature and film, with a particular focus on Australian medievalism. She is co-editor of *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars* (Brepols 2011) and co-editor of *The Unsociable Sociability of Women's Lifewriting* (Palgrave 2010). Her latest project is called “Laughing at the Middle Ages: Comic Medievalism”, and explores ways comedy has intersected with the desire to understand and recreate the medieval past, from Cervantes to the present.

**Amy Brown** (BA) is an M. Phil candidate with the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Sydney. Her thesis looks at the role of women’s friendships within the romances of Chrétien de Troyes. In addition to Arthurian literature, she is interested in gender, hagiography and ideas of perception and cognition. Her honours work was on Old English, and she currently co-ordinates the Middle English Reading Group at the University of Sydney.

**Sabina Rahman** (MA) completed her Masters by Coursework at the University of Sydney, and wrote her research dissertation on the subject of the representation of women in Grimm fairy tales. Her current work focuses on the figure of Robin Hood and is an examination of the legend particularly with regards to the manner in which the themes of sex, violence and transgression operate within the tales, from their medieval incarnations to the modern. At present she is working on the medieval ballads and concentrating particularly on the representation of violence and sex (or lack thereof) as a means of social and political criticism.

**Helen Appleton** (MA) is a PhD Candidate in the Department of English at the University of Sydney. Her thesis examines the depiction of landscape in Old English literature. She completed her BA and MA in English at the University of Durham in the UK. She also works as a research assistant on the Skaldic Project, which is producing an edition of the corpus of medieval Norse-Icelandic skaldic poetry.

**Anya Adair** (BA) is a postgraduate student with Melbourne University's School of Culture and Communication. Her study interests include Old English literature, with a current focus on poetry and the development of medieval poetic aesthetics; she has recently completed a study of the authorship of the Old English Advent Lyrics. Anya’s current research examines the aesthetic of joy in Old English poetry, and looks at the expression of high emotion in the early medieval period.

**Chris Bishop** (PhD) teaches History at the Australian National University and his doctoral thesis, “Literature and Society in Tenth-Century Wessex”, was supervised by Ralph Elliott. He also possesses all six issues of the original *Beowulf: Dragon Slayer*.