All of us are familiar with the sinister figure of the medieval executioner: a sadistic, hooded implementer of spectacularly cruel executions and other punishments before a cheering, bloodthirsty crowd of spectators. This image, however—like many of our contemporary ideas about the Middle Ages—is largely the product of nineteenth-century imaginations. In this lecture, the author of an acclaimed study of an actual sixteenth-century German executioner (based largely on a private journal covering his forty-five years of work in the profession), describes how later legal reformers and Gothic novelists methodically constructed a stereotype that served their respective purposes but grossly distorted historical reality in the process. In exploring the resulting gap between the European executioner of the distant past and his nineteenth-century incarnation, we learn much about not only the fears and hopes of those eras but also our own contemporary notions of justice and social progress.

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