

The Virgin, the Dynamo, and the Tent*

The Redpath Chautauqua and Medievalism

In memory of Professor Jeremy Du Q. Adams

Bruce Brasington

Professor of History
West Texas A&M University

WHAT MOTIVATED CITIZENS OF COLORADO SPRINGS in 1896 to build a “medieval-themed” float for their Sunflower Carnival?¹ Had they been inspired by romantic tales of chivalry and castles? No doubt. However, might there have been other reasons?

Perhaps they had visited a Chautauqua. From the 1870s to the 1920s, the Chautauqua’s circuits of speakers and performers shaped mainstream American culture and society. While major cities like Chicago were sometimes destinations, it was generally in small and medium-sized American towns where the tents were pitched and church halls booked. Among the most successful was the Midwest’s Redpath Chautauqua, whose posters and brochures have been digitized by the University of Iowa.² These display not only the picturesque Middle Ages suggested by our float, but also adaptations of medieval subjects for modern audiences advancing Progressive, unsentimental, agendas.

Having begun in the 1870s as a popular, but academically rigorous, alternative to university education, Chautauqua offered the opportunity for higher, and broader, education to the aspiring middle class. Medieval topics appear from time to time in its curriculum. The summer 1887 session of the “Chautauqua College of Liberal Arts” offered courses on “Beginning Old English,” alongside “Elements of Hebrew,” “Comparative Philology and Ancient (Classical Languages),” and “Beginning Sanskrit.” Given the early connections of the Chautauqua with Methodism and seminary preparation, aspiring pastors and teachers likely would have eagerly attended such courses.

1 <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330coll22/id/25871/rec/7> accessed on 15 August 2016.

2 *Travelling Culture: Circuit Chautauqua in the Twentieth Century*, at <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/tc/index.php> accessed on 20 May 2016. Unless otherwise indicated, all examples in this essay come from this site.



H. S. Poley (Horace Swartley). Sunflower Carnival, Colorado Springs, El Paso County, Colorado. August 1896. Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, P-2324.

By the 1890s, the Chautauqua became less overtly academic. More and more it resembled a travelling circus, or perhaps better put, a secular revival, where participants could be enlightened and entertained. To reach a broader audience, the Chautauqua became more commercial and engaged with current events. The Middle Ages became Americanized. One speaker, Lee Francis Lybarger, railed against, among other things, the origins of indirect taxation and the tariff in the Middle Ages. Others worried that modern society, undermined by vices such as drinking, might be regressing back to the “Dark Ages. Among many moralizing prophets we encounter the Catholic priest and reformer, J.M. Cleary, who paired his lecture “The Folly of the Drink Habit: A Trip Through Europe” with “The Fifteenth Century” and “The Dark Ages.”

Some speakers did go beyond passing references to the Middle Ages, and Dante proved a popular subject. James Freeman Jenness, a graduate of Stanford (as his advertisements proudly proclaim) lectured on Dante, “The Voice of Ten Silent Centuries.” His stereopticon “illustrated with charts the conception of the universe that obtained in Dante’s time.” No doubt, he contrasted Dante’s cosmos with a modern, scientific view. Such juxtaposition of the dark and modern ages would remain popular for decades to come. Among the more positive views of the Florentine poet was a lecture by Dr. D. F.

Fox, who spoke at Beloit College in 1909 on “Dante: The Torchbearer of the Middle Ages.” He declared, “Dante owed his greatness to the fact that he was exiled and forced to wander, for stern necessity is the secret of success...Had Dante remained in Florence, he might have been a good alderman, but the world would probably not have had a Divine Comedy.” Perhaps Dr. Fox saw Dante as a disciple of Roosevelt’s “strenuous life.” A few years later, Clarence Locke Miller could pair Dante with Shakespeare to illustrate “The Democracy of Achievement.” One suspects Dante embodied the values of self-help, practicality, and boosterism soon to be mocked in Sinclair Lewis’s 1922 novel *Babbitt*.

Even more popular was Joan of Arc, easily the most beloved, and adaptable, medieval figure for American audiences. Dana C. Johnson’s lecture on the virgin martyr saint impressed a reviewer who, writing in the *Lafayette, Indiana Morning Journal*, described “an intensely interesting recital of the tragic life of the warrior maiden of France.” The reviewer added that “so tense was the interest of his auditors that they unconsciously leaned forward in their seats and at the climax a sympathetic sigh escaped.” In a magic-lantern presentation, B. R. Baumgart took his audience “In the Footsteps of the Maid of Orleans.” A particularly unusual offering came from DeWitt B. Lucas, “The Man who introduces you to yourself through your handwriting.” A specialist in “graphology,” determining personality through handwriting analysis, Lucas lectured on various historical figures, among them Joan, whose signature revealed “a pure clairvoyant side to her nature and perception, which probably accounted for her “voices.”

On the other hand, some speakers devoted lectures either entirely or in part to Savonarola, hardly a medieval figure lending himself to romance. Perhaps the austere Florentine monk seemed instead a progressive before his time, a type of monastic muckraker challenging hidebound institutions and the ignorant masses. Edward Howard Griggs lectured on “Savonarola: The Moral Prophet of the Renaissance,” along with St. Francis of Assisi, Erasmus, and Giordano Bruno, the last described as “The Martyr of Science.” Like Renaissance Florence, Middle America could prove, however, a tough crowd. A rare, negative review informs us that “Reverend Frank W. Gunsaulus’ morning sermon was greatly appreciated but his afternoon lecture on ‘Savonarola’ failed to hold the vast crowd.”

We also cannot escape the subject of race. Orators traced in various ways the triumphant march of the Anglo-Saxons across the centuries. Louis J. Alber asked “Who Were the Angles and the Saxons?” The attorney and aspiring politician Sidney Tapp took an unapologetically Whig view of English legal history, both in his book, *The Story of Anglo-Saxon Institutions*, (1904) and later lecture: “A Comparison of the Latin and the Anglo-Saxon Civilizations.” To Tapp, the genius of the common law demonstrated racial superiority:

The purpose of the writer has been to demonstrate from historical facts that the Anglo-Saxon race is the only race that has ever had a true conception of republican institutions or solved correctly the problem of self-government. In this connection, the writer has done his best to point out the oppressions of other schools of government, and at the same time to show, from historical information, the struggles of the people to dethrone the privileged classes and to obtain self-government, so that the American people may appreciate it in its original purity and simplicity.³

Other speakers yoked the Middle Ages to eugenics. In 1911, Albert Edward Wiggan, “the Apostle of Efficiency,” warned that without “race improvement” either “Extermination or the Dark Ages await us.” A decade later, David Starr Jordan, noted ichthyologist and president of Stanford, presented “The Inbred Descendants of Charlemagne.”⁴ While we do not know the lecture’s contents, he did publish an article with the same title that traced the lineages of men such as Washington, Lincoln, and Robert E. Lee back to noble marriages in the early twelfth century. These medieval marriages, in turn, led back to Charlemagne and Alfred the Great, and their consequences for the twentieth century were profound:

And every farmer of English lineage may boast of as much of the “germ plasm” of...Alfred, or Charlemagne as any royal household in Europe; reversedly (sic), plebian blood may be mingled with the “bluest”, usually to the betterment of both. As a matter of fact, indeed, very few Englishmen or Americans of English origin are without royal blood; nor is it likely that the coat of arms of any king living does not conceal the bar sinister of the peasant.⁵

Racial purity, not class, was what mattered. For all their differences in status and wealth, peasant and king came from the same stock; provided it remained pure, the beneficial effects of race cascaded down the centuries, from kings and nobles, to Theodore Roosevelt and your local grocer.

Speakers also enlisted Saint Joan in the cause of eugenics, contrasting her purity and noble character with modern decadence.⁶ Edward Amherst Ott, “The Purposeful Orator,” when not discussing “Why did congenital idiocy increase 150 percent in Norway in Ten Years,” could ponder “Why did Joan of Arc become a great military leader and the other French maidens stay at home?”

The Middle Ages were also performed. Indeed, it is likely that artists outnumbered speakers along the Redpath Circuit. Some were truly unconventional, for example George E. Colby, who gave “chalk talks.” Colby drew castles while telling “funny stories.” In the 1930s, Dr. Harlan Tarbell, “world famous teacher of magicians,” recounted the history of magic, including tales of medieval sorcerers.

3 Sidney Tapp, *The Story of Anglo-Saxon Institutions*, preface. His treatment of the medieval period begins in earnest in chapter 7: “The Beginning of the Anglo-Saxon Ideas in England.” *Magna Carta* had its own chapter (chapter 11).

4 A public intellectual, active in other causes such as the Sierra Club and the defense of Scopes in his 1925 trial, he had been president of Indiana University before coming to Stanford in 1891. He was, in every sense, the modern, secular Progressive. I thank Dr. Brian Ingrassia for helpful advice on Starr’s career and influence.

5 David Starr Jordan, “The Inbred Descendants of Charlemagne: A Glance at the Scientific Side of Genealogy,” *The Scientific Monthly* 13.6 (1912): 483.

6 For example, Elisabeth Cocke, “Sex Hygiene,” *The American Journal of Nursing* 12.5 (1912): 382-87 at 384, commends Joan as an example of steadfast chastity despite her military career.

The Middle Ages figured prominently in the Chautauquan theater. Everyman was a favorite. Perhaps audiences could identify with its emphasis on the individual's progress, in the face of wordily obstacles, towards a higher goal. We find a variety of performances, from dramatic readings to complete plays. The medieval morality play could also be adapted, like Joan of Arc and Savonarola, to modern, progressive values. For example, a woman could take the stage, a subversive take on the medieval story. This was the case with the recitals of Everyman by Maria Theresa Sheehan, whose performances for college and church audiences in the 1920s drew rave reviews. Reviewers particularly praised her elocution, though the local newspaper in Pontiac, Michigan also noted her ability to change "from grave to gay in the most accomplished manner." Whether or not she found a feminist response to her assumption of the medieval character we cannot say.

Even more contemporary was Walter Browne's Everywoman. While beset by many of the temptations that confronted her medieval male counterpart, Everywoman's goal, now set in the twentieth century, was no longer heaven but "her quest of love." Her modern adversaries were Flattery and 'Nobody' (the latter, a male "Philosopher"), not Death; instead of Hell yawning before her, "The Great White Way" threatened her earthly ruin. As Browne explains:⁷

It is not a sermon in disguise, neither is it a quixotic effort to elevate the stage. At the same time, it is hoped that the play may be found to contain some clean and wholesome moral lessons. Since the days of chivalry, when knights clashed steel for their lady-loves and went on crusades to prove their prowess, while they remained secluded in cloisters or in moated castles, womankind, of which the title role of this play is intended to be a type, has grown more self-assertive and more bold. To every woman who nowadays listens to flattery, goes in quest of love, and openly lays siege to the hearts of men, this play may provide a kindly warning.

Granted, such a search for romantic love was nothing if not conventional; at the same time, the privileging of the woman as the central character, combined with settings such as "New Years' Eve of Broadway," certainly made it relevant to its audiences.

Then there was Marjory Lacey:

In presenting Miss Marjory Lacey in Everywoman, we feel that we are doubly fulfilling our obligation to the public; first in introducing an attractive, competent and worthy young artist; second, in providing a means by which the great masses of the people may listen to an artistic and forceful interpretation of the most wonderful play of the hour—a story that grips, that dispels the allurements of the stage and high life and one that every young person especially should hear.

7 Ibid. The play was subsequently filmed in 1919 by Paramount Pictures. See the *Internet Movie Database*, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0010096/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1 accessed on 16 September 2016.

Speaking to an age anxious about modernity and its vices, this version of *Everywoman* targets the youth. Its stage was the city, a dangerous place indeed. Based on the photographs in her brochure, Lackey's "interpretation" was certainly dramatic and earnest. Whether or not she ever suggested as well her personal understanding of romantic love—for she would eventually leave the stage to become the lifetime partner of Madeline Phillips, founder of the Business and Professional Women's Club of America—we do not know.

The Redpath's archives are filled with many more traces of the Middle Ages. Storytellers recounted fairy tales; we even hear of "Beowulf for Children." There are also extravagant theatrical productions like "The Miracle," which transformed the interior of a Chicago church into a medieval cathedral. Elsewhere, a dance troupe performed "The Dance of St. Francis." One wonders what parts of his life unfolded on the stage. Speakers also showed parents and teachers how their children could learn through "medieval games." Travelogues took Americans to places they would never visit; perhaps some, one hopes, held the castles and cathedrals in their memory and dreamed of a wider world. As late as the 1930s, puppet theaters, including one advertising its productions as "adult," a term with far different connotations then, regularly featured the life of Joan of Arc. One of my colleagues has asked me if her puppet would be burned at the end of every performance. I do not know. Finally, one can only speculate about what took place at the "Holy Grail Encampment" of a Chautauqua in rural Illinois.

In sum, most of the Redpath Chautauqua's medievalism, like the float in the Sunflower Carnival, was nothing if not picturesque. As we have seen, however, it could also be moralizing and didactic, framing the medieval past in a glass darkened by racial prejudice, Social Darwinism, and scientism. These "uses" of the Middle Ages reflected the way Americans have long viewed the past, and still do today, when *Game of Thrones* has replaced the Chautauqua's podium and stage: either as picturesque but useless entertainment, or as an object lesson to praise or warn the present.

The heyday of the Chautauqua was also the age of Henry Adams's *Dynamo*, which he contrasted with the beautiful, but now seemingly irrelevant, stone Virgin of the medieval cathedral in his 1904 book *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*.⁸ While I should like to think that at least a few visitors came away from the tents and meeting halls inspired to learn more, in a critical and scholarly way, about the medieval past, I am not sanguine.⁹ Most of them likely welcomed their machine age, the triumph of the dynamo over the medieval Virgin, and did not yearn for the looming towers of Chartres. Perhaps their Middle Ages, however inspiring or amusing, now seems antique, like the Chautauqua itself: mere "cultural debris."¹⁰ Now the smartphone has replaced the dynamo. The Virgin seems remote indeed.

8 Henry Adams, "The Dynamo and the Virgin (1909)," at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/HADAMS/eha25.html> accessed on 20 May 2016. Adams' influence was considerable. For example, see Walter Henry MacPherson's Chautauqua lecture on "The Influence of the Virgin on the Glory of the Gothic," which he presented as part of a series of talks in the mid-1920s. 27 August 2016. MacPherson was a politically and socially active Universalist minister in Joliet, Illinois.

9 On which see Perry Miller, "The Responsibility of Mind in a Civilization of Machines," in *The Responsibility of Mind in a Civilization of Machines*, (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 195-213.

10 A phrase taken from Russell Kirk, "Cultural Debris: A Mordant Last Word," in *The Intemperate Professor and Other Cultural Splenetics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 160-63.

That need not, however, be the final verdict. If the Redpath's lectures and performances of the Middle Ages strike moderns as quaint, unscholarly, and sometimes, downright repellent, at least culture came to the people. Why should that be any less true a century later? Yes, the orators and performers wanted to make a name and living, their impresarios and booking agents a profit, the audiences, moments of amusement and moral uplift; but at least culture, however distorted, came to the heartland. We should follow in their footsteps, not just with digital media but with community, performance, dialogue. Rather than lighting isolated screens, why not gather scholars and people together? Why not a new Redpath? Why not a medievalism freed from the prejudices of race, national glorification, and supposed progress? Perhaps such gatherings might even counter those would commodify the past, medieval or otherwise, and limit it to irrelevant amusement. In doing that, we could express a view of humane learning even centuries older than the Chautauqua, and already venerable when Hugh of St. Victor declared some eight centuries ago: "For not to know something is far different from not wanting to know something, since not to know is a weakness, but to detest knowledge is a perversion of the will." If the humanities are to shape, let alone survive, our distracted, despondent world, we would do well to both heed the advice of Hugh and, like our ancestors a century ago, leave the ivory tower, hit the road, and pitch our tents. Perhaps, then, Babbitt will not have the last word. And the Virgin will smile. ˆ