From Medieval to Medievalism

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1

Introduction: From Medieval to Medievalism

JOHN SIMONS

The purpose of this book is manifested in the range and scope of the contributions which are collected between its covers. It presents both examples of new directions in the literary criticism of the medieval text and surveys the ways in which the idea of the Middle Ages has been used as a cultural token or as a cultural heritage between the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and that of Queen Victoria. This latter project is also intended to serve as a guide to the ways in which medievalism – considered broadly as the study and use of medieval culture in the post-medieval period – can be seen as a key to understanding the culture of those periods in which it is pursued. The motivation behind the collection of the essays here presented is a desire to counteract the prevailing tendency by which the study of medieval literature, as part of the general discourse of 'Eng. Lit.', has been marginalised.[1]

As early as 1964, A. C. Spearing was exploring medieval literature's potential for canonisation according to the then dominant Leavisite techniques of close reading: 'One of the aims of the present book will be to see how far the technique of close reading can be of service in a critical approach to medieval literature.'[2] By 1977, however, N. F. Blake gave a strong, if occasionally splenetic, reminder of the linguistic specificity of the medieval text and called for a return to forms of study which were becoming increasingly uncommon:

> The new fashion of reading literature 'as literature' has had its impact on the medieval period so that many critical theories have been imported from later periods of English and applied indiscriminately to the medieval period. Few have bothered to consider how suitable such theories are in the early period, though this may have been for lack of time because critical fashions have come and gone so rapidly. The result is that many students read medieval literature without having any feel for or understanding

> of the language in which the works were written. Teachers often deplore this lack of a language basis in modern teaching and scholarship, but as philology is considered so outmoded they have not known how to satisfy this felt need.[3]

The reason for rehearsing this old argument here is that it illustrates most effectively the dilemma which has faced medieval literature since the establishment of the modern English degree in higher education. Medievalists navigate between the Scylla of a philology which is seen (in England at least) as increasingly arcane and irrelevant and the Charybdis of a literary criticism which seems often capable of little more than the bombastic commonplace. The result of this difficult passage has been to leave medieval literary studies in an isolated position. They are perceived as a specialist activity hedged around by sub-disciplines such as phonology, palaeography and codicology which are seen as outside the normal range of literary critical skills or they are briefly tacked on to the course as a compulsory element done as a chore, an option which only a small number pursue, or as a curious ahistorical element which sets the scene for the Renaissance. The combined effects of these perceptions have been to put the medieval text almost outside the categories which are normally seen as literature: I frequently encounter students who tell me that they have done no poetry at 'A' level when they have, in fact, read one or two of the *Canterbury Tales*.

The Middle Ages also pose problems of periodisation which are more extensive than for other areas of literary studies: and it is surely periodisation above all else that facilitates the construction of courses. The specialist in, say, English Romanticism might reasonably be expected to be competent in the literature of a period covering 70 years, for example, 1780–1850, at most. When we speak of eighteenth-century specialists and nineteenth-century specialists the hundred years which the appellations imply often turn out to cover only a section of the century, for example, 1830–1890. It is not rare, on the other hand, to find medievalists covering periods of almost 1000 years from the earliest Old English texts to Malory. As a teaching profile this is by no means unknown but even more profound specialism in the Middle English period alone implies a familiarity with three centuries of literary production. This problem of periodisation has also contributed to the marginalisation of medieval studies. However, the problem has been made worse because of a tendency among medievalists and non-medievalists alike

to homogenise the period. Attempts have been made to segment the Middle Ages in various ways, the most interesting and successful being found in *Ricardian Poetry* by J. A. Burrow.[4] This book, which is now 20 years old, made a laudable attempt to identify within the later fourteenth century a set of cultural concerns which were articulated commonly across a varied range of texts: whatever one may think about the exclusivity of Burrow's canon the fact remains that his attempt has not been widely repeated. All too often medieval texts are not debated within historical limitations and insufficient distinctions are drawn between texts which are years apart.

The contributions in the present collection constitute, in their entirety, an attempt to remedy the problems outlined above. The first essays show modern approaches to medieval texts at work. There can be little doubt that, over the past decade, the most exciting progress in the field has been made in the development of the significance of manuscript studies. This has had some important effects on literary critical work, not least in the growing recognition that it is useful to read texts in the contexts in which they were available to at least some of their medieval audience. One popular textbook which exemplifies this trend is S. A. J. Bradley's *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* which is an extensive anthology of translations.[5] In this book the groupings of well-known poems are determined not by subject matter or ethos (for example, religious/secular) but by codex. In spite of this manuscript studies still appear as part of the arcana of the medievalist. In his essay Murray J. Evans provides a valuable service with a survey of the field as it currently exists. In particular, he is concerned to point out the value of manuscript studies in literary criticism. Evans demonstrates that codicological research is not a dry relic from the days when philology was dominant but a vibrant scholarly activity which facilitates insight.

The next five essays show medieval studies in its engagement with a range of modern critical positions. David Aers's polemical and topical essay provides an entertaining and engaging correction to the blind adherence to critical dogma which he finds in a number of modern medievalists. In addition he exposes some of the grave epistemological problems which appear to be structural to much post-structuralist and New Historicist writing. What is important about this contribution is that it is based on the firm foundation of a knowledge of the tendencies against which it struggles. Over the past five or six years hostile reactions to contemporary literary theory have become not uncommon but it is important to separate bad-

tempered conservatism from rigorous evaluation such as that produced by David Aers.

Barbara Kowalik and Maldwyn Mills both demonstrate different techniques of reading. Dr Kowalik refers us to fine linguistic detail and shows how the interpretation of medieval narrative can proceed through the integration of contemporary concerns with language and the categories of medieval philosophy without an extreme trial of both historical decorum and the reader's patience. She shows that the process of integration need not operate through the pulling together, by violence, of two heterogeneous theories without any regard for their historical determinations: the action can be achieved elegantly and fruitfully. In his approach to *Guy of Warwick* through narrative structure Maldwyn Mills takes the reader into the area which, so far, has provided the most productive union between medieval studies and modern literary criticism. Since the value of Vladimir Propp's work was perceived, narratological study has flourished especially perhaps in the field of the Middle English romances and has provided new and useful ways of classifying a notoriously protean mode of writing. In addition, narratological work has added fresh insights to our attempts to understand the complexities of the relationship which exists between the identification of a highly traditional set of narrative possibilities and the need to explain critically the differentiation, at a range of levels, between texts which share a common type. The medieval period is increasingly attracting research into the history of women and into feminist literary criticism. In her essay Catherine La Farge explores the treatment of women in two well-known Chaucerian texts. Here we again see how responsive the medieval text can be to detailed and sophisticated linguistic analysis where this is combined with a subtle grasp of the position of readers in history. A volume of essays on medieval literature without a contribution on Chaucer would be difficult to imagine and in Catherine La Farge's work – and, in particular, in her close attention to the encoding of power in the text – we find another example of the rich possibilities of the encounter between the medieval author and the modern critic.

One aspect of the problem of periodising the Middle Ages which I did not deal with above has to do with the difficulties of identifying the literary audience. This is a problem which plagues scholars working in all periods, but for medievalists it is particularly acute because of the relative paucity of good information. The problem is exacerbated by the peculiar structure of medieval literacy and the

role that oral performance may have played in the dissemination of culture. My own view is that medieval culture as representative of a world view or, more accurately, a set of world views exists sporadically and discontinuously across social classes. Thus, for the majority of English people (again the specificity is deliberate) the Renaissance did not happen in the sixteenth century and while the Reformation brought about changes in mentality which were relatively broadly based, at least among urban communities, the transition from the medieval period to the early modern period appears to have taken place over perhaps two centuries. This is clear from studies of popular culture among early modern rural communities but it is also plain that during the early modern period and up to the Enlightenment there was a progressive dissemination of medieval court culture to social groups of lower status.[6] This means not only that the difficulties encountered in canon-formation are magnified in the early modern period as it becomes hard to exclude the popular and the medieval without significantly distorting the literary–historical model but also that medievalists themselves have tended to ignore the rich layers of medieval texts which are to be found from the sixteenth century onwards not as survivals but as living and meaningful cultural artifacts. John J. Thompson shows something of what can be done towards establishing the parameters of popular taste from the slight evidence which is generally available and also underlines Murray Evans's point that manuscript studies are an invaluable aid when making judgements about the social composition and cultural preferences of the medieval audience.

The volume then turns its attention to the question of medievalism. I referred above to the Middle English romances as protean: cultural history, on the other hand, is procrustean and the Middle Ages have been stretched in many directions in order to provide a ideological space in which a society can explore and articulate concerns which are otherwise repressed. The *locus classicus* for this is, of course, the Gothic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – study of this has been deliberately excluded from the present volume because of its relative familiarity as, for the same reason has work on the Pre-Raphaelites. Similarly, ideals of chivalry have been periodically revived to validate activities as diverse as imperial conquest and fair cricket.[7] The current vogue for 'sword and sorcery' novels and role-playing fantasy games such as 'Dungeons and Dragons' which derives from the great Tolkien enthusiasm of the 1960s and 1970s and, to a lesser extent, from the novels of another eminent

medievalist C. S. Lewis, is another example of the way in which the medieval is used to provide a play space. Why else did subject matter as unpromising as that in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* achieve international best-seller status and spawn a host of imitators?

Simon Barker shows how, in the field of early modern military discourse, the Middle Ages were constructed as a period to which commentators could look in order to castigate present abuses and to find practices from which the present could learn. It must be said that this construction of the Middle Ages as a form of Golden Age is one of the most common uses to which the period is put. By the nineteenth century the Middle Ages had become a Gothic dystopia (at least in part) which provided a measure of the March of Intellect and industrial progress. In the early modern period this perception was often, though by no means always, reversed and the medieval facilitated the operation of a range of cultural interests. These ranged from the adaptation of narrative structures drawn from the medieval romances in order to articulate the achievements of the citizen heroes of prose fiction aimed at non-courtly urban audiences, to the nostalgic residues manifested in the Accession Day tilts or the neo-chivalric shows which were used to promote the cult of Prince Henry at the beginning of the seventeenth century.[8]

In the eighteenth century attitudes to the medieval were more complex and my own contribution, on chapbooks, attempts to survey these attitudes as they manifested themselves in different social groups. The last essay, which takes us up to the turn of the twentieth century, is Peter Faulkner's study of the extraordinary F. J. Furnivall. Furnivall's work shows how self-conscious some scholars can be in their own construction of the Middle Ages as a usable discourse. Furnivall made huge contributions to scholarship but in his radical politics and in the explicit connections he made between them and his academic activities he appears strikingly modern. His work may, in this sense, be seen as to some extent analogous to the contribution made by J. P. Collier to the development of modern approaches to Elizabethan drama.[9]

It is appropriate to end the collection with an account of Furnivall because his attitudes do pre-empt many of the concerns which connect the diverse topics which are considered here. The state of medieval studies which I surveyed at the beginning of this brief introduction will not be changed overnight. Nevertheless, the relegation of medieval texts to special options or, worse, the

'compulsory medieval course' which undergraduates follow pragmatically while they pine to get back to 'real literature' is a situation which must be remedied. These essays show that that the study of medieval texts is viable as an integral part of the modern English course especially when we move from medieval to medievalism and begin to open up large sections of cultural history to inspection from otherwise unavailable perspectives.

NOTES

1. The best commentator on this process of marginalisation is probably Lee Patterson. See his *Negotiating the Past* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).
2. A. C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry*, 2nd edn (London: Edward Arnold, 1972) pp. 5–6.
3. N. F. Blake, *The English Language in Medieval Literature* (London: Dent, 1977) p. 8.
4. J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971).
5. S. A. J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: Dent, 1982).
6. See, for example, P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978) and B. Reay (ed.), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1988).
7. On this see M. Girouard, *The Return to Camelot* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981).
8. See, for example, F. Yates, *Astraea* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), especially 'Elizabethan Chivalry: the Romance of the Accession Day Tilts', on pp. 88–111.
9. On Collier see D. Ganzel, *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1982).

2

Manuscript Studies: New Directions for Appreciating Middle English Romance

MURRAY J. EVANS

Recent years have seen a marked increase in scholarly attention to Middle English (ME) romance manuscripts and their relevance to our literary-critical and historical-critical appreciation of the romances which they contain. The effect of much of this attention has been codicological, that is, concerned with the study of manuscripts as wholes, rather than merely with particular items in their contents or some one aspect of their make-up, such as script or watermarks. Thus the sometimes disparate approaches of textual scholarship and literary criticism concerning ME romance have had more exchange, and there now exists a considerable body of scholarly literature which combines the two approaches, or closely bears on their combination. Surprisingly, there is no analytical survey of these studies yet in print. As a result, those interested in investigating the subject need themselves to expend some effort in assembling a working bibliography. My essay is meant to facilitate this process by providing an overview of recent work on the subject. I shall deal first with conceptual background for the field and some other foundational material, then with three influential scholars for the combination of romance manuscript studies with literary criticism, and finally with examples of the two predominant directions of recent studies to date.

A key aspect of the conceptual backdrop for discussions of the productions of ME romance manuscripts appears in Malcolm Parkes's article 'The Influence of the Concepts of *Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* on the Development of the Book'.[1] In his article, Parkes describes the development of *compilatio* in the thirteenth century 'both as a form of writing and as a means of making material easily accessible' for the reader; the compiler 'was free to rearrange', to impose 'a new *ordinatio* on the materials he extracted from others' by 'disposing the material