

England and France, the authors say, was “essentially the creation” of Charles Homer Haskins (1870–1937), a Wilsonian progressive and “the first true professional medieval historian” in America. In *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1927), he challenged the assumption that modern Western civilization began in the Renaissance, pushing its origins back, as his title indicates, to the 12th century. Haskins’s protégé, Joseph Reese Strayer, equally dedicated to investigating “the medieval origins of the modern state,” maintained in a famous 1956 article, that French king Philip the Fair (1268–1314) was not a tyrant but a “constitutional” monarch.

Today’s medieval historians, such as Caroline Walker Bynum, the author of *Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (1995), came of age during the 1960s and ’70s, note Freedman and Spiegel, and bring to their work the era’s “profound suspicion of order, hierarchy, authority, and patriarchy.” They are

interested in showing how gender differences were historically produced, and in rescuing the marginal and excluded. They treat documents as “texts” rather than “sources,” and regard history as a recovery of past images rather than the truth of the past.

These new medievalists have “demonized” the Middle Ages, observe the authors. Some have highlighted its “grotesque” aspects, making the period seem almost incomprehensibly strange. Bynum, for instance, the authors note, examines medieval women who, in the name of spir-

itual transcendence, “drank pus seeping from wounds, fasted to the point of starvation, and submitted to horrifying acts of self-deprivation.” At its best, write Freedman and Spiegel, this sort of postmodernist approach offers “a more intriguing, more colorful, and less familiar Middle Ages, in which the state is more predatory, piety is more intense, and mentalities more foreign” than previously portrayed.

Other new medievalists, such as R. I. Moore, the author of *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250* (1987), have made the Middle Ages “darkly familiar, the analogue of a negatively construed modern West,” say Freedman and Spiegel. Instead of being “the center of a modern, rational progressive movement,” the 13th century has been transformed at their hands into “a Foucauldian Panopticon of discipline and colonization.” The focus is on heretical groups and



Torturing a heretic during the Inquisition: was it all in a medieval day’s work?

such once-marginalized subjects as incest, masochism, rape, and transvestism.

Indeed, by some accounts, report the authors, “the most popular topics in medieval cultural studies in America at the moment . . . are death, pus, contagion, defilement, blood, abjection, disgust and humiliation, castration, pain, and autopsy.” The goal of the postmodernist medievalists, conclude Freedman and Spiegel, “is not so much an expansion, enrichment, or even complication of our understanding of medieval culture but rather its ‘undoing.’”

Testing America

“Is America an Experiment?” by Wilfred M. McClay, in *The Public Interest* (Fall 1998), 1112 16th St. N.W., Ste. 530, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Extreme multiculturalists, rejecting the very idea of a common American culture, often proclaim that this country has no fixed

beliefs or standards, but rather is a continuing “experiment.” Their view reflects a misunderstanding of both America and experi-

mentation, contends McClay, a Tulane University historian.

Experiment “is always related to some specific end, some well-defined goal, some truth, hypothesis, pattern, or principle to be confirmed or disconfirmed,” he says, and effective scientific experimentation “always seeks to identify, understand, and harness the laws of nature, not transform or obliterate those laws.” And in that sense, McClay observes, America at the outset was indeed an experiment. As Alexander Hamilton wrote in *The Federalist*, it “seemed to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.”

By 1838, when Abraham Lincoln gave his celebrated address to the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, McClay argues, the results of the original American experiment were in. The government, Lincoln said, had been “felt by all to be an undecided experiment; now it is understood to be a successful one,” having conclusively proved “the capability of a people to govern themselves.” Twenty-five years later, at

Gettysburg, he famously observed that the Civil War was “testing” whether the result of this successful experiment “can long endure.”

Change is a constant, of course, and Americans have striven to have their nation live up more faithfully to its professed ideals, particularly with regard to the treatment of black Americans, McClay notes. “But the question is whether everything is therefore to be open to transformation. . . . It is one thing to argue that the experiment needs to be conducted more faithfully and quite another to say that it needs to be redefined or junked altogether.” Indeed, he writes, love of country “is incompatible with the idea of America as an open-ended social experiment, an entity yet to be achieved, in which all options are open, all traditions subject to dissolution, and all claims revocable.” In that case, only “the narcissistic self” finally matters.

The experiment of America is meaningless, McClay writes, “unless it is undertaken for the sake . . . of those convictions, beliefs, and fundamental commitments embodied in the term ‘ordered liberty.’” The great challenge—the great *experiment*—today, he concludes, is to recover the “framework of meaning” in Western civilization that allowed those cherished ideals to flourish.

Compassion Rationed

“Relatively Disabled” by F. D. Reeve, in *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Summer 1998), Univ. of Michigan, Rm. 3032, Rackham Bldg., 915 E. Washington St., Ann Arbor, Mich. 48109–1070.

Ever since his son was thrown from a horse and left paralyzed from the neck down in the spring of 1995, poet and essayist Reeve has learned how not only the disabled themselves but their relatives and close friends must struggle against a loss of personal identity.

Within days of the accident, not only neighbors but casual acquaintances and even total strangers began approaching the author to inquire about his son Christopher’s health. Though they were often sincerely sympathetic, Reeve says, it soon became apparent that they did not want to know about the reality of his son’s “personal, day-after-day suffering—how precarious his life was, how his health fluctuated, how close he came to death in the hospital and has come afterward as well.” Instead, Reeve says, they wanted the TV version of the plight of the actor who played Superman. “They wanted to hear about his

televised role as sufferer—his fight against unconquerable odds—and I, important to them only as ‘Superman’s Father,’ was expected to assure them that the fight was still going on.”

The actor’s fans do not realize, Reeve says, “how they’re discriminating against—that is, denying individual identity to—an individual father and son struggling to maintain a difficult relationship in the face of differing values and overwhelming physical problems. In Christopher’s case, the role of ‘handicapped Superman’ has taken the place of reality. If I refuse to be de-individualized, or if I insist on mentioning the misery and hardship that my son feels daily—he who can never be alone, who must be wakened and turned every couple of hours during the night—I become a nay-sayer to the image of which he has become custodian.”