

Mysteries and Masterpieces

The latest stage in the “American conquest of the Middle Ages”

by Adam Kirsch



IN 2011, Harvard University Press celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the Loeb Classical Library, the renowned series that presents accessible editions of ancient texts with English translations on the facing page. The covers of the Loeb—red for Latin literature, green for Greek—have become iconic, and generations of students and readers have found them the ideal way to access our classical heritage. In 2001, the press (HUP) launched a new series on the Loeb model, the I Tatti Renaissance Library, featuring Latin and vernacular texts from the fourteenth century and after. But between the latest Loeb—the works of the Venerable Bede, the English chronicler who lived in the seventh century c.e.—and the earliest I Tatti volume, there was a seven-century gap, representing an era of European history that is all too easily neglected: the Middle Ages.

The very term “Middle Ages,” in fact, implies that the period is significant merely as an interruption, or at best a transition, between the vital culture of the Greco-Roman world and the “rebirth” of that culture in the Renaissance. When the Middle Ages do come up in popular discourse, the terms are almost never complimentary. Last year, for instance, Cogan University Professor Stephen Greenblatt published his widely acclaimed book *The Swerve*, which tells the

story of the Italian Renaissance’s rediscovery of the Roman poet Lucretius (see “Swerves,” July-August 2011, page 8). Central to Greenblatt’s argument is the idea that the Renaissance represented a long-overdue return to reason and sanity after the long religious delirium of the Middle Ages, a time of “societies of flagellants and periodic bursts of mass hysteria.”

Clearly, the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (DOML) has its work cut out for it. Launched last year by HUP under the general

editorship of Porter professor of Medieval Latin Jan Ziolkowski, DOML gives the Loeb treatment to classic texts from the Middle Ages, aiming to fill the gap between the ancient world and the Renaissance—both on the library shelves and, if possible, in the minds of students and readers (see “A Renaissance for Medieval Classics,” November-December 2010, page 64). “For reasons both economic and cultural,” Ziolkowski writes, “the variety and distinction of the Latin literature written in the Middle Ages have yet to receive the recognition they merit....[M]y dream is that this series of publications will help to improve the situation by furnishing prospective readers with both well-known classics and lesser-known mysteries and masterpieces.”

If the Loeb has been around for a hundred times as long as DOML, that seems a fair reflection of the importance of classical versus medieval literature in our culture. This may be especially true for American readers. After all, American civilization never had a medieval period: our country is a product of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment era, when the reputation of the Middle Ages and everything they stood for was at its lowest ebb.

True, the United States has no direct inheritance from the classical world, either—but thanks to the Founding Fathers, we are in many ways Romans by adoption. When the Founders made the American Revolution and framed the Constitution, they had the Roman Republic in mind—just look at the way the Federalist Papers constantly refer to Roman history. And Washington, D.C., is a showcase of neo-Roman architecture; not for nothing is our government run from the Capitol, named for Rome’s Capitoline Hill. Gothic and Romanesque buildings are much thinner on the ground.

The great literary scholar Ernst Robert Curtius reflected on this absence in his 1948 magnum opus, *European Literature and the Middle Ages*. “What strikes me most is this: The American mind might go back to Puritanism or to William Penn, but it lacked that which preceded them; it lacked the Middle Ages,” Curtius wrote. “It was in the position of a man who has never known his mother.” Yet he saw this lack as an opportunity for American scholarship. “The American conquest of the Middle Ages,” he observed, “has something of that romantic glamor and of that deep

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sentimental urge which we might expect in a man who should set out to find his lost mother.” That “conquest” began, in his view, with the “cult of Dante” that sprang up among the New England poets of the nineteenth century, above all Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who translated the *Divine Comedy*.

DOML can be seen as the latest stage in the American conquest of the Middle Ages, offering the best introduction the general reader has ever had to the “mother” of Western Christian civilization. So far, the series has published 11 volumes, all in Latin or Anglo-Saxon; future books will include works in Byzantine Greek and other European vernaculars. Reading these books reveals both the truth and the limitations of the familiar stereotype that sees the Middle Ages as a time stunted by religious ignorance.

It is true that religion is omnipresent in these texts: they reveal a civilization completely permeated by Christian belief and practice, a faith that could be both sublimely ardent and cruelly intolerant. At the same time, DOML shows how medieval Christianity remained in a fertile tension with other strands of European culture: the pagan inheritance of the Teutonic world and the polytheism of Greece and Rome. The combination of these worldviews produced some strange syntheses—pagan, erotic poetry written by priests, Biblical stories retold as Homeric epics. After exploring these volumes, the Middle Ages are sure to strike the reader as more familiarly human, and more exotically remote, than ever before.

Atomizing the Bible

JUST AS THE BIBLE was at the heart of medieval literature, so an edition of the Bible is at the heart of DOML. This is the Latin translation of the Bible known as the Vulgate, which so far occupies four thick volumes, divided thematically into *The Pentateuch*, *The Historical Books* (such as Samuel and Kings, in two volumes) and *The Poetical Books* (including the Psalms and Job). The Vulgate takes its name from the Latin word for “common” or “popular,” and for more than a thousand years it was the only form in which the vast majority of European Christians knew their holy book. The translation was made by Saint Jerome in the fifth century C.E., and went unchallenged until the Reformation, when Protestants eager to interpret Scripture on their own terms began to translate it into vernacular languages. (Coincidentally, 2011 also marked

the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible, which remains for English speakers what Jerome’s Vulgate used to be for Latin readers—the definitive Biblical text.)

The editor of the DOML Vulgate Bible, Swift Edgar, a research assistant at Dumbarton Oaks, explains in his introduction that he has paired the Latin text with its traditional English translation, the Douay-Rheims Bible—named for the French cities where exiled English Catholics completed it, during the reign of the Protes-

tant queen Elizabeth I. But the Douay-Rheims translation, Edgar writes, was heavily revised in subsequent centuries, so it is not as strikingly different from the familiar King James Version as one might expect. Only readers who are able to make some sense of the Latin will appreciate the way that language lends the biblical text the universality and logical order of Latin itself, as in the beginning of Genesis:

*In principio creavit
Deus cælum et terram.
Terra autem erat inanis
et vacua, et tenebræ erant
super faciem abyssi: et
spiritus Dei ferebatur super
aquas. Dixitque Deus:
Fiat lux. Et facta est lux.*

In a deeper sense, however, the introduction to another DOML volume makes clear that our whole way of thinking about the

Bible, Vulgate or otherwise, is essentially foreign to the Middle Ages. “The medieval reader,” writes Daniel Anlezark, of the University of Sydney, “was most likely to encounter the Bible as a collection of texts used in the liturgy; the idea of the Bible as a single book was unknown.” Readers can get a powerful sense of what this meant in practice from *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, the most accessible book in the series so far, and historically one of the most influential. Even today, writes the editor, Bruce L. Venarde, of the University of Pittsburgh, “there are currently more than 1,200 monasteries following Benedict’s Rule.” Throughout Western Europe, the set of rules and advice laid down by this Italian monk in the 540s were the “most widely used guide to life in the monastery for more than a thousand years.”

One of the subjects on which Benedict gives especially detailed instructions is the proper schedule for reciting Scripture. “Sunday Matins should begin with Psalm 66,” begins one chapter. “After that, Psalm 50 should be said with the Alleluia; then Psalm 117 and Psalm 62; then the *Benedicite* and *Laudate* psalms, a reading from Revelation recited by heart, the responsory, an Ambrosian hymn, verse, Gospel canticle, the litany, and it is finished.” The 150 psalms are carefully



Saint Jerome—whose Latin translation was the European Bible for a thousand years—by Theodoricus of Prague (fl. 1359-1381)

NARODNÍ GALERIE, PRAHA, CZECH REPUBLIC / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

divided among the seven daily services—matins, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, and compline—so that the whole Psalter will be read each week. “For those monks who sing less than the entire psalter with the customary canticles in the course of a week,” Benedict notes sternly, “show themselves lazy in the service of devotion, since what—as we read—our Holy Fathers energetically completed in a single day, we, more lukewarm as we are, ought to manage in an entire week.”

With its focus on the Psalms, the *Rule* offers a good example of how “the Bible” as a whole did not figure largely in the mind even of a medieval monk. Indeed, at one surprising moment, Benedict even advises monks *not* to read certain parts of the Bible: “If it is an ordinary day, as soon as they rise from supper, the brothers should all sit down together and one of them should read the *Conferences* or the *Lives of the Fathers* or something else to edify listeners, but not the Heptateuch or the Books of Kings.” Those sections—known to English readers as the first seven books of the Bible, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings—are evidently too exciting, with all their battles, intrigues, and miracles, for monastic meditation: “it will not be good for weak minds to hear those parts of scripture at that time; they should be read at other times.”

This kind of benevolent strictness is the essence of the *Rule*. Benedict sets a high bar for those who want to enter the monastic life: they are to be totally obedient to their abbot, they can have no private property (“nothing at all, no book or tablets or stylus, but absolutely nothing”), and above all they are never to complain or “grumble.” The “brothers” or *fratres* are not even to have particular friends: “Care must be taken lest a monk presume in any circumstance to defend another in the monastery or take him under his protection, as it were, even if they are connected by some close kinship. In no way should monks presume in this matter, because very grave occasion for scandals can arise from it.” Presumably, this is the same kind of scandal that Benedict seeks to avoid in his rules on “How Monks Should Sleep”: “Younger brothers should not have beds next to one another, but be interspersed among seniors.”

Benedict is well aware that he is asking a great deal. That is why he deliberately makes it difficult to become a monk: “if one comes knocking, perseveres, and after four or five days, seems to suffer patiently ill-treatment directed at him and the difficulty of entry and persists in his request, let entry be granted him.... All the difficult and harsh things involved in the approach to God should be made clear to him.”



The rule-giver: Saint Benedict with Two Monks, a fresco (ca. 1497-1513) by Luca Signorelli

Yet the *Rule* is also suffused with a forgiving realism about human nature. After laying out his complex schedule of prayers, for instance, Benedict writes: “This order for Sunday Vigils should be followed at all times, in summer and winter alike, unless, God forbid, the brothers happen to rise a little late, in which case some part of the readings or responsories must be shortened.” He is even more realistic when it comes to limiting the brothers’ consumption of alcohol—clearly an ideal that was honored in the breach more than the observance: “Although we read that wine is not for monks at all, but since in our times monks cannot be persuaded of this, let us at least agree that we should not drink to excess but sparingly...If the circumstances of the place are such that not even the aforementioned measure can be obtained, but much less or none at all, those who live there should bless God and not grumble.”

The heaviest burden in a Benedictine monastery, the *Rule* makes clear, falls on the abbot himself, who must know when to be strict and when to be lenient. The ideal is a loving paternalism that mirrors

the rule of God the Father, and Benedict writes with special concern for those who find it hard to obey the rules—just as God is most intent on redeeming those who sin. The abbot, he writes, “has undertaken the care of sickly souls, not tyranny over healthy ones,” and he will be called to account for every one of his flock. Reading the *Rule*, it becomes clear why so many men and women were drawn to the monastic life. The ideal it presents, of utterly contented humility, could not be more foreign to our time, but its serene appeal can still be felt.

The Vices—and Libels—of Every Age

EVEN IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY, however, the ideal and the reality were two different things. That becomes clear in another DOML volume, the *Satires* of Sextus Amarcus—the Latin pseudonym of a writer who was probably a German monk. In a long poem divided into four books, Amarcus rails against the vices of his age, which he sees as sadly fallen from the virtuous past: “We seem to be separated as far from our fathers’ way of life as the setting of the sun is separated from its red-glowing rising,” he complains. And the clergy are a major target of his elegantly versified Latin diatribes. “The cleric turns away from the canons, and the monk from the command of Benedict,” he writes. “Hating the cloister and choir, they frequent the houses that reek of drug peddlers.”

This is one of several moments when Amarcus’s complaints strike a surprisingly unmedieval note. Another pet peeve is women cross-dressing:

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They say that girls run here and there through the halls with their curls cut like men so that, when they first fawningly approach the beds, they might submit to lewd intercourse...There is no one, even if he is skilled in making facile decisions, who can assess the truth when the sex has been altered, while the manly woman, spurning women's garments, covers her legs with breeches and boots, and parts her tunic with her bare knee.

Clearly, to Amarcus, the eleventh century was a time of loose morals, confused gender roles, avarice, and hypocrisy—the same charges leveled by the moralists of every period. It is comforting, in a way, to learn from the *Satires* that decadence is such a hardy perennial. In the Middle Ages, as now, people were slaves to high fashion—Amarcius deplores the fad for “tight wild-sheepskin with a beaver-fur back, dormouse stitched with fine chiffon, and grayish reindeer skin”—and ate too much—“fish with brine, herring, or a roast or, if it might please you more, flesh, seasonings, and ducks.” Amarcus doesn't seem to hope that his chastisements will have much effect, and he even looks forward to mockery and rejection: “long ago Noah's ark was lifted up by waves”; likewise, “while the reproaches of this haughty world deride and harass good men, they raise them up to the stars.”

The most troubling thing in the *Satires* is the way Amarcus makes



A manuscript page from *Beowulf*, c. 1000, perhaps the era's most familiar text today

Amarcius read about animal sacrifice in his Old Testament, but he seems totally unaware that it had not been a part of Jewish practice since the destruction of the Temple a thousand years earlier. He is thus a perfect example of the medieval Christian habit of treating Judaism as a blank screen, onto which any kind of fear or fantasy could be projected—a custom that led to disastrous consequences for the Jews of Europe.

If Amarcus deplores the failure of Christians to be sufficiently unworldly, other Christian poets in DOML are themselves pretty susceptible to the charms of this world. Many of the group of Latin poems known as the *Arundel Lyrics*, after the manuscript in which they survive, are attributed to the twelfth-century churchman Peter of Blois. Though Peter had a distinguished career in the English church, his love lyrics are written as hymns to Venus, the old Roman goddess of Love: “I offer my

thanks to Venus; by the divine majesty of her favorable smile she has conferred on me a welcome and longed-for victory over my girl.” He was equally susceptible to the charms of boys: “When your

down has gone and a beard springs up from sunken corners, bristling with stubble that has been cut away, I will be pricked by the spears of stubble and then I will be upset by the kisses I now suck with pleasure. That you are still pleasing to a few, you owe to razors alone. Therefore be mindful of your age!”

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the Jews a symbol of everything that is wrong in his topsy-turvy world. Early on, he deplores the influence of money: “worshippers of Christ are despised, unless they have abundant wealth,” while if a rich Jew “strikes down one of our poor people in an impious slaughter, [he] farts violently in the clean faces of the complaining relatives.” This kind of blood-libel is especially ominous given the setting: in the late eleventh century, the Crusades sparked a series of devastating massacres in Germany's Jewish communities.

Later, Amarcus spends hundreds of lines railing against the Jews' refusal to accept Christ, which he cites as an example of pride. “O wicked nation, O nation destined to perish, the letter kills you! The spirit prepares us for life,” he writes, echoing an old anti-Jewish trope. Yet he also displays his ignorance of actual Jews and Judaism when he writes, “You who delight in sacrificing so many bulls and so many sheep, sacrifice yourselves to Christ.”

It is fascinating to read such poems, with their echoes of Catullus and other Roman love poets, in the same manuscript as tender hymns to the Virgin Mary. Poem 19, for instance, is a lovely meditation on the paradox of the Incar-

nation, made more graceful by the close feminine rhymes of the Latin lines: “A corner brings the totality into existence, a little part the whole, a twig the gardener, a small plant the planter [*totum profert angulus/ integrum particular/ ortolanum surculus/ plantatorem plantula*]. The young Virgin bears the Father while keeping the shrine of her chastity intact.” These lyrics may not have all been by the same author, but they do not seem to object to being in the same book. They offer the promise that both species of Love, divine and human, have a place in human life.

The Ultimate Bestiary

“THE WRITTEN ZOOLOGY of [the medieval] period,” wrote C.S. Lewis in *The Discarded Image*, “is mainly a mass of cock-and-bull stories about creatures the author had never seen, and often about creatures that never existed.” Lewis, a (please turn to page 79)

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great medievalist who is better known as the inventor of his own stories about fantastic creatures—the *Chronicles of Narnia*—notes that it is strange that the Middle Ages should have been so credulous about exotic beasts. After all, the average medieval man or woman had vastly more experience and knowledge of animals than the modern city-dweller. But perhaps it was the very familiarity of cows and horses and pigs that made it so tempting to invent more exotic beasts: animals that surely existed somewhere in the mysterious East, too far away to be disproved.

This impulse is given free rein in *The Beowulf Manuscript*, the volume in DOML that comes closest to the Middle Ages we know from fantasy fiction and movies—a realm of monsters and magic. The star of *The Beowulf Manuscript* is, of course, *Beowulf*, the Old English poem about a heroic warrior who defeats a series of monstrous foes. As editor R.D. Fulk of Indiana University observes in his introduction, perhaps the most amazing thing about this famous poem is that we know it at all. Probably written in the ninth or tenth century, it survives in a single, twelfth-century manuscript that was almost incinerated in a

translation of a Latin translation of a Greek text, features a whole menagerie of monsters. It takes the form of a geographical survey, pleasingly full of spurious names and places (“There is a certain place when one is going to the Red Sea that is called Lentibelsinea”). But the real ingenuity of the text is devoted to descriptions of people and animals. First we are told about “native people who are six feet in height” and have “beards down to the knee,” known as *Homodubii*—“Maybe-people.” Then, as if this struck the author as insufficiently improbable, he describes another region where the natives “are 15 feet tall, and they have a white body and two faces on a single head”; and another where “people of three colors are born whose heads are maned like lions’ heads, and they are 20 feet tall”; and yet another where there are “people without heads,

predict the future, and meets nine-foot-tall people who eat whales, and fights off a horde of mice the size of foxes. But perhaps all these wonders aren’t as important as Alexander’s conclusion, which holds true whether we believe in *Homodubii* or not: “The world is to be wondered at, what it first produces either of good things or in turn of bad...It continually produces those well-known wild animals and plants and ores of metals and amazing creatures, all which things would be, for people who witness and observe it, difficult to understand on account of the variety of their forms.”

THE LITERARY FLORA and fauna of the Middle Ages are as surprising, wonderful, and sometimes awful as any made-up animal, and they too can be “difficult to understand on account of the variety of their forms.” The Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library doesn’t offer a simple key to the Middle Ages—to truly understand these texts requires the kind of study and knowledge of ancient tongues that only scholars possess. But by making them accessible to twenty-first-century readers, Ziolkowski and his team of editors at least give common readers a glimpse of the riches of this distant, forbidding, yet strangely familiar world. ▢

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house fire in 1731. Indeed, Fulk writes, it’s remarkable that the poem was ever copied in the first place: “[M]anuscripts were precious objects in the early Middle Ages, requiring considerable expense and labor to produce, and thus they tend to contain only such texts as the ecclesiastics who compiled them were likely to find useful in the service of the Church.”

Beowulf hardly fit that description, and neither do two of the shorter texts in the same codex, “The Wonders of the East” and “The Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle.” The reason they were written down in the same book “is not plain,” Fulk writes, “but one influential explanation...is that the manuscript is devoted to narratives about monsters.” In *Beowulf* itself, we find not only Grendel and Grendel’s mother but a dragon as well.

The Wonders of the East, an Anglo-Saxon

who have their eyes and mouth on their chest. They are eight feet tall and eight feet wide.”

Such descriptions must have delighted the Middle Ages the way horror and sci-fi movies delight us today: the point is not quite to believe in them, but to luxuriate in their weirdness. “Most of those who helped in either speech or writing to keep the pseudo-zoology in circulation,” Lewis writes, “were not really concerned, one way or another, with the question of fact.” Yet in the “The Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle”—another text that came to Old English via Latin and Greek—real historical personages serve to lend probability to the fantastic inventions.

During his campaign in India—again, the distant East is the best theater of fantasy—Alexander offers sacrifices to trees that can



Mid twelfth-century manuscript on parchment of “The Wonders of the East,” featuring a two-headed giant