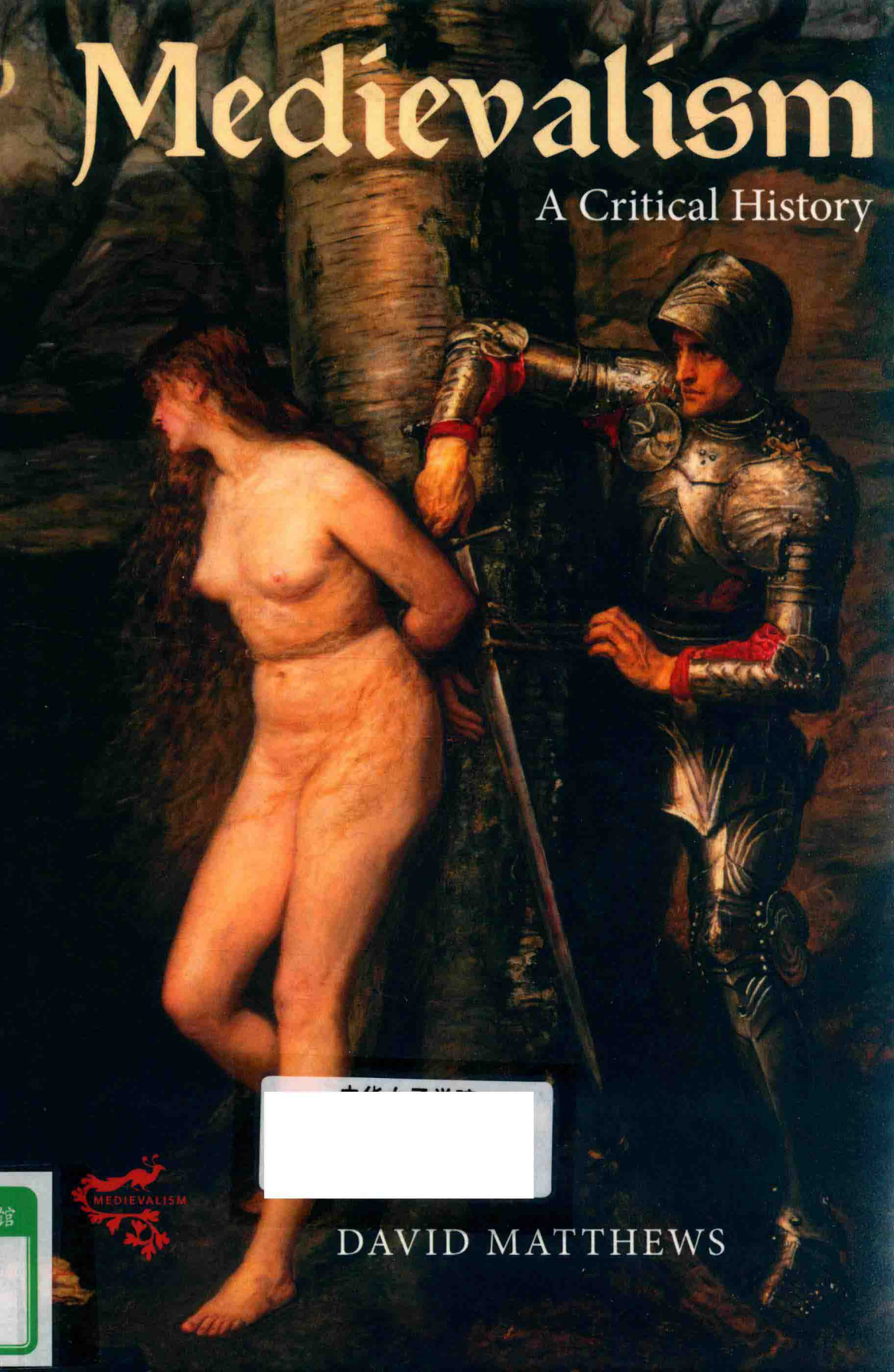


# Medievalism

A Critical History



DAVID MATTHEWS



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# Medievalism

## A Critical History

David Matthews

D. S. BREWE

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Volume VI

# Medievalism

## A Critical History



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Karl Fugelso

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**Medievalism** aims to provide a forum for monographs and collections devoted to the burgeoning and highly dynamic multi-disciplinary field of medievalism studies: that is, work investigating the influence and appearance of 'the medieval' in the society and culture of later ages. Titles within the series will investigate the post-medieval construction and manifestations of the Middle Ages – attitudes towards, and uses and meanings of, 'the medieval' – in all fields of culture, from politics and international relations, literature, history, architecture, and ceremonial ritual to film and the visual arts. It welcomes a wide range of topics, from historiographical subjects to revivalism, with the emphasis always firmly on what the idea of 'the medieval' has variously meant and continues to mean; it is founded on the belief that scholars interested in the Middle Ages can and should communicate their research both beyond and within the academic community of medievalists, and on the continuing relevance and presence of 'the medieval' in the contemporary world.

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This time at last: For Anke, with love

## Preface

This book is a guide to the field which has become known as medievalism studies; it also sketches out a history of medievalism and offers a critique of the practices that have grown up around the study of medievalism, doing so sympathetically and with the aim of furthering future study. Each of these three aims presents a potentially large task and as a result my account does not aim to be a total history, an exhaustive guide or a comprehensive critique. Medievalism is a vast field and it is difficult to imagine comprehensiveness other than in a large collaborative work. A recent French work shows the extent of the problem: *La fabrique du moyen âge* is a collaborative volume limited to the impact of the Middle Ages on nineteenth-century French literature. It nevertheless extends to 1,100 pages written by nearly 70 contributors. Even so, its editors concede that they “pretend neither to exclusivity nor exhaustiveness” and that the work is *not* an encyclopaedia but merely a beginning resource.<sup>1</sup>

A general history of anglophone medievalism is still a desideratum, though large collaborative projects are in progress.<sup>2</sup> It has been remarked before now that medievalism studies as a discipline has consisted of proliferant case studies, usually in essay form in journals (pre-eminently, *Studies in Medievalism* and more recently, in *postmedieval*), but has not been well served by longer studies. I do not pretend to offer that general history here, but I do attempt to offer a meta-commentary on the study of medievalism of a kind which up until now has been lacking. This is necessarily restricted to the cultures I have lived in or visited (chiefly Britain, Australia, and France, and to a lesser extent, Germany and America) and rarely extends beyond those languages that I can read. This book is meant to be exemplary rather than comprehensive, provocative rather than conclusive, agenda-setting rather than argument-settling.

My broad thesis is that what we have come to call “medievalism” – definitions of which I will survey shortly – is as I will propose a feature of post-medieval cultures from the moment of their emergence from the Middle Ages. Indeed, given that any moment of “emergence from a middle age” is somewhat arbitrary, it is the charting of medievalism itself that marks it, or self-creates it. In Britain, for example, it is the concerted conservation of antiquities by John Bale, John Leland, and William Camden

<sup>1</sup> Bernard-Griffiths, Glaudes, and Vibert, “Avertissement,” in *La fabrique du moyen âge*, n.p.

<sup>2</sup> Groom, Parker, and Wagner, eds., *The Oxford Handbook to Victorian Medievalism*; D’Arcens, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*.

that brings into being the historical rupture that marks off the present from a past regarded as qualitatively different: a past that could later be thought of as the *medium aevum*.

In the historical part of my argument, I then proceed to the movement, evident in France, Germany, and Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century, that is variously known as the romantic, the gothic, or the medieval revival. My chief point about this – well known material, after all – is that it was a revival of interest in the primitive broadly conceived; those aspects of the revival that were concerned with the *medieval* have clear outlines only with hindsight. It is easy to locate such figures as Thomas Percy, Thomas Warton, and Richard Hurd as if they were essentially medievalists (I have done this myself); it is important nevertheless to recall that for them the most important category was far less specifically defined. It was simply “the past.”

There is no doubt, though, that a category of what would become known as the *medieval* past did emerge as a result of eighteenth-century antiquarian work. Thomas Fosbroke’s coinage of the adjective *medieval*, soon after the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars, underlines the emergence of this discrete category; so too does the fact that Fosbroke appears to have been unaware that he was coining a term. For him, in short, the medieval was self-explanatory and coherently bounded, as it had not been for Percy, Warton or even their imaginative heir, Walter Scott; none of these figures worked with a very clear sense of the difference between a medieval period and the early modern period.

What emerged thereafter is what we might now think of as “high medievalism” – first in German and British romanticism, then in Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819) and its many progeny, including Kenelm Digby’s *The Broad Stone of Honour* (1822) and the Eglinton Tournament (1839) and also, very influentially, in French romanticism of the 1830s. Elsewhere in this period, the Viennese artists known as the Nazarenes were returning to medieval models in their painting, as was the Prussian Friedrich Schinkel in his architecture. All these instances can be regarded as reactions against Enlightenment classicism and reason: their monument might be Schinkel’s memorial to the Wars of Liberation on the Kreuzberg in Berlin (1817–21), which takes the form of a pinnacled Gothic spire decorated with angelic and allegorical figures, a medievalist and spiritual riposte to Napoleonic neoclassicism.

This very diverse constellation of influences led to the conclusive phase of cultural medievalism in the 1840s. Not coincidentally, the noun *medievalism* itself came into general use in that decade, which witnessed medievalist developments in architecture, literature, opera, religion, and political theory. I treat this as a “long decade” spanning 1839 to 1851, from the rise of Chartism to the Great Exhibition, but the period was equally pivotal on the continent. Architecture witnessed the commencement of Augustus Pugin’s Birmingham church, St Chad’s, in 1839 and, in the following year, the recommencement of Cologne Cathedral. Prosper Mérimée’s *Monuments historiques* and Pugin’s *Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England* appeared in 1843; in 1844, Viollet-le-Duc’s restorations of the Sainte Chapelle and the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris commenced, under the auspices of the Commission des Monuments Historiques (established in 1837). In 1845 the Ecclesiological Society in London began advocating the neo-gothic style in church architecture. Pugin and



Barry's Houses of Parliament at Westminster were of course under construction through this decade. John Ruskin published *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* in its first edition in 1849 and an English version of Friedrich von Schlegel's "An Essay on Gothic Architecture" also appeared in that year.

Medievalist literature also flourished. *Der Roland von Berlin* by "Willibald Alexis" (the nearest thing to a canonical medievalist novel in German) appeared in 1840. Edward Bulwer Lytton published his novel of the Wars of the Roses, *The Last of the Barons*, in 1843. Tennyson published his "Morte d'Arthur" (the germ from which *Idylls of the King* grew) in 1842. In 1849, Lady Charlotte Guest published her translation of the *Mabinogion*; J. A. Giles had published an edition of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* in 1842. Opera saw Richard Wagner's *Rienzi* (based on Bulwer Lytton's 1835 novel) produced in 1840.

This is also the decade that saw Carlyle's *Past and Present*, his 1843 meditation on the condition of England. Towards the end of the decade, as revolutions broke out across Europe, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt established the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848. In the Great Exhibition of 1851, medievalist activity was celebrated by the popularity of Pugin's Mediaeval Court. In all, this "long decade" was marked by social unrest, popular revolution – and medievalism.

What many studies of medievalism propose, at least by implication, is that this moment was one of inauguration; that thereafter, medievalism went from strength to strength and became a canonical feature of many aspects of culture. The assumption is that after Carlyle and Pugin and Ruskin, Schlegel and Merimée and Viollet-le-Duc, medievalism was here to stay. I argue, by contrast, that 1840s medievalism was unique and never to be repeated: this was the first and last time that medievalism achieved something approaching cultural dominance in several different European cultures at once, in the novel, poetry, architecture, opera, and more debatably perhaps, political theory. Thereafter, medievalism in fact declined in all spheres of culture except architecture (in which neo-gothic remained a powerful force in public and ecclesiastical building throughout Europe for most of the rest of the century, and spread to colonies and former colonies of Britain).

It is not the case – of course – that medievalism disappeared. But it is clear in all kinds of ways that its initial impetus rapidly waned. Most of the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood quickly moved away from medievalism, for example, while the most dedicated Pre-Raphaelite, William Holman Hunt, had little interest in medievalism in the first place. It is true that some poets, notably the younger William Morris, Tennyson and Algernon Swinburne, did profit from a focus on the myths and legends of the Middle Ages, but novelists largely turned their backs on the distant past that had served Scott so well. Political medievalism as developed by Carlyle (and Ruskin, and Benjamin Disraeli) also declined in the second half of the century.

One factor in what I am proposing as a rapid shift in emphasis was the rise of medieval studies: still another way of looking at the 1840s is to see it as a key decade in the organised *study* of medieval literature, the period when the early scholar Frederic Madden was most active for example, producing the *editiones principes* of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in 1839, *Lazamon's Brut* in 1847 and the Wycliffite Bible in 1850. The Philological Society, founded in London in 1842, espoused the new philology of

such men as Benjamin Thorpe and J. M. Kemble, themselves disciples of Jacob Grimm and Rasmus Rask. In France, the Abbé Migne commenced the monumental *Patrologia latina* in 1844. After 1850, a great deal of the energy that went into the Middle Ages in Britain, Germany, and France was *scholarly*, as the disciplines of history and literary study were formalised. In due course, medieval studies was professionalised with establishment in universities between about 1870 and 1925. Major publication series in Britain, Germany, and France were established early in this period and led to an explosion in the publication of historical, literary, and linguistic texts. By 1925, when the Medieval Academy of America was founded, medieval studies was a standard element of university curricula.

At the same time, non-professional medievalism was declining. As an architectural idiom, for example, neo-gothic came to an end before World War I in Europe, America, Asia, and Australia. Medievalism did of course persist: in one strand, it remained a marker of high art, albeit in ever more occulted forms. The high modernist writers still drew on medieval culture, for example, while modernist architects playfully employed medievalist idioms. Medievalist recreation in its most naked forms, however, lost prestige, coming to be associated with popular entertainment and children's culture.

To oversimplify by way of summary at this point: in the 1840s a convergence of antiquarian activities conferred considerable cultural capital on medievalism; in some spheres, most notably English poetry and European civic architecture, that capital remained highly valued in the second half of the nineteenth century. In all spheres, however, it had declined by the time of World War I. Meanwhile academic departments, especially in the fields of history, art history, and English language and literature, ensured a high value for medieval culture, now defined as the object of academic study. Then as academic medieval studies appeared to decline at the end of the twentieth century, medievalism once more rose, both as the object of popular practices and now as academic study. In the twenty-first century, large sums of money are spent on, and huge audiences attracted to, medievalist popular entertainment on film and television. Thousands of reenactors are drawn to medieval times as the backdrop for their recreations. Academic medievalists now routinely ask whether popular medievalism can do the job of leading people back to medieval studies.

It would be difficult to see organised medieval studies as accounting for the change in taste which saw the end of popular medievalism. Nevertheless, the greatest agon in reception of medieval culture was produced at the beginning of the twentieth century: that between the rigorous investigation of the Middle Ages by scholarly means on the one hand, and imaginative recreation of the period on the other. The tension between the two is felt today, when academic medieval studies and popular medievalism might once again converge. The concerns of this book arise out of that tension, and the sense that it is a very propitious moment to reconsider the rise of medievalism.

## Acknowledgements

This book has been in the making for a very long time and along the way I have incurred even more than the usual debts that books bring with them. Many of these debts I hope I have acknowledged (if not exactly repaid) in my notes. I make no apology for the way in which these notes are expansive, as they operate in part as a guide to the deeper thickets of medievalism studies. I would also like to single out several individuals here. Long ago I chose to write an undergraduate dissertation on William Morris alongside my other choices in medieval languages and literatures; Tom Burton, Michael Tolley and Ken Ruthven supported that decision, which has been immensely fruitful. Later, still ignorant of medievalism, I was brought into contact with *Studies in Medievalism* by Leslie Workman and Kathleen Verduin, who kindly invited a contribution on Walter Scott. For several years, I have discussed my concerns about medievalism as a discipline with some acute scholars: from the very earliest days, with Stephanie Trigg and Noel King, later with Ruth Evans, John Ganim, Tom Prendergast, Larry Scanlon, and Carolyn Dinshaw. I am particularly grateful, in the latter stages, for the great generosity of Louise D'Arcens, who has also been a wonderful interlocutor. Medievalism has involved me in a lot of travel; some of the earlier forays were undertaken with Mark Gauntlett (who was also among the first to urge me to publish on this topic and to whom I am forever grateful for the Excaliburgers). I also thank Eckart Bernau, the ideal guide to Guédelon; Iris Bernau and Jonathan Caetano took me to the market at Cabezon de la Sal. I also owe thanks to those who have asked me to write on medievalism and contribute to conferences over the years: especially Bettina Bildhauer, Louise D'Arcens, Steve Ellis, Matthew Fisher, Axel Müller, and Richard Utz and Elizabeth Emery.

For helping with the survey on reenactment, I am especially indebted to Lena Eriksson; as a complete novice, I could not have received more expert or patient guidance. I am of course extremely grateful to the anonymous participants in the survey, and those who helped me organise it: Rebecca Griffiths; Tina Steiner and members of the Beaufort Company; the Federation of the Wars of the Roses; Carl Sprake and the Companions of the Crow.

With one major exception I have not directly reprinted any earlier material, but I have freely plundered from some of my earlier publications on this topic. In particular, I have drawn on my essay, "From Mediaeval to Mediaevalism: A New Semantic History," *Review of English Studies* 62 (2011): 695–715, and am grateful to the journal's editors (and particularly Elaine Treharne) for permission to re-use. Some parts of the

conclusion appeared as “What was Medievalism? Medieval Studies, Medievalism, and Cultural Studies,” in *Medieval Cultural Studies*, edited by Ruth Evans, Helen Fulton, and myself (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), 9–22. I am grateful to my co-editors for permission to re-use this material.

The book was produced in very congenial environments. I probably would not have written it had I not ended up in Manchester, a quintessentially medievalist city, where I found many colleagues ready to help with my interest. I single out Mike Sanders, for conversations on medievalism and the Victorian working classes, and Jeremy Tambling and Daniela Caselli, excellent interlocutors both. Jeremy pointed me to *The Old Curiosity Shop*; Howard Booth to “The Eye of Allah.” Yusuf Awad, then a postgraduate student, helped me on questions relating to the crusaders and the Arabic language. Outside Manchester, Heather Glen pointed me to *Mary Barton*. I benefited from the research assistance of Hannah Priest at an early stage, while Thomas Froh’s research assistance in the closing stages was invaluable.

I began the writing of the book on a period of research leave in 2009 granted by the University of Manchester. The bulk of it was then written on another period of leave in the autumn and winter of 2012 while I was *Gastwissenschaftler* at the Freie Universität, Berlin. I am enormously grateful to Andrew James Johnston for making that stay possible and for his own intellectual contribution to my project, as well as to Elisabeth Kempf, Maggie Rouse, and Martin Bleisteiner for making my stay so enjoyable and helping out in myriad small ways.

Finally, I must record my gratitude to all involved with this project at Boydell and the Medievalism series, not least for their patience: Karl Fugelso, Caroline Palmer, and the anonymous readers for the press. I leave until last three people whose impact has been enormous, in different ways. In medievalism, I write the things I do in the way I do because of Stephen Knight, and am forever grateful to him – for his generous help along the way and for the expanded view I have inherited from him of the possibilities of medieval studies. Chris Jones asked me if I would write this book at exactly the right time. I hope the result justifies his confidence and is an adequate gift in recompense for his support and encouragement. Finally, the book’s dedicatee makes it all possible, and all worthwhile.

## Abbreviations

<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> , <a href="http://www.oed.com">www.oed.com</a>
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <a href="http://www.oxforddnb.com">http://www.oxforddnb.com</a>
<i>SiM</i>	<i>Studies in Medievalism</i>

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## Introduction

THE GHOSTS OF the Middle Ages are unquiet. In the cinema Robin Hood, embodied by Russell Crowe, once more bends his bow in Ridley Scott's film. J. R. R. Tolkien's dwarves, drawn from Old Norse legend, seek the gold stolen by a Beowulfian dragon in *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012) and its sequel, *The Desolation of Smaug* (2013). Turn on the television, where the Wars of the Roses are replayed in the BBC's *The White Queen* (2013) and the cathedral of Kingsbridge rises in *Pillars of the Earth* (2010), a series based on Ken Follett's bestselling novel of the same name (1989); dark-age power struggles are played out in HBO's medievalist fantasy, *Game of Thrones* (2011–) and Channel 4's *Camelot* (2011). Open a newspaper and a journalist will be criticising the medieval practice of torture, somewhere in the world; politicians, promising an end to the medieval practices of this or that Islamic regime; managers of football teams, regretting the application of medieval justice to their players. In Britain, a man walks from Worthing in Sussex to Buckingham Palace to attend the royal wedding of 2011 in full medieval armour with sword and shield.<sup>1</sup> Turn a corner in Melbourne, Manchester, Mumbai and there is a gargoyle, a pointed arch, a crenellated roof, a machicolated wall, ghostly memories of the Middle Ages shadowing modernity.

It is the task of *medievalism studies*, a rising field for the past three decades, to hunt these revenants. The field is, to quote from the definition attributed to T. A. Shippey on the website of the journal *Studies in Medievalism*, "the study of responses to the Middle Ages at all periods since a sense of the mediaeval began to develop."<sup>2</sup> Medievalism studies is usually distinguished from its long-established parent, *medieval studies*, which involves study of the *actual* Middle Ages: the period's literatures, languages, history, architecture, wars, religions and people, from peasants to popes. These are the simplest definitions that can be given of the two related disciplines. Like many simple definitions, they prove to be open to challenge and they will certainly be closely scrutinised and challenged in the course of this book. A first task, then, is to distinguish the disciplines from one another in this fundamental way, with a brief account of them both.

Defining medieval studies is the easier task. The discipline, in its broadest sense, has existed almost since the end of the medieval period itself. The earliest forms

<sup>1</sup> [www.lonelyknight.com](http://www.lonelyknight.com)

<sup>2</sup> See the SiM home page, <http://www.medievalism.net/index.html>. It is more succinctly described on the SiM blog as "manifestations of the middle ages in postmedieval times." <http://studiesinmedievalism.blogspot.co.uk/>. Both accessed 24 February 2014.



of medieval studies arose because of acts of destruction which both defined the past as medieval and threatened to efface medieval culture. *When* exactly this can be said to have happened depends on *where* one is talking about. In Britain, in the wake of reformation, scholars began collecting medieval manuscripts which were discarded by religious reformers who viewed them as worthless. Antiquarians at Henry VIII's court, John Leland and John Bale, were responsible for the identification and retrieval of medieval literature in the 1540s after the Dissolution of the Monasteries: their activities can be regarded as the beginnings of English medieval literary study.<sup>3</sup> The retrieval of texts in turn provoked the study of medieval languages, which was under way in England before the end of the sixteenth century, when Old English was reconstructed and texts edited by scholars in the circle of Archbishop Matthew Parker.<sup>4</sup>

The British case is not necessarily typical, however, and these early efforts did not lead far, as nascent British medieval studies withered in the course of the sixteenth century, so that the study of Anglo-Saxon had to be refounded at a later date. There were stronger continuities in Catholic countries. The study of medieval history can be traced to the seventeenth century and the establishment in the 1630s of the *Acta sanctorum* project by the Jesuit Jean Bolland. The discipline of palaeography was established by Jean Mabillon later in that century. In France, the question of the origins of Old French was the subject of inquiry in the seventeenth century in the work of Du Cange, and greatly advanced in the eighteenth, in particular by La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, while in Italy medieval history was furthered by Lodovico Muratori.<sup>5</sup>

Medieval studies thus began as a series of retrievals, and was born out of the death of the Middle Ages. The impossible question of when the Middle Ages can be said to have ended can be left aside for the moment; the point here is that the moment of retrieval, and the moment of recognition of a middle age, amount to almost the same thing: it is when such people as Bale and Leland set out to preserve elements of a culture that that culture can be said to belong definitively to the past.

There are sometimes indications that early medieval studies received some official, institutional promotion in medieval studies. Certainly, as Allen Frantzen has shown, the study of Anglo-Saxon received some royal support in the context of reformation because of its apparent indications of the continuity of an English church. British political theory is another sphere in which official interests – particularly parliamentary interests – looked actively to what was thought to be medieval precedent.<sup>6</sup> In France, where the monasteries were a force longer than

<sup>3</sup> See Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, ch. 1. William Kuskin, however, sees William Caxton as the more important figure, in his essay, "At Hector's Tomb: Fifteenth-Century Literary History and Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*".

<sup>4</sup> Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 43–44.

<sup>5</sup> On Bolland, Mabillon, and Muratori see the entries, respectively by Donald Sullivan, Rutherford Aris, and Susan Nicassio in Damico and Zavadil, eds., *Medieval Scholarship: Biographical Studies in the Formation of a Discipline*, 1–14, 15–32, 33–45; on Sainte-Palaye see Gossman, *Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment*, esp. pp. 153, 175–211.

<sup>6</sup> On this see Smith, *The Gothic Bequest*.