Medievalism, Mittelalter-Rezeption, Médiévisme: An Introduction

In recent years, the study of "Medievalism" (a rough German approximation would be "Mittelalter-Rezeption"); a problematic because ambiguous French approximation would be "médiévisme") has been one of the most productive areas in the academic study of the Middle Ages. The English term (spelled "Mediaevalism"), according to the Oxford English Dictionary first used by John Ruskin in 1853 and transmuted into a term of scholarly inquiry by Alice Chandler's monograph, A Dream of Order (1970), and by Leslie J. Workman's Kalamazoo conference sections (since 1971) and his journal, Studies in Medievalism (since 1976), is currently at the center of a variety of discussions about a major paradigm shift in the investigation of medieval culture in postmedieval times. While "hard-core" philologists still tend to favor the traditional scientistic/positivistic (philological?) study of the "real" Middle Ages, other groups, among them the so-called "New Philologists" or "New Medievalists," have proposed a postmodern "homecoming" toward the "joyful mobility" of medieval manuscript culture, a (re)turn of inquiry they intend to achieve with the assistance of "electronic writing". Other postmodern scholars, independent of the "New Philologists," believe that medieval studies is little more than an academic form of medievalism in the first place. In the vast territory left open between these extreme and hotly disputed ideological positions, a motley array of scholars occupies investigative niches which allow them to work on a vast number of critical case studies on how the middle ages have been viewed, (ab)used, written, depicted, invented, desired, and interpreted by critics, artists, politicians, and in popular culture from early modernity through the present.

It is the function of this sub-section of Perspicuitas to accompany the developments in this quickly expanding and exciting field of inquiry. The essays, reviews, and links available here are meant to offer an introduction to existing views and methods in practicing "medievalism". Thus, the editors will solicit bibliographies on related topics, review pertinent publications, and offer electronic access to the proceedings of the annual conference on medievalism, The Year's Work in Medievalism. We encourage scholars to contribute essays, reviews, bibliographies, or short opinion pieces on medievalism. All
submissions will be peer-reviewed and, if accepted, published with Perspicuitas and linked with this subsection. In addition, we will include links to the annual medievalism conferences, Boydell & Brewer's journal, Studies in Medievalism, and other events relevant to those involved in the critical reception of the medieval period in postmedieval times.

[...]

1) For the similarities and differences between the English and German terms see Richard Utz, "Resistance to (The New) Medievalism? Comparative Deliberations on (National) Philology, Mediävalismus, and Mittelalter-Rezeption in Germany and North America," The Future of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Problems, Trends, and Opportunities in Research, ed. Roger Dahood (Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, 2) (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), pp. 151-70. Médiévisme was proposed as the correct French equivalent in the English translation (by Sarah White; foreword by Eugene Vance) of Paul Zumthor's Parler du Moyen Age (1980), Speaking of the Middle Ages (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

2) Alice Chandler, A Dream of Order. The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1970). Leslie Workman (1927-2001) is widely recognized as the founder of the academic subject known as Medievalism. In many of his forewords to Studies in Medievalism and The Year's Work in Medievalism, he defined the subject as "the continuing process of creating the Middle Ages." In 1971 he initiated the formal scholarly investigation of medievalism through sessions at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University. In 1976 he founded the scholarly journal Studies in Medievalism, serving as its editor until 1999. In 1986 he established the International Conference on Medievalism, an annual meeting of scholars which has convened throughout the United States and in England and Austria. He was also the organizer of the four-week Summer Institute on Medievalism at the University of York in 1996 and 1998. In 1998 his achievement received formal recognition by the publication of Medievalism in the Modern World: Essays in Honour of Leslie Workman, edited by Richard Utz and Tom Shippey and published by Brepols.

What is Medievalism?

Instead of attempting to labor over an all-inclusive definition of medievalism which would, in the end, still fall short of declaring clear boundaries for the field, I have chosen to provide the following citations from scholarship on the subject of "Medievalism." They best exemplify the interdisciplinary scope and contested nature of the field. Richard Utz

"[Medievalism is] the study of the Middle Ages, the application of medieval models to contemporary needs, and the inspiration of the Middle Ages in all forms of art and thought."


"[M]edievalism, in origin and for the first hundred years, was an English movement. [...] In the early twentieth century, medievalism was virtually driven off the field by two things: primarily the First World War, which overwhelmingly discredited the whole ethos of 'chivalry' to which ruling classes across Europe had committed themselves; and secondly by Romanticism, a process which I have described in my article, 'Medievalism and Romanticism'.


"There are two ways that medieval studies can be didactically justified as of central and consistent importance in education and culture. First, we can say the medieval heritage is very rich today in a prominent set of ideas and institutions, such as the Catholic Church, the university, Anglo-American law, parliamentary government, romantic love, heroism, just war, the spiritual capacity of little as well as elite people, and the cherishing of classical literatures and languages. That this heritage ought to be consciously identified, cultivated, and refined is commonly asserted. Secondly, we can say less
conventionally that medievalism civilization stands toward our postmodern culture as the conjunctive other, the intriguing shadow, the marginally distinctive double, the secret sharer of our dreams and anxieties. This view means that the Middle Ages are much like our culture of today, but exhibit just enough variations to disturb us and force us to question some of our values and behavior patterns and to propose some alternatives or at least modifications. The difference is relatively small, but all the more provocative for that." – Norman Cantor, Inventing the Middle Ages (New York: Morrow, 1991), p. 47.

"Four distinct models of medieval reception can be determined:
(1) The productive, i.e., creative reception of the Middle Ages: subject matter, works, themes, and even medievalism authors are creatively re-formed into a new work;
(2) The reproductive reception of the Middle Ages: the original form of medieval works is reconstructed in a manner viewed as 'authentic,' as in musical productions or renovations (for example, paintings and monuments).
(3) The academic reception of the Middle Ages: medieval authors, works, events, etc., are investigated and interpreted according to the critical methods that are unique to each respective academic discipline;
(4) The political-ideological reception of the Middle Ages: medieval works, themes, 'ideas' or persons are used and 'reworked' for political purposes in the broadest sense, e.g., for legitimization or for debunking (in this regard, one need only recall the concept 'crusade' and the ideology associated with it)."


"Medieval philology is the mourning for a text, the patient labor of this mourning. It is the quest for an anterior perfection that is always bygone, that unique moment in which the presumed voice of the author was linked to the hand of the first scribe, dictating the authentic, first, and original version, which will disintegrate in the hands of all the numerous, careless individuals copying a literature in the vernacular. [...] Philology is a bourgeois, paternalist, and hygienist system of thought about the family; it cherishes filiation, tracks down adulterers, and is afraid of contamination. It is thought based on what is wrong (the variant being a form of deviant behavior), and it is the basis for a positive methodology.” – Bernard Cerquiglini, In Praise of the Variant, trans. Betsy Wing (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 34 and 49.

"In what ways can the study of the Middle Ages teach us to historicize the field of critical theory? Which is another way of asking: to what extent do our own strategies and desires determine the questions we pose and the answers we give? We cannot escape the obligation to clarify our own agendas. We
can do so only by recognizing the degree to which the inquiring subject stands in a compromising position: on the one hand, involved in an enterprise that, since the Renaissance, has assumed the disinterestedness of knowledge, the objectivity of philological science: on the other, participating as a socially contextualized being in a network of predetermined subjectivities such as sex, social position, or ethnic origin." – R. Howard Bloch and Stephen G. Nichols, "Introduction," Medievalism and the Modernist Temper, ed. R. Howard Bloch and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p.5.

"The belief that the skills of a discipline are neutral methods rather than complex systems of representation encourages the illusion that disciplines, which are skill-centered, are themselves different; the belief also devalues the skills. It has been my aim to show that the skills of traditional medieval scholarship -- the essence of the tradition now confronted by innovation -- are not timeless, transhistorical, and unchanging. Rather, they are the products of the ages in which they were devised and are personal as well as professional ways of speaking; contemporary criticism, likewise, is not only a new collection of critical languages but also a new group of persons speaking languages of their own. The traditional skills of our disciplines, which are the means of maintaining discipline, cannot be dispensed with; nor can the history of the scholarly disciplines that they have shaped be ignored. The skills must be renewed and the history must be deconstructed or 'dismantled' to enable 'a more intimate kind of knowing' in which we find another way of knowing ourselves and our predecessors, and of speaking their languages, as well as our own, in the conversation through which we know the Middle Ages." – Allen J. Frantzen, "Prologue: Documents and Monuments: Difference and Interdisciplinarity in the Study of Medieval Culture," Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies, ed. Allen J. Frantzen (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991), p. 32-33.

"What, then, does New Medievalism mean? I will offer you two versions. First, it means study of the Middle Ages in the light of what literary scholars call, by ellipsis, 'theory' -- that is, the literary and cultural theories associated with thinkers such as Derrida and Michel Foucault. [...] More specifically, New Medievalism means Postmodern Medievalism, study of the Middle Ages from a consciously held postmodern perspective, a point of view which distinguishes itself from modernity, or what I have proposed to call the Long Renaissance." – William D. Paden, "'New Medievalism' and 'Medievalism'," The Year's Work in Medievalism X (1995), 232-33.

"The Middle Ages are virtually unique among major periods or areas of historical study in being entirely the creation of scholars. Since the term 'Middle Ages' in one of its many forms was first coined by Italian humanists, successive cultural revolutions down to and the including the advent of Romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century found it desirable to adopt and enlarge the term for their own
Richard Utz proposes. It is axiomatic that every generation has to write its own history of the past, and this is especially true in the case of the Middle Ages. It follows that medievalism, the study of this process, is a necessary part of the study of the Middle Ages. [...] Medievalism, being concerned with process rather than product, is a particularly fruitful area of several forms of postmodern criticism. Since the establishment of Studies in Medievalism, other forms of medievalism, particularly critical approaches, have emerged -- in Germany, Mittelalter-Rezeption, which takes its name and inspiration from the reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss, and in the United States a new approach to the Middle Ages inspired by Paul Zumthor, whose Parler du Moyen Age (1980), appeared in this country in 1986 as Speaking of the Middle Ages, with an introduction by Eugene Vance.” – Leslie J. Workman, "Medievalism," The Year's Work in Medievalism X (1995), 227.


"The Methods used to establish medieval studies as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century are well known and can be summarized as follows. In order to separate and elevate themselves from popular studies of medieval culture, the new academic medievalists of the nineteenth century designated their practices, influenced by positivism, as scientific and eschewed what they regarded as less-positivist, 'nonscientific' practices, labeling them medievalism. They isolated medieval artifacts from complex historical sediments and studied them as if they were fossils.” – Kathleen Biddick, The Shock of Medievalism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 1-2.

What, to begin with, is the nature of the signifying field in which medievalist historiography, as a mode of sublimation, takes place? I use the term 'sublimation' to refer to the problem addressed by Freud of how the creation of art and other forms of cultural 'achievement' may be understood in relation to desire. The movie Babe will help us to an initial sketch of what is at stake in the relation of the signifier to desire and memory. Babe is, first of all, a film with a recognizably medievalist agenda. It celebrates love between master and servant (these days, animals have to stand in for the peasants), and rural life as the scene in which such love might be rediscovered. It expresses distaste for technology, focused especially on communications in the form of a Fax machine, but also recuperates the Fax, as well as discipline, training, technique. These figures recall the master tropes of anti-utilitarian medievalism in the nineteenth century. So does the film's insistent association of meaningless speech with
commercialism and disbelief in the remarkable, and its association of meaningful speech with Babe's taciturn but loving farmer—a man behind the times who nonetheless is able to succeed because he recognizes the distinctive gifts of his animals, even when they want to do the work of the 'other' (even, that is, when the pig Babe wants to do the work of a sheep dog." – Louise Fradenburg, "'So That We May Speak of Them': Enjoying the Middle Ages," New Literary History 28.2 (1997) 205-30.

"Studies we might define under the heading of medievalism, where we examine representation of the medieval or definitions of the medieval, suffer from just such a circuit, an illness of causality one might say, as we seek to consider the effects of a particular image of the medieval and its causes, whether historical, aesthetic, or even cosmological. But medievalism offers a potentially more powerful theoretical position than that of the New Historicism in that medievalism is not about defining a particular truth about the Middle Ages, but rather about defining the truth of a Middle Ages, a point of impasse that is the subject of representation across periods, media, genres, and theories. Medievalism acknowledges the fictional structure of history, going beyond simple historical understandings, to focus instead on a mythic structure that ties us to history." – Richard Gleizer, "Medievalism and New Historicism," The Year’s Work in Medievalism X (1995), 220-21.

"The conflict between anachronism - the disruption of temporal sequence - and antiquarianism - its preservation - can be seen in the difference between Horace Walpole’s antiquarianism, which leads to the creation of the Gothic, and Walter Scott's antiquarianism, which leads to the creation of the historical novel. The Gothic is an Enlightenment revision of medieval superstition and fantasy; the historical novel is a Romantic revision of antiquarian collection that makes use of history to create a temporal identity rather than fabricating it for mere escapism." – Elizabeth Fay, Romantic Medievalism. History and the Romantic Literary Ideal (Basingstoke, NH: Palgrave, 2002), p. 13.

Studies in Medievalism

Studies in Medievalism provides an interdisciplinary medium of exchange for scholars in all fields, including the visual and other arts, concerned with any aspect of the post-medianal idea and study of the Middle Ages and the influence, both scholarly and popular, of this study on Western society after 1500. Founded by an independent scholar, Leslie J. Workman, in the late 1970s the journal is currently edited by Tom Shippey (Saint Louis University). Originally privately published, Studies in Medievalism has been published with by Boydell & Brewer, Ltd., P.O. Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK; Boydell & Brewer, Inc., PO Box 41026, Rochester, NY 14604-4126, USA. Orders and inquiries about back issues should be addressed to Boydell & Brewer at the appropriate office. Boydell & Brewer can also be contacted via their web page: http://www.boydell.co.uk
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The 18th annual conference will be held at Saint Louis University, October 17-18, 2003; inquiries should be directed to Tom Shippey (shippey@slu.edu). For updated information about organizing future medievalism conferences or submitting section or paper proposals for the Kalamazoo and Leeds
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