

# The Middle Ages of reason

## Terry Jones

It was the medieval world that dragged us into the future, not the reactionary Renaissance

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**T**he main reason I wanted to make Medieval Lives was to get my own back on the Renaissance. It's not that the Renaissance has ever done me any harm personally, you understand. It's just that I'm sick of the way people's eyes light up when they start talking about the Renaissance. I'm sick of the way art critics tend to say: 'Aaaah! The Renaissance!' with that deeply self-satisfied air of someone who is at last getting down to the Real Thing. And I'm sick to death of that ridiculous assumption that that before the Renaissance human beings had no sense of individuality.

To mark the start of the new millennium, the New York Times ran a leader that stated: 'A thousand years ago, when the earth was reassuringly flat and the universe revolved around it, the ordinary person had no last name, let alone any claim to individualism... Then came the Renaissance explosion of scientific discovery and humanist insight and, as both cause and effect, the rise of individual self-consciousness... the beginning of our modern era.'

Is that really what they believe in New York? Do they really think that having a surname gives a person more identity than a Christian name? Isn't it rather the reverse?

And do New Yorkers really, truly believe that before the wonderful Renaissance nobody had any sense of being an individual? Have they read the General Prologue to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales? Have they read any of Boccaccio or Dante? And I name these three as specifically medieval not Renaissance.

The Renaissance was a backward-looking movement that hailed the distant past - ancient Greece and ancient Rome - as the only source of enlightenment. Petrarch, a Renaissance writer, wanted to put the clock back and to return to writing in Latin. And not just the Latin that was then current. He wanted to return to classical Latin. The Latin that was then current and still being spoken in the churches and monasteries was condemned as deficient. Rather than reviving Latin, the Renaissance killed it stone dead as a spoken language.

Chaucer, Boccaccio and Dante (although writing at the same time as Petrarch) wrote in the vernacular. They also celebrated the vitality, exuberance and individuality of ordinary men and women. They were the modernists and in that way they were truly medieval. Petrarch was the backwards-looking conservative. The proud despiser of the common people. The willing servant of a tyrant such as Bernabo Visconti. Petrarch provides a prototype for the Renaissance and for much of what follows.

In order to sell their package of conservative intellectual authoritarianism, the writers of the Renaissance had to make out that the intervening centuries were a time of darkness and ignorance into which they would now shine the light of ancient knowledge.

The distortions, obfuscations and downright lies which they and admirers of the Renaissance ever since have fastened onto the Middle Ages still infect our historical vision. The very fact that we call that period (whatever it is) 'the Middle Ages' is but one example. The idea that it is a limbo between the bright lights of the classical World and the even brighter lights of the Renaissance is enshrined there in the very title.

But the medieval world wasn't a time of stagnation or ignorance. A lot of what we assume to be medieval ignorance is, in fact, our own ignorance about the medieval world.

Take for example the idea that the people of the Middle Ages thought the earth was flat. It simply isn't true. And yet the New York Times takes it as gospel and, indeed, some get quite cross when you try to tell them that people in the Middle Ages were quite aware that the world was round.

The idea that they thought it was flat was invented by an American journalist by the name of Washington Irving. In 1828, he wrote a biography of Columbus in which he described the great man confronting the Church leaders who accused him of heresy for claiming the earth was round when the Church taught that it was flat.

The meeting never happened and the Church never taught that the earth was flat. Irving simply made it all up. And yet it's stuck. It's just one of the many, many misconceptions about the medieval world that we don't seem able to shake off.

Medieval Lives has been my chance to put a little bit of the record straight, as far as I can.

Why do I feel so exercised about what we think of the people of the Middle Ages? Why should I care about any injustice done to them? I guess it's because so many of their voices are ringing vibrantly in my ears - Chaucer's, Boccaccio's, Henry Knighton's, Thomas Walsingham's, Froissart's, Jean Creton's... writers and contemporary historians of the period who seem to me just as individual, just as alive as we are today.

We need to get to know these folk better in order to know who we are ourselves.

· An eight-part series, Medieval Lives, written and presented by Terry Jones begins tomorrow on BBC2 with a look at 'The Peasant'. A book accompanying the series is published by BBC Books at £18.99

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