



THE NEW MIDDLE AGES



Beer and Brewing in Medieval Culture and Contemporary Medievalism

Edited by
John A. Geck
Rosemary O'Neill
Noelle Phillips

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The New Middle Ages

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Vintage engraving showing a scene from the story of the Anglo-Saxon English hero Hereward the Wake. Hereward sees Martin Lightfoot depart with the letter, while men party in the hall. From Henry Courtney Selous, Illustrations of 'Hereward the Wake' by Charles Kingsley. London: Art Union, 1870. Via Getty Images.

ISSN 2945-5936

ISSN 2945-5944 (electronic)

The New Middle Ages

ISBN 978-3-030-94619-7

ISBN 978-3-030-94620-3 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94620-3>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*To those brewers and beer lovers (medieval and modern, craft and home)
that have made the world of beer—its past, present, and future—a more
inclusive place, where anyone can feel they belong.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We must first thank Megan Cook for bringing the three of us together at her panel on beer and medievalism in 2017, at the International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo. The three of us (Rosemary, Noelle, and John) work in different areas and we might never have dreamed up this project together if it wasn't for Megan's panel.

We would also like to thank all of our contributors, each of whom completed their essay in the midst of a pandemic and approached this topic (beer and beer medievalism) from their own unique perspective. The wide range of our contributors' expertise expands the coverage of this book—and we hope that there is something for all readers here.

Amy Ellis has our gratitude for her excellent work in indexing the manuscript and preparing it for submission—tasks that are often hidden but nevertheless invaluable.

And finally, we are so thankful for our respective families and the patience they have shown as we have put extra work into this project over the past year. You all deserve a beer!

CONTENTS

1 Introduction	1
Noelle Phillips, Rosemary O'Neill, and John A. Geck	
Part I Historical Perspectives	31
2 Beer and Ale in Early Medieval England: A Survey of Evidence	33
Conan Doyle	
3 Reconstructing Medieval Gruit Beer: Separating Facts from Fiction	57
Susan Verberg	
4 Baptized by Beer: Continuity and Change in the Religious Use of Alcoholic Beverages in Medieval Norway and Iceland	93
Fernando Guerrero	
Part II Nostalgias	115
5 Codex Cervisarius: A Pilgrim's Guide to the Medievalism of Craft Beer in Quebec and Ontario	117
John A. Geck	

6	Nostalgic Medievalism in the 1642 and 1646 Versions of the <i>Ex-ale-tation of Ale</i>	157
	Mary Bateman	
7	Latvia's Labietis: Modern Craft Brewing Across the Pagan–Christian Threshold	181
	Robert A. Saunders	
8	“God Wotte What Liquor”: Brewing History and Memory in Early Modern England	205
	Donovan Tann	
Part III Gender		227
9	Playing with Vikings: Ludic Medievalism and Craft Beer's Transformation of the Norsemen	229
	Noelle Phillips	
10	From Tapsters to Beer Wenches: Women, Alcohol, and Misogyny, Then and Now	265
	Carissa M. Harris	
11	Devil's Brew: Demons, Alewives, and the Gender of Beer in the Chester <i>Harrowing of Hell</i> and Contemporary Craft Beer Branding	285
	Rosemary O'Neill	
Part IV Communities		313
12	The Wonders of Ebrietas: Drinking and Drunkenness in Old English and Anglo-Latin Riddles	315
	Richard Fahey	
13	Alcohol, Community, and Chaucer's Pardoner: Ale as a Populist Antidote to Alienating Avant-Gardism	341
	Randy Schiff	

14	“Harsh, Violent, and Muddy,” or Ale, Wine, and Liquor in Adam Thorpe’s <i>Hodd</i>	363
	Anna Czarnowus	
15	Afterword	389
	Ren Navarro	
	Index	397

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LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1	Ren Navarro's image on Parallel 49's The Ren-aissance	17
Fig. 3.1	Cities associated with gruit beer taxation, production, distribution in between the tenth and sixteenth century	60
Fig. 3.2	Stadtrechnung of Wesel entry "Van der Gruet" from 1430. (Stadtarchiv Wesel A7/1430, fol. 401 v)	72
Fig. 5.1	Brimstone Brewing's Midnight Mass, Hail Mary, Sinister Minister, and Apparition (Untappd: Brimstone Brewery n.d.)	126
Fig. 5.2	2016 biography of Ovi Bercan (Microbrasserie Kruhn: Nos Bières n.d.)	128
Fig. 5.3	Kruhn's "Transylvanian" beers (Microbrasserie Kruhn n.d.)	130
Fig. 5.4	Unibroue's Maudite, Don de Dieu, and Le Fin du Monde (Unibroue n.d.)	137
Fig. 5.5	Lake of the Woods' Big Timber, Sultana Gold, and Tippy Canoe beer labels (Untappd: Lake of the Woods Brewing Company n.d.)	138
Fig. 5.6	Mill St. Brewery's Minimus Dubbel, Stone Mason Ale, and Madawaska Maple (Mill Street Brewery: Past Releases n.d.)	142
Fig. 5.7	Bellwoods Brewery's Motley Cru, Bring Out Your Dead, Farmhouse Classic, and Farmagedon (Bellwoods Brewery: Beer Archive n.d.)	144
Fig. 5.8	Beau's All Natural Brewing Company's Lug-Tread Lagered Ale and Vassar Heirloom Ale (Untappd: Beau's All Natural Brewing Company n.d. and Beau's All Natural Brewing Company: Vassar n.d.)	146

Fig. 5.9	Beau’s All Natural Brewing Company’s Patersbier and Kremlock the Roggenbier (Untappd: Beau’s All Natural Brewing Company n.d.)	147
Fig. 5.10	Brasseurs du Monde’s L’Assoiffé 6, Blasphématoire, and Ostentatoir (Brasseurs du Monde: L’Assoiffé 6, Blasphématoire, and Ostentatoir, n.d.)	148
Fig. 5.11	Brasseurs du Monde’s L’Interdite 120 and L’Égalitaire (Brasseurs du Monde: L’Interdite 120 n.d. and Brasseurs du Monde: Égalitaire n.d.)	150
Fig. 7.1	Lāčplēsis on the Base of the Freedom Monument (Rīga, Latvia). (Source: Wikimedia Commons/Peters J. Vecrumba)	186
Fig. 7.2	Mežs (‘Forest’), a Juniper Red Ale inspired by the <i>Dainas</i> . (Used with permission)	191
Fig. 7.3	Labietis logo. (Used with permission)	197
Fig. 7.4	Sindija Mačtama’s Curonian “Pirate-King” Lamekins. (Used with permission)	198
Fig. 9.1	Norse Brewing Co Logo. (Source: Norse Brewing Company. Used with permission)	249
Fig. 9.2	Valkyrie Brewing Company (n.d.)	253
Fig. 9.3	My son and I playing at Vikings in Muninn’s Post, 2015. (Source: Noelle Phillips)	258
Fig. 11.1	St. Thomas’s Church, Salisbury: Last Judgement Mural (ca. 1470–1500, By Nessino – Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=27836832)	289
Fig. 11.2	St. Thomas’s Church, Salisbury: Last Judgement Mural (detail)	291
Fig. 11.3	Stone’s Arrogant Bastard Ale label (Arrogant Consortia 2022)	299
Fig. 11.4	Le Stryge, Notre-Dame de Paris, West Façade (By Jawed Karim—Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=362069421)	300

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1	<p>The botanical ingredients of the substance gruit. (<i>Arnhem</i>: Jappe Alberts 1955, 7, 10, 43; 1967, 10, 29; <i>Cologne</i>: Ennen 55–57, 189–90; Loesch, 64; Scheben 1880, 109–12; <i>Deventer</i>: Doorninck 1885, 7–13, 32, 134; 1888, 39–46, 90, 152–58, 214–21; de Hullu 1899, 117, 119–24; Meyer 1976, 491; <i>Duisburg</i>: Mihm and Mihm 2007, 248–756; <i>Dortmund</i>: Rübél 1892, 185–89; <i>Münster</i>: Eberhardt, 132–134, 190–195; <i>Wesel</i>: Kraus 1907, 79; <i>Zutphen</i>: Wartena 1977, 80–81, 98–99; <i>Zwolle</i>: Doorman 1955, 29; <i>general 1511</i>: Cockx-Indestege 1971, 225; <i>general 1661</i>: Schookius 1661, 216)</p>	67
Table 3.2	<p>Provenance of questionable gruit herbs. The herbs and spices listed in this table are questionable in connection with gruit. The table indicates when a botanical first appeared in the literature; when was it first published (date), by whom (author), and who subsequently repeated the reference. Some botanicals may be explained through identification issues (blueberries, cherries, rosemary and wild thyme) while others seem to appear out of nowhere (cinnamon, nutmeg, sage and yarrow). It is possible ginger has been correctly identified, but instead is associated with the (possible) side-business of resale by the Gruithuis, similar to the alternative botanicals as noted in Cologne</p>	75
Table 9.1	Viking- or Norse-themed breweries	244
Table 9.2	Breweries that produce Viking- or Norse-themed beer(s)	245



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Noelle Phillips, Rosemary O'Neill, and John A. Geck

Some of humanity's oldest stories are drinking stories – and many of those involve beer. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (ca. 2000 BCE) describes how the wild Enkidu is brought into civilization by drinking his fill of ale (seven jugs!).¹ A tale from Egypt, ca. 2500 BCE, tells how the lioness goddess Sekhmet, enraged at the rebelliousness of humanity after her father Ra directs her to punish the disobedient, wreaks havoc on earth. To stop her carnage, Ra orders Tenenet, a beer goddess, to brew up a strong batch for him. Ra dyes it red, adds a sleeping drug, and pours it over the fields to tempt

¹ Some translations identify the drink as wine, but most translate it as beer or ale.

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Switzerland AG 2022

J. A. Geck et al. (eds.), *Beer and Brewing in Medieval Culture and Contemporary Medievalism*, The New Middle Ages,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94620-3_1

Sekhmet, who has been driven mad by blood-lust. Sekhmet consumes all of the beer and falls down in a drunken sleep, awaking the next day as the giving and gracious domestic goddess Hathor (Godlaski 2011, 1453). In Sumerian folklore, Hathor's equivalent is Ninkasi, another beer goddess who is the subject of the famous poem "Hymn to Ninkasi," a song of praise that describes the brewing process.

In these early tales, beer is a drink that brings peace and restores community, rather than one that disrupts and divides. It is a drink of the hearth and the home, one cultivated by feminine hands and shared around a table. This sense of beer as a communal drink, one suited for all classes, continued in the European Middle Ages, when monks would regularly brew for themselves and for visitors, and alewives would brew and sell to their neighbors out of their own homes (Hornsey 2003, 290; Unger 2004, 22–30; Bennett 1996, 3–37). The early medieval Irish saint, St Brigid of Kildare, miraculously produced beer (out of her bathwater), along with bread and milk to help the sick and impoverished, and a poem attributed to her imagines heaven as a lake of ale (Sellner 1991). As Max Nelson describes, beer miracles in the early medieval period were not uncommon; divine fermentation and magically appearing beers depicted the beverage as one worthy of God's attention (Nelson 2005, 94–96). In medieval Scandinavia, as Fernando Guerrero's chapter in this volume discusses, the clergy would sometimes use beer in place of Eucharistic wine or the holy water of baptism. A glass of "good ale" was often the subject of songs sung by patrons of the neighborhood tavern (Palti 2008, 192–4), and huge barrels of English beer were proudly given by King Henry II of England to the French court (Hornsey 2003, 288–9). Beer crossed lines of gender and class for centuries, even millennia. However, as women's production and serving of beer became increasingly stigmatized in the late medieval and early modern periods, beer became associated with the rowdiness and dissolution of male spaces (although when gin became popular in the eighteenth century, beer's reputation received a boost) (Hornsey 2003, 367; Bennett 1996, 145–57). Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, beer increasingly became the drink of the average working-class man, from the railroad, shipyard, and agricultural workers drinking porter and then the newer pale ale during the Industrial Revolution,² to

²Thomas Carlyle disparagingly referred to the working-class as the "vulgarest Cockney crowd" who would laze about on a Whit-Monday "with nothing but beer and dull folly to depend on for amusement" (Pionke 2016, 13). Laborers were sometimes given beer in lieu

1980s construction workers of popular imagination crushing can after can of mass-produced light lager. By this time, women in brewing were largely reduced to the scantily clad “Bud Girls” in Budweiser’s advertising campaigns. Now, well into the twenty-first century, the craft beer industry that grew rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s to challenge corporate beer is shifting beer’s demographics. Craft brewers present beer as both a valuable commodity that appeals to those with taste and discernment, and an accessible drink that anyone can afford and enjoy.

One strategy for this reframing of what beer is and what it does occurs through the re-creation of beer’s early history. This sometimes takes shape through medievalism and sometimes through a generalized nostalgia for the premodern. The notion of medievalism, however, is a central idea explored in this volume. Medievalism has no single definition, but may be generally understood as the adaptations, imaginings, or recreations of medieval things or ideas by post-medieval societies, from the seventeenth-century until the present day. David Matthews acknowledges that it is impossible to create a clear taxonomy for medievalism, so he offers three general categories to help us understand its different manifestations: medievalism that attempts to recreate the Middle Ages as they were; medievalism that imagines the Middle Ages as they might have been; and medievalism that creates a new, fantastical Middle Ages that never existed (2015, 47–48). Louise D’Arcens, in a similar spirit, offers two categories of medievalism: the “made” Middle Ages (conceptual, imaginative) and the “found” Middle Ages (historical) (2016, 2).

Reimagining and recreating beer’s medieval past has become a powerful tool not only in craft beer marketing, but in historical fantasies more broadly (including books, movies, and business marketing). Beer, ale, tankards, “wenches,” jolly drunkenness, tipsy monks – these all evoke a medieval world in which beer is a sign of community and connection. In some ways, this rosy vision of beer’s history does reflect some of its reality – before and throughout much of the Middle Ages, beer *was* an important element of local connections, local economies, and daily life, as suggested by actual medieval representations of beer. In William Langland’s

of payment (Gazeley and Horrell 2013, 264). Ian Pritchard cites the work of Davies and Hopkins when he explains that “upon leaving work, many [industrial labourers] proceeded directly to the nearest pub in order to rehydrate. It was not uncommon for iron ‘puddlers’ (skilled ladlers and moulders who worked directly in the glare of the blast furnace hearth) to drink upwards of six to eight quarts of beer immediately after work” (2012, 331).

fourteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman*, for example, the sin of gluttony is represented by intoxication and appears to be the least damaging and most entertaining of the seven deadly sins. The character Glutton enjoys skipping church to drink ale with “hote spyces” in a local pub, plays drinking games, farts, falls over and vomits, and wakes up the next day with a raging hangover yet still calls for another cup of ale (*Piers Plowman* C:V:297–363 [Langland 2008]). However, this humorous vision of beer is also a mythologized and simplified one; it tends to efface the troubling side effects of alcohol use, such as addiction and assault, and it conceals the powerful social, economic, and religious effects of beer and brewing. Beer has been a central feature of human societies for a very long time, and the modern craft beer industry draws upon the power of that history to add value (economic and cultural) to the products it sells. As many chapters in this book explore, the imprint of medieval beer appears as a trace in today’s craft breweries, the modern mirroring its own imagined version of the medieval.

The concept of the diptych – an artistic or literary object in which two sides are linked together and form a complementary pair – is what shapes this collection of chapters, as the book’s title implies: it addresses beer and brewing in *both* medieval culture itself and in present-day forms of nostalgic medievalism. Exploring medieval beer in its historical contexts enriches our analysis of how ideas about the medieval past affect modern craft beer marketing; understanding the former expands one’s understanding of the latter. Despite the importance of beer to societies before and after the Middle Ages, and to countries outside of Europe, it is the European medieval past – or more accurately, our imaginings about that past – that has the firmest hold on modern perceptions of what beer is and where it came from. Medieval beer is often represented as the origin point of the beer we drink today, which is why this volume begins with chapters that consider medieval European beer in its historical context, using literary, historical, and archaeological evidence. Complementing these historically grounded chapters that open the volume are those at the end of the collection, which explore fictionalized representations of beer in the medieval period. These use medieval literary texts (as well as one modern work of medievalized fiction) to consider how beer in the Middle Ages could represent both community and disruption.

Between these two framing sections are chapters that address medievalism. These chapters consider the impact of beer’s medieval history on subsequent historical periods as well as contemporary craft beer culture,

mostly in the cultures of North America and Europe. But why is the “medieval” so important to beer now? The influence of medieval history on contemporary craft brewing could be because the medieval period saw the first sustained efforts at regulating beer and turning it into a more industrialized and profitable industry – the industry we recognize today. Or perhaps it is because beer’s modern reputation as a manly drink first developed in the late medieval period; as beer became more profitable in the latter half of the Middle Ages, women were quietly pushed out and it became perceived in more masculine terms (Bennett 1996). Maybe it is simply because “Western” drinkers think of European medieval history when they imagine their heritage. Whatever the reason, the Middle Ages – more than ancient Egypt or the Victorian era or any other time – has a powerful influence on how we see beer, so to study the playful historical imaginings at work in the craft beer industry also requires us to examine the medieval history underpinning those imaginings. This volume therefore offers both historically grounded analyses of beer’s medieval history and the medieval stories told about it, to examine and critique our modern adaptations – and erasures – of that history. The collection closes with a brief afterword by Ren Navarro, a craft beer consultant and diversity educator in the alcohol industry. Navarro’s concluding comments on medievalism in craft beer are shaped by her position as a queer Black woman in a largely male-dominated industry, and she offers an informed ground-level perspective on this subject that our academic interrogations may sometimes miss.

As a drink which has been continuously consumed in Europe for over a millennium, beer powerfully undercuts the imagined divide between the modern world and the premodern. But what accounts for the nostalgia around beer, its ability to enchant the past? This book will unsettle the binary between the present and the past that emerges from narratives that put the 1516 *Reinheitsgebot*, the famous German beer purity law that limited beer’s ingredients to barley, hops, and water (and later yeast), at the center. Accordingly, this often-discussed legislation moves to the margin of our accounts. An argument might be made that the *Reinheitsgebot* signaled, with its gesture toward industrialization and rationalization, the end of medieval beer and the beginnings of a more structured beer industry. The *Reinheitsgebot* certainly has an important place in Germany’s beer history, and is included in the German tax code and referenced on German beer bottles. However, the purity law only applies to beer produced in Germany, since the European Union struck down its international

application, that is, beers imported to Germany do not have to comply with these specifications (van Tongeren 2011). While the *Reinheitsgebot* remains important – and sometimes contested – in Germany, since it purportedly enforces brewing standards, outside of this context, it serves a largely ideological function. When first instituted, this law applied only to Bavaria, and was not the first law that attempted to regulate brewing standards and practices. Phillips points out that for the craft beer industry globally, the *Reinheitsgebot* is more powerful as a concept than a legal entity, arguing that the law “was just one small reflection of changes that had been slowly happening for decades, or even centuries, earlier across Western Europe” (Phillips 2019, 44). For these reasons, the *Reinheitsgebot* is acknowledged in this volume but not discussed at length. We follow Phillips in acknowledging that “while it may feel natural to locate the inception of regulated brewing closer to the early modern period than to the Middle Ages, in reality there was no clear revelatory or transforming moment” (2019, 44). While we recognize the power of the *Reinheitsgebot* in the development of Germany’s brewing industry, when we consider brewing across Europe and North America more broadly this law fades into the background.

BEER CULTURE: FIVE THESES (A MODUS BIBENDI)

Jeffrey Cohen’s famous 1996 essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” proposes a way of “understanding cultures through the monsters they bear” (4). We find this framing – of “reading” a culture through one of its most long-standing and significant products – a useful way to trace the threads connecting the different chapters in this volume. Indeed, we might even think of beer itself as monstrous in its unpredictability, its divergent effects, and its magical fermentation. Like the ancient goddess Sekhmet/Hathor, beer can be both friend and foe, monstrous and convivial. Many chapters in this volume explore this dichotomy, which is expressed through the words of Chaucer’s Pardoner below. Drinking can be both an impetus for camaraderie³ and a “lecherous thyng,” “ful of

³Randy Schiff discusses the complex social play that beer consumption has for the Pardoner in his chapter, “Alcohol, Community, and Chaucer’s Pardoner: Ale as a Populist Antidote to Alienating Avant-Gardism” in this volume.

striving and of wrecchednesse.”⁴ Indeed, the sins of drinking existed within “a tradition...in the later Middle Ages in England which included, under gluttony, not only excessive eating and drinking, but also great swearing and blasphemy, sorcery and witchcraft, and devil worship (understood in two ways) as well” (Yeager 1984, 45). As the Pardoner elaborates:

A lecherous thyng is wyn [wine], and dronkenesse
 Is ful of stryvyng and of wrecchednesse.
 O dronke man, disfigured is thy face,
 Sour is thy breeth, foul artow [are you] to embrace. . .
 Thy tonge [speech] is lost, and al thyn honeste cure [all your care for
 decency],
 For dronkenesse is verray sepulture [drunkenness is truly the death/burial]
 Of mannes wit and his discrecioun. (*The Pardoner’s Tale*, ll. 549–559)

The Pardoner’s warning against drunkenness, spoken as he drinks a “draughte of corny ale” (a bit of hypocrisy fully appropriate to a man who declares “For though myself be a ful vicious man,/A moral tale yet I yow telle kan”), is part of *The Canterbury Tales’* conflicted representation of beer, and of drinking more generally (*The Pardoner’s Prologue*, ll. 456, 459–60). It is at the tavern that the pilgrims meet, and through drink (wine, like the Cook and the Shipman, or ale, like the Pardoner and the Miller) that some tales are told, some halted, and some renewed.⁵ Despite the Pardoner’s warnings, the Host claims that the pilgrims should always carry good drink with them, since that “wol turne rancour and disease/T’acord and love, and many a wrong apese [it will turn rancor and disease into accord and love, and appease many wrongs]” (*The Manciple’s Prologue*, ll. 97–98). It is a magical view of the monstrous potential of intoxication.

This dichotomy exists in beer-drinking today. On the one hand, “beer is seen as an everyman’s drink in the United States [...] an inexpensive beverage consumed by ‘regular’ people in casual settings like the local bar, baseball games, or the backyard after mowing the lawn” (Elliott 2017, 59). At the same time, “[s]tudies of violent crime in modern societies demonstrate that alcohol was a factor in more than 50 per cent of the

⁴This and all subsequent citations from *The Canterbury Tales* are drawn from Chaucer (1987).

⁵The Miller and the Pardoner, for example, are both inspired to speak after drinking, while on the other hand, the Cook is unable to speak due to intoxication – until some wine revives him.

homicides and assaults [...and that when] the perpetrator was drunk, the level of aggression increased” (Martin 2001, 111).⁶ Further, the culturally understood demarcations of the “everyman” often mark craft beer consumption as “informed and defined by whiteness,” and specifically “white, middle-class men” (Withers 2017, 237). When “‘Good People Drink Good Beer’ (Maryland-based craft brewer Flying Dog Brewery’s slogan) and ‘Bad People Drink Bad Beer’ is a common mantra that is ground into the fibers of the craft beer culture,” the exclusionary role of craft beer (in production, marketing, and consumption) rises to the fore: its monstrosity lies in its careful delineation of what is normative (Withers 2017, 237). Finally, when monstrous medievalisms (including all the common myths of the medieval: the Middle Ages as an origin of national identity, of modern assumptions of gendered behavior, and of European supremacy) are deployed in craft beer marketing and consumption, the dangers of each amplify the other.⁷ Here, there is the potential for beer-drinkers to, knowingly or unknowingly, engage in an identitarian performance which can “[reject] neoliberalism’s multiracial globalization, [revive] fictive ancestral values, and [envision] a medievalized geopolitical sanctum of whiteness” (Kao 2020, 371).

With monstrosity in mind, we very consciously draw on Cohen’s “Seven Theses” essay. Cohen “partially violate[s] two of the sacred dicta of recent cultural studies: the compulsion to historical specificity and the insistence that all knowledge (and hence all cartographies of that knowledge) is local,” in order to offer a “*modus legendi*: a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender” (1996, 3). We do the same, both in this introduction and in the concept of this volume overall. Our *modus bibendi*: a method of (beer) drinking and understanding beer culture shares some of the same overarching theses of Cohen’s monster

⁶Martin goes on to note that “[s]cholars who have attempted to quantify the level of alcohol-related violence in traditional Europe have found that the role of alcohol was not as great as in modern societies” (2001, 111). Anna Czarnowus’ chapter in this volume, “‘Harsh, violent, and muddy,’ or Ale, Wine, and Liquor in Adam Thorpe’s *Hodd*,” considers the implications that modern assumptions about alcohol and violence have in Thorpe’s revisionist retelling of the Robin Hood tales.

⁷These aspects of medievalism in modern craft beer marketing and consumption are explored in the chapters by John A. Geck (“Codex Cervisarius: A Pilgrim’s Guide to the Medievalism of Craft Beer in Quebec and Ontario”), Carissa Harris (“From Tapsters to Beer Wenches: Women, Alcohol, and Misogyny, Then and Now”), and Rosemary O’Neill (“Devil’s Brew: Demons, Alewives, and the Gender of Beer in the Chester *Harrowing of Hell* and Contemporary Craft Beer Branding”).

culture, recognizing that beer presents a “corporeal [or in this case, literal] fluidity, [a] simultaneity of anxiety and desire, [that] ensures that the monster will always dangerously entice” (19). Reading about medieval beer-drinking practices and engaging in medievalisms in modern craft beer culture allow us to see the “[e]scapist delight” that beer can offer, while also presenting “fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion [...] in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space” (17). It is these poles, of a desire for monstrous revelation and of a fear of monstrous violence, exclusion, and destruction, that define the ambiguous space beer has occupied, and occupies, in the world. We offer, then, the following Five Theses of Beer Culture.

Beer Enchants and Disenchants

Beer is magic. What starts out as wholesome but ordinary foodstuff – barley tea, a nourishing beverage in the vein of porridge or soup – becomes transformed through the work of imperceptible organisms (yeast) into a delicious and intoxicating nectar. Yeast’s magical effects have been known to brewers for millennia, though of course not on the microbiological level (Van Zandycke 2012, 859). Patrick McGovern (2003), who studies ancient fermentation techniques, speculates that Neolithic brewers likely discovered yeast through “trial and error...it is even possible that the frothy yeast that bubbled on the surface of a mixed beverage of grapes and other materials was skimmed off and used in later fermentations” (82). In the fifteenth century, Margery Kempe recognized that the collapsing of the krausen (the head of fermenting yeast on the surface of her beer) was ruining her brews: “For, whan the ale was as fayr standyng undyr berm as any man mygth se, sodenly the berm wold fallyn down that alle the ale was lost every brewyng aftyr other [when the ale was as nicely fermenting under the yeast as any man might see, suddenly the yeast would fall down so that the ale was lost, each brew after the other]” (Staley 1996, ll.208–9). She saw the failure of the yeast as part of God’s punishment for her own pride. The brewing of ale is a miracle that echoes acts of sacred transformation in the Christian tradition, such as the conversion of water into wine in Jesus’ first miracle at the wedding at Cana, and the transubstantiation of wine into the blood of Christ in the eucharistic ritual (Phillips 2019, 138–9). As Fernando Guerrero notes in his chapter in this volume, beer could substitute for both water and wine in Christian rituals in early

medieval Scandinavian countries. Beer is a worker of miracles, a sacred beverage.

Yet beer can also invoke magic of a more diabolical kind. In medieval and early modern Europe, the alleged misdeeds of witches included spoiling beer, magically transporting beer, and preventing people from drinking beer (Martin 2001, 107). In Skelton's early modern poem "The Tunnyng of Elynour Rummyng," among the titular character's many crimes against decency is serving a woman who uses beer (with an effective yeast – "good ale barm") to make a toxic charm:

And wyth good ale barme
 She could make a charme
 To helpe wythall a stytych;
 She semed to be a wytch. (Skelton and Scattergood 1983, 225 [lines 453–58])

Elynour's brews also help women bewitch their husbands. However, unlike Elynour, few brewers find they can exercise this level of control over the brewing process. As Margery Kempe – and countless other brewers – discovered, the magic of fermentation is often highly unpredictable (as magic always is). Fermentation, through its production of alcohol, can embody the sacred yet also threaten it; it disrupts the social order but also holds it together in community. It can also create bad beer and, possibly, black magic. Alcohol is seen as a catalyst for access to the spiritual world, as we see in various trance and dance practices of cultures around the world (Phillips 2019, 139).

Today, the craft beer movement can enchant (or rather re-enchant) a world of beer-drinking that had, for over a century, been marked by a trend of "[i]ndustrialization, consolidation, global integration," during which "consumers switched to the cheap and consistent offerings of large-scale breweries" (Swinnen and Briski 2017, 168). In the identity constructed by the craft beer movement, one "closely aligned with local food movements, indie attitudes, or artisan production," craft beer producers and consumers draw on the Arts and Crafts Ethos established by William Morris in the nineteenth century, and tie together "consumption as pleasure and consumption as an ideological act (reacting against industrial culture)" (Rice 2016, 238 and 239). This ideological act serves as a challenge to the "rationalizing arc of modernity [and its] sense of loss as the old 'nature-centered' world of myth and magic gave way to the new

‘human-centered’ world of efficiency and control,” as described by Max Weber (Suddaby et al. 2017, 286). The battle between the major macro-breweries and the craft microbreweries is cast as a “David versus Goliath story,” wherein “[b]rewers are expected to remain small, brew every batch by hand (literally), share their struggles and successes with sympathetic consumers and colleagues, and raise a fist at those damn big breweries that are out to get them” (Alström and Alström 2014).

As discussed by Suddaby et al. (2017), craft movements in many industries reject “an elitist discourse that privileges progress over primitivism, science over myth and secularism over religion” (287). Rejecting this discourse is a popular source of identity in craft beer production, marketing, and consumption, as is evidenced by the rapid success of craft breweries during the past decade (290), highlighting that the evocation of escapist fantasy into a nostalgia for the past is indeed alluring to many. This fantasy is not, however, without its dangers: concomitant with a “return to craft” come other facets of identity construction, including “populism, tribalism, fundamentalist religion and spirituality, [and a] scepticism of science” (287). In Suddaby et al.’s analysis, such seemingly disparate events as the Iranian revolution and craft beer are connected through a shared rejection of modernity. A skepticism toward science may be linked to the increasing popularity of “traditional” methods of brewing (lambics, sours, gruit ales, and farmhouse beers). The rejection of scientific approaches may appear to broaden the range of beer styles, but it also drives the anti-vaccination and anti-climate change movements of both the left and the right (290). The nostalgic appropriation of medieval images by craft beer producers and consumers is a phenomenon explored in this volume by both John A. Geck and Noëlle Phillips. However, while these appropriations are often playful and ironic, they can also be far more perilous. For example, pastoral, romantic views of an agrarian past often align a “medievalized environmentality” with imagined white histories, a perspective that set the foundation for twentieth-century white nationalist groups such as Identity Evropa to use ecofascism as a recruitment tool (Kao 2020, 376).

Despite some of these pitfalls, medievalism offers an imaginative space in which craft beer branding and identities can flourish. As discussed by Umberto Eco (1986), this is nothing new: “[i]mmediately after the official ending of the Middle Ages, Europe was ravaged by a pervasive medieval nostalgia” (66), marked today by “a curious oscillation” between imaginative and historical senses of the Middle Ages (63). In the more fantastic dreams of the Middle Ages, whether as a “site of ironical

revisitation,” “a barbaric age,” “the Middle Ages of Romanticism,” “national identities,” or “Tradition” (Eco 1986, 69–71), all modern pre-conceptions of the premodern past can appear. Drinking craft beer enables consumers to engage in “experiential medievalism” (Pugh and Weisl 2013, 122) or “participatory medievalism” (Kline 2016, 75). These medievalisms produce “a spectrum of active, embodied encounter] that carries participants into created medieval worlds with differing degrees of immersion, yielding the sense of participating in, and even inhabiting, a neomedieval fictional world” (Kline 2016, 76). Within this spectrum, consumption of medieval-themed beers is an experiential medievalism that allows drinkers to temporarily inhabit or relive an imagined medieval space (Pugh and Weisl 2013, 122). Taking the craft beer revolution and its concurrent medievalisms at face value runs the risk of erasing the importance of how we have modernized the medieval to create such experiences. As Elliott notes, the re-enchantment of the world through modern craft beers is as much a figment as the dreamt-of Middle Ages used in their marketing: “the production of craft beer is thoroughly rationalized and involves a surprising amount of technical expertise and scientific standardization that have become hallmarks of the industry,” a process which echoes the broader “rationalization of society” (Elliott 2017, 60 and 75–6). This process has been under way since the Middle Ages, either through the initial efforts of systematized brewing in monastic settings, or in the gradual transition of domestic brewing and beer-selling by women to a more industrial process controlled by men.⁸ We are enchanted by beer’s magic, its veiled histories, but our own modern, rationalized recreation of this premodern drink must ultimately disenchant it (if we want the quality and standard of beer to survive in a capitalist marketplace).

Beer Builds Communities and Dismantles Communities

Beer creates community. The alehouse, like the tavern and the inn, provided a place to gather in medieval England. We need only imagine the most famous tavern in medieval English literature, the Tabard Inn of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, and the motley group of thirty pilgrims who gathered there, to see the power of spaces where alcohol is served to create unlikely groupings and cement social alliances. For their simultaneous

⁸This process is discussed in this volume by Rosemary O’Neill in her chapter.

ability to bring people together and foment social disruption, such spaces were often attacked in homiletic literature as “the devil’s churches” (Martin 2001, 62).

This last image reminds us of the potent ways drinking creates community: through communion, the shared ingestion of food and beverage of symbolic resonance. Mervyn James has influentially explored the relationship between the medieval cycle drama, the Corpus Christi holiday to which the performances were linked, and the Eucharistic miracle which the holiday celebrates. As Christ’s body becomes incorporated into the bodies of his followers who ingest the Eucharist, dissolving the boundaries between individual bodies and replacing them with a shared communal body created through faith, so the secular rituals of the cycle drama dissolve and re-create community, enacting the social body anew (James 1983).

Ingestion provides a powerful metaphor for inclusion and belonging, and social cohesion emerges through shared consumption. For this reason, scholars have often turned to anthropologists to explain the significance of eating and drinking in medieval texts. In his recent study of the Chester cycle, Matthew Sergi (2011) looks to Anna Meigs, an ethnographer of Papua New Guinea, who helpfully reminds us that “food and eating (and the rules associated with both) are understood as means that unite apparently separate and diverse objects and organisms, both physiologically and mystically, in a single life.” She details this process: “Food has a distinctive feature, one that sets it off from the rest of material culture: it is ingested, it is eaten, it goes inside. In a small-scale society, moreover, it is and is understood to be the product of the labor of known individuals, the output of their blood, their sweat, their tears.” As a result, “food is a particularly apt vehicle for symbolizing and expressing ideas about the relationship of self and other” (qtd. in Sergi 2011, 108). Beer, a nourishing beverage and a local product of local labor, quite literally rebuilds and renews community. It is the stuff communities are made of.

But beer, of course, can also damage and destroy communities. Alcohol use can lead to addiction and bodily degradation; it contributes to accidents and violence. As we saw above, it is after drinking a gallon and a gill of ale that Glutton drags his farting, vomiting body home and sleeps through the end of Sunday in *Piers Plowman* B.V. Drinking in Langland’s account is a highway to hell, leading quite literally to other sins. Crime and criminals were associated with sites of drinking from an early point in medieval England; “the men and women who congregated in breweries, ale houses, taverns and inns were held in general suspicion as potentially

disorderly” (Hanawalt 1998, 105; Clark 1983, 30). This is with good reason: “Court cases leave little doubt about taverns and inns encouraging concentrations of disorderly behavior, which took the form of noisy pranks, brawling, homicide, prostitution, rape, and insurrection” (Hanawalt 1998, 111). Anna Martin, surveying the scholarship of alcohol and crime in medieval and early modern Europe, found that while alcohol seems to have been less of a factor in violent crime than in modern societies – where it contributes to more than 50 percent of homicides and assaults – it nonetheless factored into some assaults in all times and locations studied and up to 20 percent of violent crimes in some contexts, a number that she thinks is perhaps understated given the ubiquity of alcohol consumption (Martin 2001, 111). The sociability of the tavern could quickly turn to violence (112). Included in this violence is sexual violence; as Carissa Harris has previously argued, the alcohol-facilitated rape of two women in the *Reeve’s Tale* reflects an intertwining of alcohol and sexual violence that continues into the twenty-first century. When the two clerks use “strong ale” as an excuse to rape Malyne and her mother, they enact what she calls “felawe masculinity” – a culture of competitive masculinity built on excessive consumption of alcohol and sexual assault, with echoes into the present day (2018, 56). During the 2018 confirmation hearing for US Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, he repeatedly emphasized – often defensively and aggressively – his love of drinking beer, a love that the average American man doubtless understood. However, what was at stake was the link between Kavanaugh’s “one of the guys” drinking habits and the sexual assault of Christine Blasey Ford.

In this volume, Anna Czarnowus’ chapter explores the hold that this dark side of drinking has on the modern perception of the Middle Ages as a time of drunken disorder and pervasive violence. There is certainly truth to this, but it is a truth that echoes in modern societies as well: alcohol had destructive potential in the Middle Ages just as it does now. Despite the cheeriness associated with ale-drinking in medieval literature, there are some poems and tales that tell a darker story. In “Lament of a Hen-Pecked Husband,” (IMEV 210) the speaker sorrowfully describes having to follow his wife to the alehouse and watch her drink (with the implication that she cannot stop herself). In BL Sloane MS 2593, one of the drinking songs focuses on the negative outcomes of ale, citing it as a reason for injuries, hangovers, and, in the last line, death: “ale mak many a mane to hang upon þe galows” (qtd in Palti 2008, 193). A post-medieval (1619) royal proclamation condemned tavern-owners for using wine barrels to

age beer in a way that made it stronger and higher in alcohol, thus “enticing...Our people to drunkennesse, and immoderate drinking, to the greate waste and consumption of corne and graine” (and this same practice also took barrels away from their prescribed use by the navy) (STC 8621). Drunkenness and economic imbalances (the overuse of corn and grain, the conflict with the navy’s resources) are both presented here as disruptive consequences of ale-drinking, so disruptive that the King became involved. Both then and now, the disruptive qualities of overindulgence and inebriation can indeed damage communities, just as much as the conviviality of modern beer consumption can build them up.

Beer Includes and Excludes

Beer was associated with a universalizing populism in the Middle Ages (an association upon which Chaucer’s Pardoner tries to capitalize, as Randy Schiff argues in this volume), and that association persists today. US Presidential candidates win elections, pundits tell us, because they pass the beer test – “Who would you rather get a beer with?” (Mouunk 2020). Beer is the symbolic beverage of comity and inclusion, as when President Obama held a “Beer Summit” to tackle the issue of racist practices in policing. Barack Obama had Bud Lite, Joe Biden a non-alcoholic Buckler, Henry Louis Gates went for Samuel Adams Lite, and Sgt James Crowley chose Blue Moon (Tapper et al. 2009). Their choices reflected the country’s beer-drinking spectrum in general, with one man choosing a corporate beer, one choosing a non-alcoholic beer, one choosing a craft beer, and one choosing a popular “faux craft” beer branded as craft but actually produced by MillerCoors (now Molson Coors). Obama’s Beer Summit covered most of the population’s beer-drinking options. Beer is thus the everyman’s beverage; sharing a beer with someone is a symbol of trust, inclusion, and belonging.

Yet beer also excludes; in reality, it has not unanimously been viewed as universal. Beer’s universalizing reach does not extend to those who eschew alcohol for health or religious reasons; any gathering centered on beer implicitly excludes Muslims, for example.⁹ For American temperance movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries beer became an

⁹See John A. Geck’s discussion in his chapter of the crusader imagery in the marketing of Microbrasserie Kruhhnen, or the label of Mill St Brewery’s Minimus Dubbel.