

Medievalism's Lexicon: Preliminary Considerations

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The following observations, first shared at the 49th International Congress on Medieval Studies in Amy Kaufman's roundtable on "Medievalism in the Academy", are meant to suggest a new departure in how we practice medievalism studies, one that would begin to systematize scholars' terminological choices when discussing the reception of medieval culture in postmedieval times:

1) Medievalism, if we may believe our colleagues in historical semantics, is a term coined as part of a conservative English response to a particularly invasive species of so-called "-ism" terms which attempted a hostile cultural takeover of the happily isolated British isles in the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century.¹ Together with "conservatism," the similarly past-oriented "medievalism" gave expression to a mentality of national bourgeois resistance to revolutionary continental coinages such as Immanuel Kant's "republicanism", Friedrich Schlegel's "democratism", "feminism", "socialism", and "communism", all of which represented the modern obsession with temporality and threatened progressive movement and change.

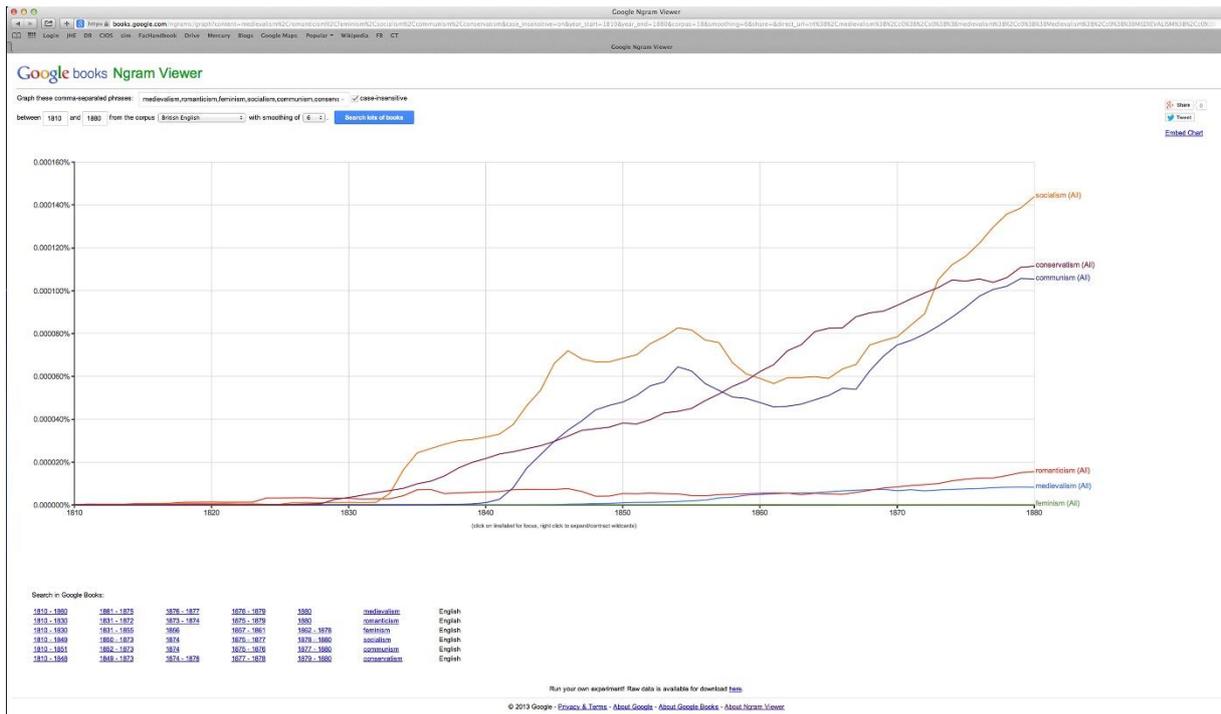
Based on a perceived unique continuity between the medieval past and nineteenth-century British government, institutions, and customs, "medievalism" would become pretty much synonymous with "romanticism", another term that implied nostalgia for the days of a merry old England in which, via more or less organic and allegedly unbloody developments like Magna Charta and the Glorious Revolution, the foundations of the modern nation were created.² If "medievalism" emerged as a term that expressed a continuist and conservative national ideal in Britain, profound social and cultural disruptions, like the French Revolution or the failed liberal uprisings in Italy and Germany around 1848, may well have prevented the original coinage, easy translation, and quick adaptation of similar terms in various continental national languages.³ Thus, "medievalism's lexicon" reveals semantic variations due to specific national histories and mentalities, variations we need to be aware of when viewing medievalism as a transnational phenomenon and assuming that the English term and concept must needs exist elsewhere.

The chart below, produced with Google's Ngram Viewer graphing tool, shows the coeval evolution and usage of the terms "communism", "conservatism", "feminism", "medievalism", and "socialism" from within Google's database of (British) English books published between 1810 and 1880:

¹ See, for example, R. R. Palmer, Joel Colton, and Lloyd Kramer, *A History of the Modern World*. 9th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), pp. 436-50. Their observations clearly build on the work of Reinhart Kosellek.

² Leslie J. Workman, "Medievalism and Romanticism," *Poetica*. 39-40 (1994): 1-34.

³ Richard Utz, "Coming to Terms with Medievalism: Toward a Conceptual History," *European Journal of English Studies* 15.2 (2011): 101-13.



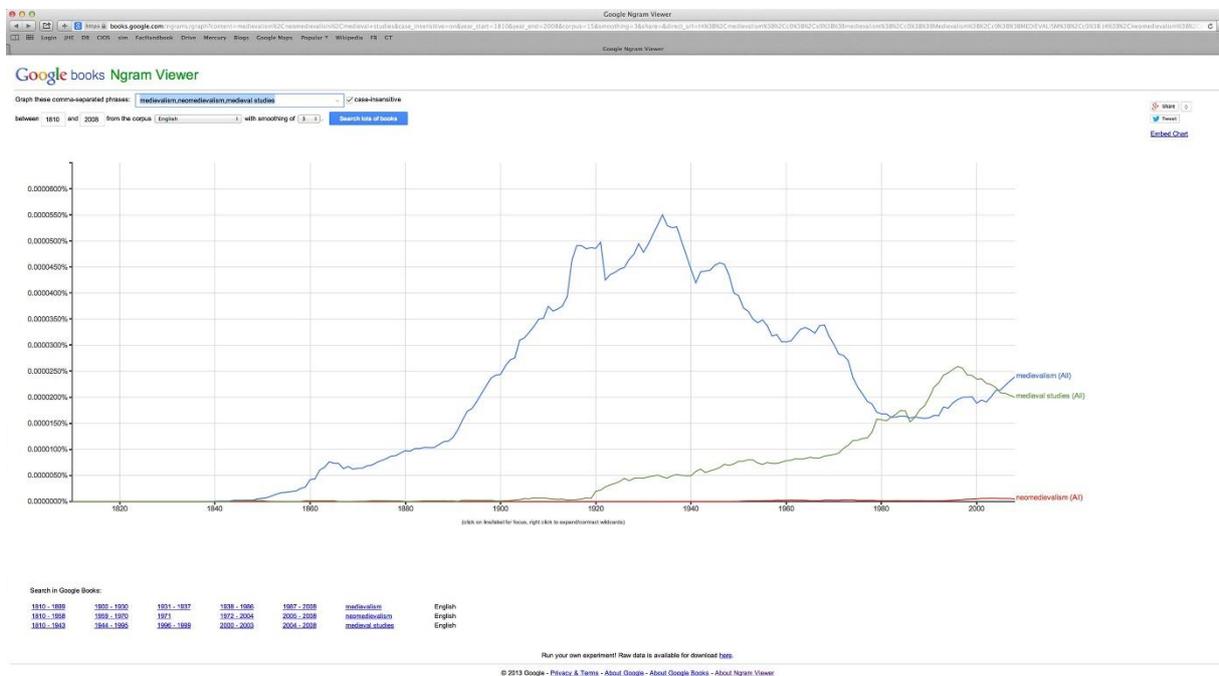
2) The second facet to be considered when building a lexicon for speaking about “medievalism” is that, just like for many issues under discussion by medieval studies scholars, nobody outside the academy really cares about the purely ‘academic’ distinction between “medievalism” and “medieval studies.” Despite the importance we as specialists attach to the semantic narrowing and expanding of our terms of investigation, visual, textual, and electronic fictional narratives unconcerned with these differences have a much stronger influence on the general public’s understanding of the Middle Ages. Most recently, neomedievalist narratives, which have begun to dominate medievalist creations in the aftermath of Tolkien’s widely received fictional worlds, no longer make any earnest attempt at including what we know about the “real” Middle Ages. In fact, these most often digital media are content with creating pseudo-medieval worlds that playfully obliterate history and historical accuracy and replace history-based narratives with simulacra of the medieval, employing images that are neither an original nor the copy of an original, but altogether Neo.⁴ This kind of medievalism challenges traditional Enlightenment-based historicist constructions of authenticity and authority.

3) A third consideration for medievalism’s new lexicon is the term’s semantic othering by the academy. Since the 1870s, and well into the 1990s, philologists and medieval studies scholars, eager to solidify their own roles as specialists on the Middle Ages, self-amputated from allegedly non-academic, popular, and thus unreliable or anachronistic forms of encountering and experiencing the Middle Ages. Thus, medievalist fiction, film, gaming, performance, reenactment, ritual, and even academic work on the reception of the Middle Ages after the Middle Ages were ridiculed and excluded by a

⁴ On this topic, see the contributions to *Neomedievalism in the Media: Essays on Film, Television, and Electronic Games*, ed. Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements (Lewiston: Mellen, 2013).

good many academic gate-keepers. This has been changing since the 1990s, as hundreds of essays, books, journals, and conferences demonstrate, and it was the International Medieval Congress at Western Michigan University that became the first venue to open its doors to Medievalism Studies.⁵

The chart below, again produced with Google's Ngram Viewer graphing tool, shows the evolution and usage of the terms "medievalism", "neomedievalism", and "medieval studies" from within Google's database of all English language books published between 1810 and 2008. The chart shows that a) the use of the term "medievalism" was much more widespread than that of academic "medieval studies", b) that "medieval studies" only became a concept (and field) in the early twentieth century; and c) that the usage of both terms meets at exactly the time when Leslie J. Workman begins to organize his first medievalism sessions at the International Medieval Congress. Finally, the chart also reflects the resilience of "medievalism" as a term after the year 2000. This recent development would reflect the continually increasing number of publications in medievalism studies since the 1980s:



Several general developments in the academy, especially various stages of feminism, gender studies, postmodernism, and popular culture studies, have assisted the subject of medievalism studies to re-bridge the boundaries of pastist vs. presentist engagement with medieval culture, to re-connect subjectivity, emotion, and memory with the dominant demands for authenticity, authority, and distance, and to celebrate the kind of collaborative “critical making” that happens when medievalists are also writers of medievalist fiction or builders of medievalist objects and buildings.

⁵ On these beginnings of medievalism studies, see Kathleen Verduin, “The Founding and the Founder: Medievalism and the Legacy of Leslie J. Workman,” *Studies in Medievalism* 17 (2009): 1-27.

In fact, Jonathan Hsy has declared, and I agree with him, that medievalism has become something like a laboratory for what he calls “co-disciplinarity.” This co-disciplinarity, which distinguishes itself from the more familiar “multi-”, “cross-”, or “trans-disciplinary” models of scholarly teamwork which would necessitate a somehow transgressive act, would do more than bring together two or more people trained in different disciplines to examine a shared object with the benefit of their respective interpretive skill sets (for instance, a literary scholar and an art historian might serve as “collective caregivers” to Pre-Raphaelite paintings that incorporate allusions to medieval narratives).⁶ To Hsy, co-disciplinarity entails a shared intellectual and creative zone within which an individual or a group of collaborators – academic and non-academic – may challenge the very conventions of academic disciplines and experiment across multiple modes of artistic production.

It is with this spirit of potentially ground-breaking co-disciplinarity in mind that I would like to invite all practitioners of medievalism studies to consider the following list of terms Elizabeth Emery, I, and thirty-three colleagues are about to propose for future studies in medievalism in our forthcoming Boydell & Brewer volume entitled, *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*:⁷

Archive; Authenticity; Authority; Christianity; Co-Disciplinarity; Continuity; Feast; Genealogy; Gesture; Gothic; Heresy; Humor; Lingua; Love; Memory; Middle; Modernity; Monument; Myth; Play; Presentism; Primitive; Purity; Reenactment; Resonance; Simulacrum; Spectacle; Transfer; Trauma; Troubadour.

We chose these terms based on topics included and excluded in publications and presentations over the last 30 years, coverage of various discourses, specialty areas, and linguistic and cultural traditions, our own backgrounds and connections, and the availability of practitioners of medievalism studies to write specific entries. The enabling obstacles Elizabeth and I communicated to our contributors and the publisher were that a) each term be defined concisely in its relation to “medievalism;” that b) each essay contain at least one specific example demonstrating such an application; and that c) all this be done within approximately 3,000 words and with a relatively small number of annotations and, instead of such annotations, a short list of suggestions for further reading. The target audience includes advanced undergraduates and graduate students in the vast realm of the humanities, social sciences, the arts, and music, especially those with co-disciplinary aspirations. The volume will be made available to the public during the upcoming 29th International Conference on Medievalism, October 24-25, at the Georgia Institute of Technology. It is dedicated to Hope College’s Kathleen Verduin, founding figure extraordinaire of academic medievalism in the English-speaking world, without whose efforts and achievements the field would not be what it is today. The reason for making this pitch about the forthcoming volume first at the International Medieval Congress and now here in writing is that I would like to invite all practitioners to join the discussion about these terms by reading, critically reviewing, and testing the terms proposed by the volume. And I invite you especially to consider contributing to the growing lexicon of medievalism by defining and adding, in your own

⁶ “Let’s FAIL together, yeah yeah YEAH!” *In the Middle* (blog: <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2012/10/lets-fail-together-yeah-yeah-yeah.html>), published 5 October, 2012; accessed 22 June, 2014.

⁷ For complete information on the forthcoming publication, see <http://www.boydellandbrewer.com/store/viewItem.asp?idProduct=14589>. Jonathan Hsy contributed the essay on “Co-Disciplinarity”.

work, the terms we were not able to include, so that we might soon get closer to reaching a truly co-disciplinary inclusiveness in medievalism studies.

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