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King Alfred and the Opening of the Medieval Mind: A Cautionary Tale

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Abstract

The public humanities have shaped ideas about sex, race, and gender. This is a cautionary tale that points to the repeated problems of the model of public humanities as academics or elites dispensing knowledge to a public audience. King Alfred of England ordered a set of texts “most needful for all men to know” translated into English. Long celebrated in English history as an example of public education, these translations also put forward certain ideas about race and sexuality for the emerging English public, a reminder of the ideological function of the public humanities. Likewise, modern scholars worried about medieval and classical texts that depict homosexuality becoming available to the public, so they refused to translate them or altered them. As a counter to such models, I consider the seventh-century Archbishop Theodore, a Syrian-born ecclesiast who ran the English church and who provides a model of a collaborative public humanities in which lay people shape knowledge and law together. Their model of public humanities encourages us to explore the historical Black public and their contributions to medieval studies that academic medieval studies have ignored.

Keywords: homophobia; King Alfred; medieval studies; public humanities; racism

“The danger of the public humanities is their continuity with the past.”
– Mary L. Mullen¹

In the 800s, King Alfred of England ordered a set of texts “*niedbeðearfosta sien eallum monnum to wiotonne*” [most needful for all men to know] translated into English.² Long celebrated in English history as an example of public education, these translations also put forward certain ideas about race and sexuality for the emerging English public, a reminder of the ideological function of the public humanities.³

¹ Mullen 2014, 186.

² Fulk 2021, 8; translation mine.

³ Alfred’s program, of course, took place prior to the invention of the humanities as a concept, but it nonetheless illustrates the potential pitfalls of certain modern models of public humanities.

What texts did Alfred translate? Theology mostly: Pope Gregory the Great's book on pastoral care, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, and Augustine of Hippo's *Soliloquies*. He also likely had Paulus Orosius's famous history of the world translated.

Most of these translations were loose at best, since Alfred had the texts changed to reflect the values he wanted to espouse.⁴ He formed the first literary canon in the English language, and his canon conveyed the values he wished the English to have.

Alfred saw the English mind as bare of morals and knowledge, fallen from a previous golden age. His desire to Make Wessex Great Again had the same contours as so many other political movements built around a return to a half-imagined utopic past: a heady brew of fervent nationalism, religiosity, and a cult of personality that has held sway over English minds for a millennium.⁵

The story that scholars have told about Alfred largely matches the one he told about himself (or had royal biographers write about him): a man of intellectual as well as martial prowess, a unifier in an age of Viking assaults, a devout Christian who followed his less moral brothers to a shaky throne, and the first great nourisher of education for the English public. Victorian Oxford historian Edward Freeman stated that:

It is perhaps, after all, in his literary aspect, that the distinctive beauty of Ælfred's character shines forth most clearly. [...] he writes, just as he fights and legislates, with a single eye to the good of his people. [...] *Ælfred is the most perfect character in history.*⁶

Donna Beth Ellard has documented the intensely personal identification with Alfred that many white medievalists have admitted.⁷ So fierce is the gravity of Alfred's self-fashioning that many still describe the English people of his era as "Anglo-Saxons," the continental-derived Latinate name he gave them in one of his royal titles.⁸ That Alfred's Englishmen seem not to have called themselves "Anglo-Saxons" does not matter.⁹ Slavish scholarly devotion to Alfred's hagiography requires few facts.

Alfred worship reached its height during the Victorian period, a period that Mary L. Mullen argues formed the model of the public humanities.¹⁰ Mullen contends that most modern public humanities take a Victorian-inspired form of institutionalized academics disseminating knowledge to the masses: "public humanities programs preserve existing hierarchies of cultural authority rather than redefining or redistributing it."¹¹ Much of the humanities functioned as ideological tools used by cultural elites. English literature studies, for instance, emerged in large part as a tool aimed at providing the lower classes with the indoctrination

⁴ Whether Alfred himself did the translations remains a contentious question. See Bately 2009; Godden 2007.

⁵ On Alfred's utopic writings and nationalism, see Karkov 2020; on his nationalism, see Davis 1998; on the afterlives of Alfred in modern English nationalism and racism, see Ellard 2019; Parker 2007.

⁶ Freeman 1867, 54; emphasis mine.

⁷ Ellard 2019, 246–48.

⁸ Malone 1929; Rambaran-Olm and Wade 2022.

⁹ Malone 1929; Rambaran-Olm and Wade 2022.

¹⁰ On Victorian misuse of the medieval past for colonialist propaganda, see, among many studies, Ellard 2019; Leake 2024. See Mullen 2014.

¹¹ Mullen 2014, 184.

that the upper classes believed they needed.¹² The elite expected English literature and the humanities to be crucibles for forging a shared national identity among the lower classes, an identity that would dissuade those lower classes from organizing around labor struggles.¹³

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, humanists have often taken the side of imperialism and empire. In the 2010s, several scholars used critical theory to humanize U.S. drone warfare, with one article arguing that drones “queer the experience of killing in war” and that “[d]rones are ‘genderqueer bodies.’”¹⁴ In late 2023, a CIA analyst published a paper arguing that “National security needs a humanities comeback.”¹⁵ Many have uplifted empire and imperialism in their scholarship, as Edward Said so cogently showed, but a few others involved themselves more actively in the business of empire.¹⁶ Princeton medieval historian Joseph Strayer served on a small group of elite CIA consultants in the 1950s whose involvement in CIA operations in the global south is still not fully known.¹⁷

The humanities’ frequent involvement in imperialism has long been demonstrated. But what of the public humanities? Here too, I think, history undercuts the assumption that the public humanities are a universally promising idea. A long historical perspective shows us the role that the public humanities have played in shaping ideas about sex, race, and gender. This is a cautionary tale that points to the repeated problems of the model of public humanities as academics or elites dispensing knowledge to a public audience.

1. The public humanists

Public humanities often take the form that Daniel Fisher calls “outreach” projects: “the sharing of university-created knowledge with communities.”¹⁸ Many major public humanities programs emphasize this model of scholars trying to address larger audiences via blogs, op-eds, podcasts, and so on. Public humanities programs’ websites often explicitly mention training in podcasting, for instance, with the slogan of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County public humanities program a podcast microphone.

The issue with defining the public humanities often revolves around defining the “public” and its role in those humanities. Matthew Wickman surveyed over 60 humanities center directors and discovered that they could not agree on what counted as public humanities, with debates about whether academic articles are public humanities and a large contingent of academics arguing that teaching students is public humanities.¹⁹ Indeed, public humanities programs at universities predominantly put on events and teach courses *about* the public humanities rather than doing public scholarship. The public often feels absent in public humanities, a problem with long historical roots.

This article interrogates the historical role of the public in past humanities outreach programs. In it, I argue that the common model of the scholar imparting information to the public – telling them the facts “most needful to know” – repeats the same traditional

¹² Gossman 1982.

¹³ Eagleton 1983, 17–53.

¹⁴ First quote originally in all caps. Daggett 2015, 361–62.

¹⁵ Gilmour 2023, 25.

¹⁶ Said 1993; 2003.

¹⁷ Holsinger 2010.

¹⁸ Fisher 2024.

¹⁹ Wickman 2016, 9–10.

hierarchical form of public education preferred by the powerful in Europe for more than a millennium. This model has manipulated figures like Alfred to suit the demands of white supremacy. The time has come for public humanities, if it seeks to be better, to embrace other models, ones in which the public is as involved in shaping the humanities as the academy. Perhaps more involved. One such model might be the one that Alfred himself likely sought to recreate: the time of Archbishop Theodore and Abbot Hadrian, who shaped early English theology in response to the needs and questions of lay women and men. The academy has shied away from such models due to racism and elitism. Tracing how the Black public has responded to King Alfred shows how much the academy has deprived itself of different perspectives.

Yet the history of the public humanities is littered with scholars deliberately terraforming history to match their ideologies and to shape public opinion, so the model of scholarly outreach can be laden with danger. English imperialism force-fed King Alfred's story to global southerners for over a century as part of imperialist education. Edward Said recalled school days in 1940s Cairo heavy with medieval English history:

Our lessons and books were mystifyingly English: we read about meadows, castles, and Kings John, Alfred, and Canute with the reverence that our teachers kept reminding us they deserved. Their world made little sense to me, except that I admired their creation of the language they used, which I, a little Arab boy, was learning something about.²⁰

English imperial education remains perhaps the most widespread public humanities initiative in recent history, yet rarely appears in scholarly discussion about the public humanities (one exception is Mullen 2016).²¹ The *Palgrave Handbook of Digital and Public Humanities*, for instance, contains almost no reference to imperialism other than an article that argues that characterizing Israel as an imperial project is anti-Semitic.²² Meanwhile, public humanists in the pages of *The Public Value of the Humanities* argue for the importance of British literature to the public, claiming British literature “is exceptional in that its literary culture has been extremely sophisticated for over a thousand years” and argue that “[w]e might begin to take as much pride in this literary heritage as the Germans do in Goethe or the Bengalis of West Bengal in Tagore.”²³ The field of public humanities needs to further consider the role of colonial education, racism, and ideology in its own shape and goals. Scholars reflecting on the public humanities should investigate the more troubling underpinnings of their field.

Let me illustrate the ideological function of public humanities with an examination of how medievalists have sought to shape public opinion on homosexuality. Many scholars worried about medieval and classical texts that depict homosexuality becoming available to the public, so they refused to translate them or altered them.²⁴ In 1859, the Reverend J. Baron argued an early English confessor's manual's subject matter (including explicit discussions of homosexual acts) rendered “it unfit for general reading” and that it should not be translated for the public.²⁵ Scholars did not care that most of these texts condemned homosexuality; all that mattered was that they mentioned it at all. Church scholar Henry

²⁰ Said 2000, 39.

²¹ Mullen 2014.

²² Paci 2022, 489.

²³ Hampson 2011, 68, 72.

²⁴ Reeser 2016; Wade 2022.

²⁵ Baron 1859, 32.

Daniel-Rops wrote that “[n]o decent person could undertake a translation” of Peter Damian’s eleventh-century screed *against* homosexuality.²⁶

Indeed, as Ellard and I have pointed out, medievalists have stringently policed the legacy of King Alfred himself.²⁷ Many medievalists sought to explain away the story in Asser’s *Vita Alfredi* that God sent Alfred hemorrhoids to stop Alfred’s sexual desires. I’ve noted a barrage of articles that started at the height of the AIDS crisis and insisted Alfred was not a “passive homosexual” (something no one had claimed).²⁸ This is the context that made books like John Boswell’s *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* such bombshells when they came out in the 1980s.²⁹ The scholarly backlash to Boswell’s claims about medieval homosexuality continues today, suggesting how much medievalist scholarly norms legislate against discussions of medieval queerness.³⁰

Twentieth-century scholars writing for the public often ignored homosexuality, described it as dangerous, or associated it with the Islamic world.³¹ Norman Cantor, one of the most famous medievalists writing for the public, claimed in his popular textbook that Roman civilization “was vitiated by homosexuality[,]” called homosexuality “a fundamental debilitating factor in any civilization where it is extensively practiced[,]” and noted that “the medieval Arabic [civilization], where homosexuality was also widespread, similarly underwent a sudden malaise and breakdown.”³² Cantor’s posthumous 2005 biography of Alexander the Great claimed that homosexuality was common among the ancient Greeks in part because “[t]here was no AIDS in those days.”³³ Medievalists writing for the public have long wished to mold public opinion. Recent public histories of the European Middle Ages have almost entirely passed over sexual and gender minorities, save when discussing homophobia. Matthew Gabriele and David M. Perry’s *The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe*, for instance, repeats the old histories’ tendency to ignore homosexuality, with only a passing mention of Guinevere “questioning Lanval’s sexuality.”³⁴ Likewise, Marc Morris’ incredibly popular recent book *The Anglo-Saxons* makes no references to homosexuality at all.³⁵

A particularly illustrative example of scholarly revision is how scholars frequently mis-translate public-facing translations of the Old English *Maxims I*, which praises warriors who sleep together:

*Earm biþ se þe sceal ana lifgan,
wineleas wunian hafaþ him wyrd geteod;
betre him wære þæt he broþor ahte, begen hi anes monnes,
eorles eaforan wæran, gif hi sceoldan efor onginnan
oþþe begen beran; biþ þæt sliþhende deor.
A scyle þa rincas gerædan lædan
ond him ætsomme swefan.*

²⁶ Daniel-Rops 1959, 712.

²⁷ Ellard 2019; Wade 2022.

²⁸ Wade 2022; quote is Craig 1991, 303.

²⁹ Boswell 1980.

³⁰ On this, see Keufler 2006.

³¹ Wade 2022.

³² Cantor 1963, 31.

³³ Cantor 2005, 47.

³⁴ Gabriele and Perry 2021, 166.

³⁵ Morris 2021.

[Wretched is he who must live alone.
 Fate has ordained that he must dwell friendless;
 It would be better for him if he had a brother: both of them sons
 of an earl, if they should struggle against a boar,
 or a bear (that is a strong-holding beast).
 These warriors must always bear arms and sleep together.³⁶

Scholars could easily lean on the word “*broþor*” to argue that these two men are brothers, but even brothers sharing a bed is too homoerotic for many translators. The Everyman edition of *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* omits this passage from its translation of *Maxims I*.³⁷ Another translation alters it so that the lines describe a “kinsman *standing* bravely beside you/with a well-made spear.”³⁸ Other translations turn a pair of men into a military troop, stating that “The warriors should [...] all sleep in a body,” or that they sleep “in a troop,” or “among their squadron,” all translations emphasizing manly martial bravery.³⁹ Most of these translations are from public-facing editions of the poems. These alterations change the public’s perception of early medieval culture, steering them toward traditional readings of the medieval English past as heterosexual.

Indeed, the “*broþor*” does not necessarily mean biological sibling, given how often it has been common for soldiers to consider each other brothers.⁴⁰ Furthermore, “brother” was a term for a lover or husband in many parts of the Middle Ages. Boswell’s pioneering work on brother-making ceremonies in the early Middle Ages argued that these were, in fact, same-sex marriage ceremonies, a suggestion that many medievalists pilloried for decades.⁴¹ Recently, Roland Betancourt has unearthed writings by Patriarch Athanasius I of Constantinople that described a brother-making ceremony as an act that “brings about coitus and depravity.”⁴² Boswell, seemingly, was right about at least some of these brother-making ceremonies. Indeed, other premodern cultures used brother-making ceremonies as same-sex unions, including seventeenth-century Fujian.⁴³ There exist rich queer possibilities for the “brothers” in *Maxims* that scholars have foreclosed. These scholarly interventions reveal the pitfalls of the “outreach” model of the public humanities deciding, like King Alfred, the books “most needful for men to know” and editing them to match their desired morals.

2. Hadrian and Theodore offer an alternative

As a counter to such models, I want to consider another early English model: the seventh-century Archbishop Theodore and Abbot Hadrian. The pope offered Hadrian, a monk from Africa, the archbishopric of England, but Hadrian declined. He accompanied the pope’s final choice, the Syrian-born ecclesiast Theodore, to England, and they both reformed the English church and taught widely.⁴⁴ Lay people turned to them with ethical and moral questions to which they offered theological solutions. The Venerable Bede claimed “they attracted a

³⁶ Krapp and Dobbie 1936, 162; translation mine.

³⁷ Bradley 1995, 350.

³⁸ Halliday 2011, 189.

³⁹ Shippey 1976, 73; Williamson 2017, 494; Hasenfratz 2014.

⁴⁰ My thanks to a reviewer for this point.

⁴¹ Boswell 1994; Kuefler 2006.

⁴² Betancourt 2020, 123.

⁴³ Ng 1989, 85–86.

⁴⁴ On Theodore and Hadrian, see Rambaran-Olm, 2021.

crowd of students.”⁴⁵ We find records of these decisions in a penitential (the very one that Reverend J. Baron in 1859 thought inappropriate for public consumption). In its preface, the penitential states that numerous people sought out Theodore’s counsel:

Further, not only many men but also women, enkindled by him through these [decisions] with inextinguishable fervors, burning with desire to quench this thirst, made haste in crowds to visit a man undoubtedly of extraordinary knowledge for our age.⁴⁶

These decisions, born out of public questions, became the basis for much church law in the subsequent centuries, suggesting how much the public (and the African monk and Syrian archbishop) influenced church law in the Middle Ages. Theodore’s penitential was the first penitential document to address women’s concerns, causing a large shift in penitentials thereafter (and, quite possibly, in how priests taking confession ministered to women).⁴⁷ It was also the first penitential to compare male–male sex with bestiality, a comparison that influenced many subsequent penitentials, theological texts, and modern homophobic diatribes.⁴⁸ (This fact should suggest to us the limits of Theodore and Hadrian as a model for a progressive public humanities: their work often represented Christian imperialism, laden with damaging prejudices.)

Small moments from Theodore’s penitential illustrate that it owes its shape to Theodore’s interactions with the laity and their questions. One such example is the tale of a woman whose regret over her vows lead her to seek Theodore’s counsel:

14. A woman who vows not to take another husband after her husband’s death and when he is dead, false to her word, takes another and is married a second time, when she is moved by penitence and wishes to fulfill her vow, it is in the power of her husband [to determine] whether she shall fulfill it or not.

15. Therefore, to one woman who after eleven years confessed [such] a vow, Theodore gave permission to cohabit with the man.⁴⁹

This thorny passage reveals that this decision – like many in the document – originated with the questions of a laywoman concerned with her own ethical and moral problems. The passage suggests that ordinary people – including ordinary women – concerned themselves with spiritual questions to a greater extent than we might imagine.⁵⁰

This pivotal English document that shaped church law for centuries came from a partnership between laypeople of all genders asking questions and two non-European scholars answering them. Such a project resembles what Fisher calls “engaged public programming”: “public programming in which the primary objective is not to transfer knowledge but to cultivate an exchange between facilitators and participants concerning matters of shared

⁴⁵ Bede 1969, 333.

⁴⁶ McNeill and Gamer 1990, 183.

⁴⁷ Wade 2018, 6–7.

⁴⁸ Wade 2020.

⁴⁹ McNeill and Gamer 1990, 209.

⁵⁰ Wade 2018.

interest.”⁵¹ This model of a collaborative public humanities in which lay women and men shape knowledge and law together offers us a more shared, more ethical roadmap for the public humanities. Alfred’s public education program – the books most needful for men to know – was his attempt to return England to a previous golden age of education: likely the age of Hadrian and Theodore.

How might public humanities imagine itself as a truly collaborative, public-focused model? We must imagine models for the humanities in which the public determines the questions asked and the topics discussed, which aren’t concerned with academics promoting their current work to a wider audience but instead doing the work that a wider audience asks of them.

3. The public

Hadrian and Theodore’s model would invite a public deeply into academic knowledge creation, but often the public –especially marginalized communities –have been barred from entrance. The public has made a great range of ideological functions of the same figures that (white) public humanists have so often wielded for conservative ideological purposes. Matthew Vernon and Jonathan Hsy have examined how communities of color have made use of the Middle Ages.⁵² Communities of color saw value in King Alfred’s story. In March 1834, the first school for Black students in Cincinnati opened. Its pupils were asked at the end of the year “What do you think *most* about?” and one anonymous sixteen-year-old student’s response pressed Alfred’s traditional story into service for anti-racism:

Look at king Alfred and see what a great man he was. He at one time did not know his a, b, c, but before his death he commanded armies and nations. He was never discouraged but always looked forward and studied the harder. I think if the colored people study like king Alfred they will soon do away the evil of slavery. I cant see how the Americans can call this a land of freedom where so much slavery is.⁵³

The focus, notably, is not on Alfred’s public education program but his personal struggle to learn, a similar priority to a 1992 story in *Ebony* titled “Alfred the Great” about a reluctant student being coaxed into reading by his teacher.⁵⁴ This 1834 student’s response, however, links Alfred’s struggle with reading to the evils of American slavery.

No *white* public intellectual in 1834 proclaimed Alfred’s story as a lesson for the abolishment of slavery. Instead, eight years earlier, *Beowulf* scholar John Josias Conybeare compared the monstrous Grendel to Black and Indigenous people in an aside that assumed Black people were all slaves:

Grendel evidently belongs to the same class of semi-mythological personages as the Polyphemus, and the Cacus and the Πιτυοκαμπτης...of classical antiquity. In later ages, a Highlander, an American Indian, or even a runaway Negro, have assumed, in the eyes of their more civilized neighbours, the same aspect of terror and mystery.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Fisher 2024.

⁵² Hsy 2021; Vernon 2018.

⁵³ Another example that focuses on Alfred’s literacy; Aptheker 1951, 157–58.

⁵⁴ Smith 1992.

⁵⁵ Conybeare 1826, 159.

That one group used the early medieval English to reify racism and chattel slavery and another group used them to argue for slavery's abolition on the other hand illustrates how much the humanities remain value-neutral tools useable for good or ill.

Universities and medievalists have barred certain groups from entry despite their interest; instead, they endlessly positioned these groups as “the public” in need of education. The whiteness of academia is often blamed on disinterest. A common claim among medievalist scholars, for instance, is that the field is predominantly white because students of color are not interested in European medieval studies. Yet significant evidence of students of color engaging in medieval studies can be unearthed from the nineteenth century onward, as Vernon has detailed.⁵⁶ In the Reconstruction Era, surveys showed that a large number of Black students preferred Latin, Greek, and medieval history studies to industrial instruction and learning trades.⁵⁷ A 1926 report on Black education in Texas found 4,064 Black students enrolled in ancient and medieval history classes at the high school level.⁵⁸ Only Algebra, Composition, and Latin were more popular, and twice as many Black students studied premodern history than studied American history.⁵⁹ Libraries also recounted the interest of Black children in medieval literature. Rachel D. Harris, a Black librarian in Louisville, wrote in 1915 about the popularity among Black children of English medieval stories once the librarians had introduced these at story times, writing that the librarians “were successful in finding a large number who read with pleasure the stories of Beowulf, Siegfried, the Cid, Roland, etc.”⁶⁰ Harris’ article includes the following image of the children’s reading room of the Western Branch Library of Louisville (Figure 1).

How many children in the picture were reading medieval adventure stories? The large number of the first Black scholars to receive PhDs in America who studied medieval studies suggests that the Middle Ages remained popular. The first Black woman to get a PhD in the United States, Georgiana Simpson, did her master’s thesis on the medieval German poem *Merigarto*.⁶¹ Anna Julia Cooper, one of the first Black women in the United States to receive a doctorate, could not publish her edition of the medieval poem *Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne* in the States due to gate-keeping from prominent white medievalists in the academy.⁶² Eileen Southern, the first Black woman to receive a PhD in musicology in the United States, wrote a dissertation on the Middle Ages, while Doris Evans McGinty, a Black scholar who was also the first woman from the United States to study musicology at Oxford, wrote her dissertation on “Music in the Middle Ages.”⁶³ Nathaniel Patrick Tillman produced a dissertation on John Lydgate in 1940.⁶⁴ Indeed, Black writers from Marcus Garvey to Martin Luther King have drawn on Alfred the Great in their speeches and writings, while Black scholars like Orlando Patterson and Toni Morrison have discussed *Beowulf*.⁶⁵

⁵⁶ Vernon 2018.

⁵⁷ Eby, 1925, 271–72; Marrs et al., 1926, 16.

⁵⁸ Marrs et al., 1926, 16.

⁵⁹ Marrs et al., 1926, 16; Works 1925, 34.

⁶⁰ Harris 1915, 386.

⁶¹ Simpson 1920; UChicago Library 2024.

⁶² Shilton 2003.

⁶³ Antonucci 2013.

⁶⁴ Tillman 1940.

⁶⁵ Garvey 2006, 7; King 1968, 61; Morrison 2019; Patterson 2018, 47–48.



Figure 1. Children's reading room, from *The Southern Workman*, 1915, p. 387.⁶⁶

Indeed, evidence suggests that the only thing keeping students of color from interest in medieval European literature is the traditional way it has been taught. David Kirkland wrote about the failure of *Beowulf* with Black high school students, a failure he attributed to the traditional way that the instructor taught *Beowulf*.⁶⁷ As Mary Rambaran-Olm has argued, Black professors teaching medieval literature and language like Gordon David Houston “advocated for literature to be read and appreciated in ways that would help students connect with culturally distant materials.”⁶⁸

A larger issue, one related to the problem of the public humanities, is that academic medieval studies shut out scholars of color, particularly Black scholars, and their scholarship has been forgotten or suppressed. Cooper and Simpson, like so many other Black scholars who started in medieval studies, transitioned to academic areas that were less gate-kept and which were likely more personally rewarding. Prominent scholars like Mervyn Coleridge Alleyne started as professors of medieval literature but shifted into scholarship on Black culture, history, and language.⁶⁹ Southern and McGinty both moved into studying Black music in their later careers, and it is this that they are most well-known for. Stuart Hall recounted J. R. R. Tolkien dismissing Hall's more theoretical approaches to medieval literature during Hall's education, potentially depriving medieval studies of one of the twentieth century's greatest scholars.⁷⁰ In order to remain in medieval studies, scholars of

⁶⁶ Harris 1915, 387.

⁶⁷ Kirkland 2011.

⁶⁸ Rambaran-Olm 2020.

⁶⁹ Walicek 2016.

⁷⁰ Hall and Schwarz 2017; Lavezzo 2021; Rambaran-Olm 2021.

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True Christianity will gain by every step which is made in the knowledge of man.—*Spurzheim.*

THE ANGLO-SAXON CIVILIZATION, AS EXEMPLIFIED BY ALFRED THE GREAT.

IN Alfred the Great we have one of the best types of the civilized man, and perhaps the most exalted Christian the middle ages produced. the poor, and shelter the weak; and with all thy might right that which is wrong. And, son, govern thyself by law; then shall the Lord

Figure 2. *The Phrenological Journal*, April 1871, Vol. LIII, no. 4, 257.⁷¹

color often had to lean on whiteness. Belle de Costa Greene, a Medieval Academy of America fellow and Morgan Library librarian, passed as white in medieval studies, enabling her to exist in the field.⁷² Indeed, as Sierra Lomuto argues, “Belle Greene’s prominence as a symbol for diversity also exposes ‘the walls’ of exclusion...that continue to enclose medieval studies.”⁷³

This racist exclusion in medieval studies likely comes as a direct result of the field’s use of medieval European history and literature – particularly that literature lately called “Anglo-Saxon” – for white supremacy.⁷⁴ King Alfred has long held a particularly central role in such racial narratives, as Ellard and others have demonstrated.⁷⁵ Nineteenth-century composer Philip Klitz wrote a King Alfred minstrel show where Alfred played the part of the “Minstrel king” and sang in “the Ethiopian style.”⁷⁶ Alfred’s position in nineteenth and twentieth-century white supremacist texts pulls back the curtain on the role of the humanities in perpetuating race science. In the nineteenth-century *The Phrenological Journal*, one long article focused on King Alfred as a paragon of the “Anglo-Saxon race” and its supposed superiority (Figure 2).⁷⁷

Jacob Abbot’s 1862 book on King Alfred included a lengthy chapter on how Alfred typified the superiority of the white race.⁷⁸ James H. Malone interrupted his massive 1922 book on the Chickasaw to argue that the white people in the American South exemplified the “Anglo-Saxon race[,]” whom Malone insisted are the people of Alfred.⁷⁹ These associations continue today. Daniel Hannan, a British Member of the European Parliament, wrote a book on the “Anglo-Saxon” global legacy of freedom and the common law, which he claimed led to a relative lack of racial strife in Britain’s former colonies.⁸⁰

⁷¹ *The Phrenological Journal* 1871, 257.

⁷² Lomuto 2023.

⁷³ Lomuto 2023, 15.

⁷⁴ On this, see Biddick 1998; Kabir, 2005; Vernon 2018; Ellard 2019; Rambaran-Olm and Wade 2022.

⁷⁵ Ellard 2019.

⁷⁶ Klitz 1850.

⁷⁷ *The Phrenological Journal* 1871.

⁷⁸ Abbot 1862.

⁷⁹ Malone 1922, 389–90.

⁸⁰ Hannan 2013, 280–90.

Writers of color recognized the cultural links between white supremacy and the people of King Alfred. Black writer John Williams' 1967 novel *The Man Who Cried I Am* imagined a plan by the white leaders of the global north – called Alliance Blanc – to exterminate Black people entirely.⁸¹ The plan's name was the King Alfred Plan, and it became a widely held real-life conspiracy theory in Black communities that was investigated by the FBI.⁸² Max Reddick, a Black novelist, uncovers the Plan at the climax of the novel when he receives a letter about it from his friend Harry Ames (a thinly disguised version of Richard Wright). Reddick himself is an Alfred figure, whose life has been spent trying to translate Black experiences to white readers and politicians and whose lifelong struggles with hemorrhoids have eventually become a fatal rectal cancer. After reading the letter, Reddick explicitly ties the Plan to “Anglo-Saxon” white supremacy, thinking to himself,

There were lessons:

The unprotesting, unembattled die.

The enemy today is the believer in Anglo-Saxon updated racial mythology.⁸³

Indeed, as he reads the plan itself, Reddick dazedly wonders why it is called the “King Alfred Plan” and then sees a little explanatory footnote in the government document: “849–899 (?) King of England; directed translation from the Latin of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.”⁸⁴ Williams has portrayed the brutal genocidal racism of the “Anglo-Saxon” racial mythology as linked directly to modern ideas about Alfred's educational and translation efforts. Yet Alliance Blanc's explanation is historically incorrect: Alfred did not order the *Chronicle* translated from Latin but composed in English. There was never a Latin version of the *Chronicle*. The Alliance Blanc's master plan draws on a false medieval history of Alfred's education program to title its genocidal plans.

By contrast, Ames' letter about the Plan employs a different kind of medieval history, telling Reddick that, “where the black man is concerned, the white man will bury differences that have existed between them since the beginning of time, and come together. How goddamn different this would have been if there had been no Charles Martel at Tours in 732!”⁸⁵ Reddick interprets this to mean the possibility that armies of “Moors driving up from Spain” would have entered the rest of Europe and then “how white would Europe be? Or America, for that matter?”⁸⁶ (Williams here foresaw the role Charles Martel would have in the modern white supremacist imagination due to Martel's defeat of a Muslim army at Tours. Since Williams' book came out, numerous white supremacist organizations have taken their names from Martel.)⁸⁷

⁸¹ Williams 2003.

⁸² Emre 2023, xxxiii.

⁸³ Williams 439

⁸⁴ Williams 420

⁸⁵ Williams 251

⁸⁶ Williams 252

⁸⁷ See, for instance, the 1970s and 1980s violent anti-Arab French terrorist Groupe Charles-Martel, the recently banned French terrorist group named the Martel Division, and the currently active American white supremacist Charles Martel Group (Le Monde 2023). The last group has been described as “the heart” of white supremacist organizing in the United States (they planned the Charlottesville Nazi rally) (Reeve 2024, 34–35). The Christchurch shooter in New Zealand had “Charles Martel” engraved on his gun.

Reddick himself dates white supremacy and anti-Blackness back to the European Middle Ages, thinking bitterly of the “goddamn Europeans with their Black Peters and Black Madonna and blackface celebrations[,]” which Reddick describes as “[f]ive hundred years of guilt[,]” thus planting the origins of European racism at the end of the Middle Ages.⁸⁸ Academics only began to discuss these connections of modern and medieval anti-Blackness in the 1990s, but, outside the academy, Black writers were articulating the intertwined nature of the Middle Ages and modern racism decades before those working in the humanities. Maybe the public are the ones whose voices the academy needs to hear.

The Alfredian model of the academic broadcasting their humanities – of selecting, (mis) translating, and disseminating the books they think “most needful for men to know” – imagines that the only possible sources of useful knowledge are the institution and the academic. It also ignores why a divide between academics and the public emerged in the first place: racism, imperialism, slavery, and homophobia. Humanists might turn instead to Hadrian and Theodore, likely Alfred’s own model for education, and their collaborative work with multiple publics. Perhaps such a public humanities might truly take place in the public: outside the university entirely. A public humanities made in, by, and for the public, a public who might prefer discussing Charles Martel’s adversaries rather than Martel or King Alfred.

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⁸⁸ Williams 2023, 13.

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