

SIMMONS, Clare A., ed. 2001. *Medievalism and the Quest for the "Real" Middle Ages*. London, Frank Cass. 168 pp.

Edited by Clare A. Simmons, *Medievalism and the Quest for the "Real" Middle Ages* is a collection of eight articles devoted to the revision of the Middle Ages in the last four centuries. As her starting point Simmons vindicates a redefinition of the terms "Medievalism" and "Medieval Studies" by asserting that all critical approaches to the study of the Middle Ages are, inevitably, biased by centuries of previous interpretation and are therefore instances of medievalism. The editor thus locates these papers in the context of the latest studies in medievalism and provides the reader with a well-informed survey on the state-of-the-question, from the antiquarians' pioneering interest for the medieval to the critical appraisal of medievalism as an academic discipline in the late 1990s.

To begin with, Simmons offers a brief summary of the latest critical sweeps that have dominated the field in the last two decades, a section she addresses particularly to readers not well acquainted with medievalism. Among others, she evaluates positively the contribution of New Historicism in the works of Lee Patterson (*Negotiating the Past*, 1987), Marina S. Brownlee, Kevin Brownlee and Stephen G. Nichols' (*The New Medievalism*, 1991), and highlights Bloch and Nichols' critical updating in *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper* (1996). In the same way, Simmons regards Frantzen's *Before the Closet* (1998) as a significant step to widen the traditional perception of homoeroticism in the approach to the Early Middle Ages. However, neither Norman Cantor's *Inventing the Middle Ages* (1991) nor Katherine Biddick's *The Shock of Medievalism* (1998) escape from Simmons' criticism: the former is attacked for its biased Victorian scope -- "Cantor seems to pursue the ghost of a 'real' Middle Ages at the same time that he lays that ghost to rest" (17) -- whereas the latter meets well-founded objections to the use of postcolonial categories in the analysis of medieval cultures.

The eight articles of this collection are chronologically arranged and offer a chaleidoscopic study of the Middle Ages as object of revision in

disparate time settings, from seventeenth-century England to contemporary America. Implicitly, the work aims at plurality by taking into consideration several study cases not only within the English-speaking tradition, but also dealing with French appropriations of medieval narratives and myths throughout the nineteenth century. Thus, the first and second pieces deal with eighteenth-century medievalism in England, and a third article focuses on nineteenth-century England, while the fourth and fifth ones analyse French cases. Again, the sixth paper explores English Victorian medievalism; the seventh turns to the early twentieth century, to end up with an appraisal of one of the latest men's movements in the 1990s United States. The problem this posits is that there exists no sense of contingency among the different pieces, but the collection rather works on the assumption that medievalism is a universal rather than a time/place bounded phenomenon inserted in a given cultural whole.

In this way, the first contributor, Kelly A. Quinn, deals with Samuel Daniel and Thomas Campion's dispute on rhyme. Quinn effectively analyses Daniel's rhetorics of persuasion in relation to the popularity of the Middle Ages as model of prestige, and presents the reader with an accurate rendering of Daniel's counterattack on Campion's *Observations on the Art of English Poesie*. The relevance of his 1603 *The Defense of Ryme* is reinscribed in the agenda of recovering medieval rhyme schemes against the rise of the quantitative movement promoted by the humanist poets. Daniel equates rhyme with the revival of an English medieval tradition that links poetics with nationalism yet, paradoxically, he feels compelled to defend what was regarded at the time as a return to older, traditional Catholic poetic modes.

Kristine Louise Haugen devotes her paper to Richard Hurd's eighteenth-century appreciation of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Haugen builds her analysis on the concepts of the "gothic" and "verisimilitude" as operative in Hurd's times. The so-called "gothic" –that is, inspired by chivalric romances– components of the allegorical poem are used to reconstruct an imagined past. Although interesting, Haugen's study is at certain points difficult to follow in her explanations of how a Renaissance text deriving from medieval narratives is read by Hurd three centuries later as when, for instance, she asserts that ". . . the historical distance Hurd values in the

medieval era, the gap produced by its uncompromising and awesome otherness, is really the cavernous space that is left when Hurd has done away with all texts yet remains convinced that it is necessary to have direct contact with the past" (55). Whether "cavernous space" is meant to refer to Hurd's invented, extra-textual Middle Ages, which can only be reconstructed through texts as *The Faerie Queene*, remains unclear.

Mark Schoenfield's article centres on Scott's 1819 *Ivanhoe* and its echoes of a real 1817 legal issue, the Ashford vs. Thornton trial, where Wager Battle was invoked as the continuity of the ancient right of body justice. The view of this medieval method as barbarous in spite of the glamourized tradition it might recall made Scott's readers aware of the irrational aspects of the Middle Ages. At this point the nobility and heroism of the medieval past seem to be overcome by the Victorian sense of progress and civilization. Schoenfield argues that, by including the famous scene of the Wager Battle between the Templar knight Bois-Guilbert and *Ivanhoe*, Scott appealed to his audience's respect for law and order in nineteenth-century terms, and openly supported a judicial system based on legal codes over the justice of the body. According to the author, the value of this revisit of medieval law lies in the fact that this polemical trial not only inspired Scott but also clearly illustrates the pertinence of medieval models in industrial England. Curiously, this time the Middle Ages are invoked as a counterexample, as Scott's handling of the Wager Battle issue embodies modern determination to conjure the unnecessary violence of a medieval past so often glorified.

Sarah Hibberd's piece discusses a case of contemporary French medievalism, as it deals with the representations of Jeanne d'Arc in the Parisian stage in the 1820s. In the context of the Bourbon restoration the heroine was re-appropriated as a national symbol, but now her medieval mysticism is rewritten as typically female emotional instability. Madness is then feminized in consonance with new morals and, as a consequence of this, the warrior maiden icon and her divine inspiration are now deconstructed. Hibberd succeeds in demonstrating how, progressively, Jeanne's medieval saintly aura is reinterpreted as feminine weakness. Hibberd's contribution thus addresses gender issues and offers an original analysis of the process of imposing modern categories on the Middle Ages.

Also focusing on French revisions of the Middle Ages, Elizabeth Emery studies the impact of *La Revue des Deux Mondes* in the shaping of popular medievalism in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War. The traditional confrontation between France and Germany was transferred in the 1870s to the field of literature and philology, particularly thanks to the works of philologists as Léon Gautier, and so scholarly projects became entwined with the nationalistic agenda. Research programs devoted to *La Chanson de Roland* and the recovery of the figures of Charlemagne and Jeanne d'Arc as national heroes participate in a national enthusiasm echoed by this periodical and, as Emery points out, “. . . France recovered from its identity crisis, however, it was able to value the Middle Ages as more than a patriotic topic” (109). Emery evaluates how, in a period marked by the national sense of defeat against the Germans, the revisiting of the national past in a widely read periodical proves instructive as it demystifies its origins at the same time that it celebrates them.

Back to the English context, two of the last papers of this collection deal with the articulation of masculinity and medievalism: Frederick S. Roden's study of religious medievalism and male homosexuality and Aronstein's approach to the late twentieth century use of Arthurian myths by the Mythopoetic Men's Movement. These pieces, however, do not appear in a sequence but are separated by Heady's article on Chesterton.

In the first place, Roden addresses the phenomenon of male monasticism and homoeroticism in the mid-nineteenth century and reinscribes it within Cardinal Newman's Tractarianism. In the line of Queer Theory, Roden undertakes the discussion of the influence of the “Aelredian model of religious friendship” (119) and evaluates its connections with the work of Raffalovich and other intellectual figures interested in the defence of homosexuality. The author sheds light on some appropriations of the medieval past by the “uranists,” a topic to a certain extent obliterated in Victorian studies. Roden completes his analysis with the exploration of the conflictive relationship between fin-de-siècle Neo-Platonic Hellenism and Catholicism in their view of homoerotics and tracks their manifestations in the work of minority authors as well as the influential Wilde and Hopkins.

In the last place, Susan Aronstein offers a detailed analysis of how medievalism becomes operative in popular American culture. The Arthurian myths in particular are revisited as the matrix for the definition of contemporary masculinity and articulated as a response to the women's rights and feminist movements. Aronstein aptly denounces the manipulation the texts undergo at the hands of the leaders of the Mythopoetic Movement and how this reading is used to justify a return to the traditional male dominion under the appearance of restitution of a medieval, original and natural order.

Placed between these works, Chene Heady's "Heraldry and Red Hats: Linguistic Skepticism and Chesterton's reading of Ruskinian Medievalism" starts by criticizing Alice Chandler's *A Dream of Order* (1970) for not including Chesterton's medieval studies. The title of Heady's article, however, is somehow confusing. Heady's Chinese-box-like revision of Chesterton's revision of Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* is combined with the discussion of heraldry in Chesterton's *Chaucer*. Heady basically aims at explaining the contradictions of Chesterton's Catholic Thomism and his high regard for medieval art, an art he defined as the most perfect symbolic system in its primitive depicting of reality. According to Heady, ". . . Ruskin's primitivism is the central element on which the whole of Ruskinian sign theory rests, and Chesterton's Catholic rejection of this concept by a merciless logic requires his linguistic pessimism (this is probably not how Chesterton, biographically speaking, developed his position, but the logic does follow)" (139). The parenthetical comment on the part of the author, nevertheless, betrays a certain weakness in the argumentation, especially when a few lines later Heady adds: "But despite all his linguistic skepticism, Chesterton is not an unorthodox Catholic, just a little less orthodox than he would have liked to believe," an assertion which I understand as riskily speculative. On the other hand, neither the idea of "linguistic skepticism" is sufficiently delineated nor the importance of heraldry explained; here heraldry appears just as the specific field in which, according to Chesterton, the primitive perfection of medieval art could be more clearly appreciated. Unfortunately, the paper does not explore this idea thoroughly, nor its connections with religious the medievalism of Chesterton.

The Quest for the "Real" Middle Ages turns out to be an ambitious, polyphonic project aiming at a better understanding of medievalism as a cultural phenomenon. Nevertheless, the work fails in providing the reader with a critical frame which would help to locate this cultural trend in its proper context. The differences in methodology and perspective of this collection of articles do not allow for a cohesive vision of the matter but rather give the collection a fragmentary character. Also, there is no consideration of the genre-specific features of the appropriation of the medieval past in each case, but all revisitings –whether a philological study as Gautier’s on *La Chanson de Roland* or the imitation of “primitive” monasticism with homosexual innuendo in the religious background of late Victorian England– are presented as similar expressions of medievalism. Besides, the book is limited in its geographical scope: there is no example of medievalism in other European nations than England and France and, furthermore, no explanation is provided in this respect. This is particularly striking as several of the papers –Quinn’s, Roden’s, Heady’s– insist on the confrontation between Catholicism and Protestantism in the definition of each nation’s identity, whereas the recovering of the Middle Ages is frequently linked to a nostalgia for Catholic modes. The opposition/parallelism with the wake of medievalism in traditionally Catholic nations as Spain or Italy would have been, in this sense, revealing. As neither the “back-to- medieval- Catholicism” trend nor the loosely chronological axis seem to offer a clear interpretive pattern for understanding medievalism in the periods and locations selected, perhaps a thematic arrangement of these papers would have offered a better frame for interpreting the phenomenon in each case.

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