

MEDIEVALISM TODAY

The catalyst of modern scholarly medievalism was Alice Chandler's book *A Dream of Order* (1970), a work whose influence continues to grow and which has demonstrably interested many younger scholars in medievalism. The *academic* establishment of medievalism in North America began with a single session at the Tenth International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University in 1976, which has grown into an annual multi-session program at the Congress. The reason for the remarkable neglect up to this time of what is clearly a major tract of modern cultural history lies in the complex relations of the terms *medievalism* and *romanticism*, which I have dealt with in a lengthy study.¹ Other sessions besides our own have since appeared at the Congress every year, and there have been many sessions elsewhere, particularly at meetings of the Modern Language Association.

Since 1976 some entire conferences have been given to medievalism, notably the Eighteenth Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies at the State University of New York at Binghamton in 1984, devoted to "Medievalism in American Culture." The First Annual General Conference on Medievalism, organized by *SIM*, was held at the University of Notre Dame in 1986. Subsequent annual Conferences have been held at universities across the country and in England and Austria. Our forthcoming Conference (August 13-16, 1997) will be in Canterbury, England.

I now think of medievalism as the continuing process of creating the Middle Ages. Nobody, I think, would now disagree with this very simple definition, and it could well be asked why I have not offered it before instead of the more rhetorical definitions which I have given in the pages of *Studies in Medievalism* from time to time. One reason certainly is that twenty years ago, when I set about launching *Studies in Medievalism*, the word process was not in my critical vocabulary and hardly, I think, in anybody else's: we thought in terms of conclusions or consensus.

About Studies in Medievalism

A number of problems postponed the appearance of *Studies in Medievalism* until 1979. At the time when I founded *SIM* the distinction between medieval studies and medievalism was important because of the confusion and scholarly distrust which surrounded the word *medievalism*. At the same time, since our introduction of medievalism as a scholarly topic began and has continued in the context of medieval conferences, it scarcely seemed necessary to emphasize their mutual dependence. I thought that medievalism, exploring the context, the processes of thought and imagination, the biases and prejudices which determined the conclusions of scholars, would enrich our understanding of

medieval studies. This was an early recognition of the importance of what we now call "process."

In 1992, my editorial noted that as a very small journal creating in effect an entirely new field, we were still constrained by what we were offered, and I remarked on the continuing indifference of medieval scholars to medievalism; I except of course the few, such as Otto Gründler, Paul Szarmach, and Norman Cantor, and those contributors who had the vision and imagination to support our activities. I now first dared to challenge the vast edifice of medieval studies, quoting Ernst Curtius to the effect that "the Middle Ages for which I had been searching did not exist". In our 1993 volume (*SIM V*), I noted that medievalism was still a new field in which the basic exploration remained to be done before we could adopt "a real critical and philosophical appreciation." By 1995 (*SIM VII*), however, I felt that "previous volumes have established a framework for the historical consideration of medievalism and we may now turn to different questions. The theory, method, and philosophy of medievalism are long overdue for exploration," and this will indeed be a focus of future publication.

Beginning with Volume IV in 1992, *Studies in Medievalism* has been an annual volume published by Boydell and Brewer; the volumes of *The Year's Work in Medievalism* are now beginning to appear. Two volumes have so far appeared in an occasional series of monographs, texts, and papers, one of them the posthumous first publication of a volume by the pioneer woman scholar Jessie Weston.²

In the Editorial to the first issue of *Studies in Medievalism* (1979) I proposed cautiously that "it is time to begin the interdisciplinary study of medievalism as a comprehensive cultural phenomenon analogous to classicism or romanticism." This view was based in part on the realization, not wholly original, that the "Middle Ages" we inherit was very largely a nineteenth-century invention, based, to be sure, on sixteenth-century humanist propaganda, seventeenth-century antiquarian scholarship, and eighteenth-century fantasy, and that this understanding was dangerously neglected by contemporary scholars. Norman Cantor's *Inventing the Middle Ages* (1991) has since done much to correct this, although it deals only with twentieth-century scholarship.

To have given medievalism a local habitation and a name may seem a modest achievement compared, for example, with the progress of Arthurian studies over the same time period, or the amazing growth of medieval studies themselves, but a respectable achievement if we consider the problems of "networking" a totally new field; a simple lack of resources which has seriously affected our ability to promote medievalism and to make it truly interdisciplinary; and, until recently, the qualified receptivity of the academic world in America to the whole idea of medievalism. Unfortunately, the continuing focus on the art and

literature of the nineteenth century provides a handle for those who prefer even today to dismiss medievalism as a Victorian fantasy. This is one reason why *Studies in Medievalism* has adopted as an epigraph the comprehensive statement of Lord Acton:

Two great principles divide the world, and contend for the mastery, antiquity and the middle ages. These are the two civilizations that have preceded us, the two elements of which ours is composed. All political as well as religious questions reduce themselves practically to this. This is the great dualism that runs through our society.³

No one besides ourselves has approached the study of the Middle Ages in the light of this statement, and we have barely begun.

Since 1976, other centers of medievalism have emerged, all of which fall within but do not extend our own terms of reference. There is first the *Mittelalter-Rezeption* Symposium directed by Professor Ulrich Müller of the University of Salzburg. This, as its name suggests, originates in the Reception theory associated with Hans Robert Jauss, although it has moved in the direction of a broader interpretation similar to our own. There is the Takamiya Seminar at Keio University, which takes an historical approach like ours but has so far limited itself to the nineteenth century, and is training excellent scholars in the field. Meanwhile, in 1994, after we had been publishing and conducting a very active program of conference activity for fifteen years without apparent effect, everybody suddenly discovered medievalism. Conferences sprang up, there were graduate courses, books on medieval historiography to which Norman Cantor had given a lead, and there began to be increasing debate on the future of medieval studies, a natural part of our province in which we have been actively engaged.⁴

In the course of these changes we have progressively abandoned our view of medievalism as a modest ancillary to medieval studies. We now see them as clearly reciprocal, or as I remarked in a recent book review, quoting Yeats, "how do you separate the dancer from the dance?" Critical scholarship in general, having reeled back on the very brink of deconstruction, has supplied among other things an unmistakable emphasis on process: and the natural development of our own work has similarly led us to emphasize the process of creating the Middle Ages, which is medievalism.

The attitude of *Studies in Medievalism* to feminist scholarship is a far easier matter to deal with. There isn't one, except that we would like to be offered more of it.⁵ It follows from our very broad terms of reference that our attitude is pragmatic, eclectic, and I hope objective, and whatever works for the author and for the subject is fine with us.

Distinctions between Medievalism and Medieval Studies

I will now offer a few comments or cautions to those contemplating scholarship on medievalism as distinct from medieval studies. First, and most obviously, you will in effect be addressing two cultures: one, the time of your chosen text, seventeenth or eighteenth century or whatever, and second, the Middle Ages as you see them now. It is thus more than ever necessary then to cultivate the historical imagination. Consider for example Warton or Walpole on medieval poetry, or consider the consequences (very irritating to me at least) of Kenneth Branagh's producing the sixteenth-century play *Much Ado about Nothing* in an apparently eighteenth-century setting with twentieth-century manners and musical comedy costumes.

A great part of the scholarship, particularly the editions of texts, on which we still base much of our own work on the Middle Ages, is nineteenth-century. Now the nineteenth century stands like a pervasive refractive and distorting medium between us and the past. The manners and morals of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* would have been intelligible to Shakespeare, Molière, or Chaucer, or Petronius: those of *La Traviata* I think would not. Nineteenth-century respectability is a fog between us and the whole European past. I emphasize this problem because of course those whose studies have been concentrated on the Middle Ages themselves may well overlook it. So scholars have always to juggle with two patterns of culture besides their own, not to mention of course the differences between several medieval cultures. And of course I need not mention that everything you read, of whatever century, has the biases of a male-oriented society. Finally, there is a problem not particularly related to feminism, but of which as an historian I am particularly conscious, and this is a dangerous emphasis today on literature rather than history as the source of our views about the past.

Medievalism then invites us to explore the circumstances which have produced the scholarship of the Middle Ages from 1500 to the present but particularly in the nineteenth century when this interest becomes a major focus of contemporary concern: and it follows that practically everything in the nineteenth century, a time of profound and sometimes violent social change, falls potentially within our terms of reference. I will refer however to two subjects in particular which claim our attention. One is chivalry. Despite the very considerable literature which has recently grown up around this subject, I am still not sure how much of it is truly medieval and how much is nineteenth century. The other is social justice, by which I mean a complex of matters from industrial legislation to the position of women in law. Both these areas in fact involve the changing position of women in society, and both are matters in which the nineteenth century and the medieval reflect upon each other.

Another subject insufficiently studied is nineteenth-century medieval scholars themselves, who come before us in every posture from dedicated to unusual to eccentric to stark, staring ravers. One thinks for example of Carlyle or Ruskin. It seems to me that feminist scholarship is advancing steadily, and I for one hope only to see more of it. The progress of medievalism has been very different, and much more modest, and I have described what I think we need to do now. For both undertakings, the future is a bright one.⁶

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NOTES

¹Leslie J. Workman, "Medievalism and Romanticism," *Medievalism and Romanticism 1750-1850*, ed. Leslie J. Workman, *Poetica* 39-40 (special issues for 1993): 1-44.

²Jessie L. Weston, *The Romance of Perlesvaus*, ed. Janet Grayson, *Studies in Medievalism Monographs and Texts* 1, 1988.

³Written c. 1859; first published in Herbert Butterfield, *Man On His Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 212.

⁴See the most recent issue of *Arthuriana* for reviews by Richard Utz and by me of *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper*, ed. R. Howard Bloch and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

⁵Articles recently published include Robin Blaetz, "Cecil B. DeMille's *Joan the Woman*" (*SIM* VI, 1994); Kymberly N. Pinder, "The Reception of Toby E. Rosenthal's [painting] *Elaine: Medievalism in San Francisco*" (*SIM* VI, 1994); Karen Hodder, "Elizabeth Barrett and the Middle Ages' Woolful Queens" (*SIM* VII, 1995); Marilyn Lincoln Board, "Modernizing the Grail Quest: Gender, Theology, and Allegory in the Iconography of G. F. Watts" (*SIM* VII, 1995); Suzy Beemer, "Asceticism, Masochism, and Female Autonomy: Catherine of Siena and *The Story of O*" (*SIM* VIII, 1996, forthcoming).

⁶See the final pages of Cantor's *Inventing the Middle Ages*.

SHARED INTERESTS OF *SIM* AND *MFN* (VOLS. 22 AND 23)

Some of the ways our work already parallels *MFN*'s project are suggested in *MFN* No. 22 (Fall 1996), the issue on Gender and Medievalism, which covers topics that *SIM* too has addressed in some form: contemporary fiction about the Middle Ages, modern constructions of medieval women like Joan of Arc, the influence of prominent medievalists like Tolkien, the recuperation of medieval art forms like stained glass. Indeed, if "medievalism" as we define it denotes the whole range of postmedieval engagement with the Middle Ages, then "medieval studies" themselves must be considered a facet of medievalism rather than the other way around. Where can one confidently draw a boundary between the two? To what extent, we might ask, did "medievalism" both instigate and inform the academic study of the Middle Ages in the early decades of the discipline? Ralph Adams Cram, for example, seems to have modulated naturally from the ultra-romanticism of his short-lived periodical *The Knight Errant* to the