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Insights

Reinventing Renaissance

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*Engage the Past,
Define the*

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Transforming Medieval and Renaissance Studies

For most of us, Shakespeare's words live squarely in the theater of history. But what if they could also reshape how we think about the present? As the new director of the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS), English professor and trailblazing scholar Ayanna Thompson is pioneering an interdisciplinary program that brings pre-modern research into the 21st century.

Thompson returned to Arizona State University in the fall of 2018. Her extensive academic work explores how medieval and Renaissance texts interact with today's crucial conversations. She says Shakespeare and his contemporaries can provide a roadmap for the issues reshaping our world, like the United Kingdom's 2016 Brexit referendum.

"Older texts endure not only because they are aesthetically beautiful, but also because they offer complex portraits of complex worlds," she said. "[Shakespeare]

could not have imagined Brexit, but he did imagine and represent the complexities involved in forming national identities."

At the center, Thompson envisions a revamped approach where those crossovers find a home. And she isn't just looking to redefine the field itself, but whom it includes.

"I want to foster and publish complex scholarship that is written in an accessible manner," she said. "And I want to diversify the pipeline into medieval and early-modern studies."

Dean of Humanities Jeffrey Cohen says the shift resonates with both students and the New American University's inclusivity mission.

"Professor Thompson's changes are making it clear that studying history does not mean setting aside the issues and problems that occupy us at the moment," he said. "Under her leadership, ACMRS is deepening our understanding of the past in order to forge a better future."



ACMRS will be the place where people want to go to try out their new ideas, to make their work accessible to a nonacademic audience, to grapple with the most complex ideas that are affecting us currently, and to show us why these older materials impact the way we can think about new and better futures.

— **Ayanna Thompson**

ASU Department of English professor and director of the Arizona Center of Medieval and Renaissance Studies



"The Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies was a big part of why I decided to come to ASU. From the Huntington Library fellowship, to Dr. Thompson's efforts to connect faculty, staff and students — the center ensures students receive the support they need for their studies. My involvement in ACMRS is already helping me learn more about the shape of medieval studies and enabling me to do what I love."

— Basil P., PhD student in English (Literature) with a graduate certificate in Medieval Studies

Join the conversation

Since 1981, the center has been an Arizona mainstay exploring medieval and Renaissance texts through public events, lectures and certificate programs. But like similar programs across the country, it appealed to a fairly niche audience. Under Thompson's leadership, that's changing fast.

With an eclectic lineup of guest lecturers, cutting-edge conferences and partnerships with Huntington Library and the Folger Shakespeare Library slated for 2019, the center's radically new direction is redefining how pre-modern research fits into contemporary debate.

This January's "Race before Race" brings the discussion to ASU.

The two-day symposium gathers distinguished medieval and early-modern scholars from around the world for a frank

discussion about how notions of race, ethnicity and identity impact our world today. The first day will close with a public dialogue featuring avant garde director Peter Sellers, joining Thompson for a conversation about how Shakespeare and other classical works speak to contemporary social issues.

But revisiting history isn't just about Shakespeare. The symposium also features an extremely rare copy of "Neptuno alegórico," a 1690 booklet written by Spanish scholar Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, one of history's earliest feminists and a vanguard of Latin American literature. The event marks the first time the manuscript is available for public viewing since ASU Library acquired it in November.

You can see it all firsthand by attending the event Jan. 18 – 19, 2019 at the Carson Ballroom in Old Main.

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clas.asu.edu/symposium

More information

acmrs.org