

**Receptions: Medieval and Early Modern Cultural Appropriations  
Introduction to the Themed Issue**

*Deborah Seiler and James Smith*

Volume Editors

The University of Western Australia

Texts feed off each other and create other texts, and other critical studies; literature creates other literature. Part of the sheer pleasure of the reading experience must be the tension between the familiar and the new, and the recognition both of similarity and difference, between ourselves and between texts.<sup>1</sup>

~Julie Sanders

On the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of August 2012, the conference that led to this volume took place at Saint Catherine's College, The University of Western Australia.<sup>2</sup> Co-sponsored by the UWA Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Studies and the Perth Medieval and Renaissance Group, this conference sought to explore cultural appropriations in, by and of the medieval and early modern world, across a range of disciplines. The conference was particularly notable for the richness and variety of appropriations covered in its papers and plenaries, but also for the quality of those papers given by postgraduate students and early career researchers. This volume represents a selection of these papers, outlining the many ways by which the pre-modern was, has, or will be adapted and appropriated to fit new and diverse contexts.

As Julie Sanders has suggested, literature creates not only more literature, but the methodologies to appreciate the continuities and novelties of change. In the essays collected within this volume, a group of early career scholars have each presented an insight into the process by which ideas merge and spawn new progeny, both within the medieval and early modern reception of the classical, and the modern reception of the pre-modern. There are six essays in total, arranged as follows:

In "J. R. R. Tolkien's New Legends of the North", Alana Bennett explores J. R. R. Tolkien's adaptation of medieval material within the composition of *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son* and *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*. Bennett demonstrates that the texts are creative reinterpretations used as exercises for comprehension, rather than medievalist aesthetic diversions. Tolkien, as both academic and enthusiast for

---

<sup>1</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> For archived information about the conference on the Perth Medieval and Renaissance Group website, see <[http://sponsored.uwa.edu.au/pmrg/2012\\_conference](http://sponsored.uwa.edu.au/pmrg/2012_conference)> , 2012 (accessed 6 March 2014).

creative composition, generates works that bring the reader into a sharing of pre-modern literary form and logic through a medievalism of form over content.

Angus Cheng-yu Yen discusses television adaptation of the *Canterbury Tales* in “A Popular Change from an Old Man to a Young Girl: The BBC’s *Pardoner’s Tale* (2003)”. The author argues that these twenty-first century re-imaginings of Chaucerian content take medieval moral tropes and adapt them to the needs of twenty-first century British popular culture, keeping the original force of the stories while simultaneously reworking their moral register to fit with contemporary sentiments. The *Pardoner’s Tale*, in particular, presents a moral translation of content from medieval to modern through the alteration of moral standards and their representation in the figure of a girl, the avatar of death.

In “Appropriating the Classical Underworld: The Otherworld and its Spectacle in *Sir Orfeo*”, Blythe Hsing-wen Tsai demonstrates the use and adaptation of classical imagery within the fourteenth-century Breton lay *Sir Orfeo*. By refashioning the classical Underworld—a word originally symbolising eternal loss and remorse—the essay argues that the Orfeo poet makes use of the supernatural Otherworld as a topos in the structure of medieval romance, a supernatural ambiguous space of trial and testing. The author notes that *Sir Orfeo’s* Otherworld, in contrast to the Classical netherworld, is filled with spectacle, chivalric conventions and, perhaps most importantly, that it is a place from which it is possible to return from unharmed.

“Chaucer’s Reworking of the Ovidian *Locus Amoenus*” by Brid Phillips discusses Geoffrey Chaucer’s reception and adaptation of the Classical ‘pleasant place’ topos, repurposing the motif as a space to provoke consideration of emotional or moral dilemmas, frequently those related to an excess of desire. The essay argues that Chaucer made use of a literary motif familiar to his audience in order to articulate a depiction of death and grief based on human responsiveness to environment, complicating the secular and Christian discourses on human mortality.

In “Relics of the Tasmanian Gothic: Medieval Artefacts in Medievalist Australia”, Nicholas Dean Brodie explores two objects found within Tasmanian churches that have been linked to the European medieval past, and traced to origins far from their antipodean locations. One object, a neo-gothic window, was later thought to be genuinely medieval. The other, apparently a Norman-era baptismal font, was only recently identified as being ancient. Through these objects, the author brings to attention the manner in which the mythological aspects of the window and the credibility of the font reveal under-studied aspects of the neo-gothic in Australia.

Finally, “Dost thou know thy tongue’s true tune?: Discovering the early opera ‘mezzosoprano’ voice for today’s interpreters” by Patricia Alessi provides a musicological example of reception and appropriation by grounding modern operatic interpreters within the historical context needed to correctly understand the mezzo-soprano voice classification. Through an engagement with seventeenth and eighteenth-century operatic theory, Alessi makes it possible for a twenty-first century mezzo-soprano to perform early Baroque pieces with accuracy.

The editors of this volume would like to thank the six authors for their insights, their hard work, and for the quality of the finished essays. The editorial process is itself a process of reception and adaptation, and the genesis of this volume is no exception. It has been a pleasure to oversee the publication of new research and the refinement of ideas, and it is hoped that this volume will be received and adapted anew. There are many to thank for this volume, including the UWA Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, the Perth Medieval and Renaissance Group and the UWA Institute for Advanced Studies for the original conference, the authors and generous peer reviewers for the adaptation and refinement of the essays, and the Limina editorial collective for supporting and hosting the volume. Special thanks go to Steven de Haer, Limina Submissions Editor, for his assistance in the publication of the volume.

\*\*\*