

Introduction

In the painting *Reading the Legend* (1852) (Front Cover) a man sits reading aloud at a woman's feet, in the pose of a courtly lover, a ruined castle looming in the background. Rather than attending to his words, the woman gazes at the castle itself. The landscape before both is the same, but their view is in different directions. The painting encapsulates the huge interest in the Middle Ages, and related chivalry and romance, which surged in the mid-nineteenth century: it succinctly depicts nineteenth-century medievalism--the study and use of medieval literature and culture in a post-medieval period, here nineteenth-century Britain. Nineteenth-century medievalism did not take the Middle Ages and assess them as the separate past, but tried to absorb elements of the medieval into the present: the couple, well dressed in the contemporary fashion, immerse themselves and become part of a landscape of medieval romance. The painting also illustrates the interplay between the contrasting "male" and "female" versions of the medieval: the woman is producing her own version of the story, with its roots in the landscape, independent of the reading of her male companion. The artist, Lilly Martin Spencer, was herself "inspired by Tennyson's poem 'Lancelot and Elaine'" (Bolton-Smith and Truettner, 164), influenced by the writing of a male medievalist.

Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism, considers how women poets, short story writers, biographers, historians and visual artists used medieval motifs, forms and settings to enable them to comment on contemporary issues, such as war and gender roles, areas where women's more open comment had often met with career-destroying censure. *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism*

analyzes an identifiable “female” medievalism and considers how it exists alongside the dominant “male” version in nineteenth-century literature. Female medievalism crosses the boundaries of Romantic into Victorian literature, and is still seen in the early twentieth century. The dominant strain of medievalism influences and inspires female medievalism, but women writers and artists also often use the discourse in contradictory ways.

Burke’s famous lament, “But the age of chivalry is gone--that of sophisters, economists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever” (238), summarizes the prevailing mood of nineteenth-century medievalism, that of yearning for a past Golden Age. British culture has always nurtured a medievalist tendency, since the days of Elizabeth I’s “Gloriana” propaganda, which Spenser later developed in his pro-Protestant polemical allegory, *The Faerie Queene* (1590). The popularity and pervasiveness of medievalism peaked in the late-eighteenth century due to a combination of elements. The antiquarian scholarly researches on key texts and translations from the Middle Ages, notably by Hurd, Ritson, Warton, Ellis, and Percy, encouraged interest in the period and inspired writers throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.

Richard Hurd’s *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762) laid the foundations for the reassessment of the Middle Ages, and led the way for editors like Thomas Percy. Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) was a landmark in medieval scholarship. *Reliques* made collecting medieval texts fashionable for the first time, and also bridged the gap between the antiquarian scholar and general cultured reader. Percy’s desire to win an audience and popularize these ancient poems often led him to embellish his translations, earning the scorn of those scholars who demanded

accuracy and linguistic fidelity. The most famous among these, Joseph Ritson, derided Percy because he “preferred his ingenuity to his fidelity.”¹

However, Walter Scott found some sympathy with Percy’s approach:

He that would please the modern world, yet present the exact impression of a tale of the middle ages, will repeatedly find that he will be obliged, in despite of his utmost exertions, to sacrifice the last to the first object, and eternally expose himself to the just censure of the rigid antiquary, because he must, to interest the readers of the present time, invest his characters with language and sentiments unknown to the period assigned to his story; and thus his utmost efforts only attain a sort of composition between the true and the fictitious.
(Williams, 99)

Scott followed Percy’s lead in rewriting history to enhance the appeal of the Middle Ages in his own influential medievalist works, such as *Ivanhoe* (1819), *Quentin Durward* (1823), and *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828). *Ivanhoe*, for example, used as direct sources Sharon Turner’s *History of England from the Norman Conquest* (1799) and George Ellis’s *Specimens of Ancient Poetry* (1805), but has major errors in the topology, and chronology of the work. Yet, as Clare Simmons has noted, “most of Scott’s major errors of chronology are not random but form a pattern that helped create a new interpretation of the period” (88), one that would win back an interested readership.

Sharon Turner, who published all his major Anglo-Saxon researches in 1799-1800, made the medieval era most accessible to the early nineteenth-century readership by changing the perception of the period through his works: as Simmons suggests, “Above all Turner helped make respectable the study of a people formerly dismissed as barbarous and uncultured” (60). This positive portrayal of the Middle Ages was particularly influential for women writers in the nineteenth century, as women could openly immerse themselves in medieval history as a reputable and “ladylike” pursuit. Medieval history, imaginatively interpreted, proved popular: through works such as Kenelm Digby’s *The Broad Stone of Honour*, a cult of nineteenth-century “gentlemanly” chivalry and “queenliness” developed, which made reading and studying medieval texts popular.

Since the Christian medieval past could be sanitized without utter dilution, and made acceptable and laudable in the nineteenth century, medievalism had a wider and longer lasting appeal than the Hellenic revival. Hellenism emerged from the middle of the eighteenth-century, and was most notably developed at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Keats and Shelley. Despite the significance of the revival to Romanticism, with Hellenism’s origins in, “a love of human perfection and tending toward the erotic, a renewed appreciation of the physical world and the processes shared by nature and by human beings” (Gaul 207), the revival always had its opponents. It was much harder to make pagan Ancient Greece, with its more complex and liberal ideas of sexuality, an ideal age to be emulated. When Carlyle first uses the word “classicism” in 1831 it actually marked the decline of the Hellenic revival: “Classicism referred to whatever was good, or typical, or universal, or lasting, and so

it remains [...] As the idea permeated the culture, the factual basis became increasingly obscure”(Gauß, 206).

By contrast, events of the 1830s led to a huge surge in the popularity of medievalism. Medieval scholarship and the popularization of medieval history and texts coincided with a time of contemporary social, political and religious unrest that, for many, made the Middle Ages preferable to a nineteenth-century present. In the face of an enlightened French Revolution turned monstrous, wars with France and America, misery and discontent of a whole class through Industrial Revolution, and religious upheaval prompted by scientific discovery, what was considered the simplicity of the Middle Ages seemed a Golden Age when juxtaposed with the complicated present. Constant comparisons were made, as titles such as Pugin’s *Contrasts* (1836), Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1843) demonstrate. Writers mirrored a Utopian past alongside an inferior present, in the areas of society that most concerned them. For William Morris, the Middle Ages was a time of community and artisanship before industrialization, views he expressed later in *News from Nowhere*. For Roman Catholic writers it was a time of more unified and purer religious expression, as seen in the work of convert Kenelm Digby. Medievalism held appeal for socialist and Tory Young Englander,² radical and reactionary alike.

Several studies have recorded the reasons for the surge in popularity of medievalism in the nineteenth century: Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature*; Marc Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*; Kevin L. Morris, *The Image of the Middle Ages in Romantic and Victorian Literature*; Clare A. Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest: History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*; Kathleen

Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism*; Elizabeth Fay, *Romantic Medievalism: History and the Romantic Literary Ideal*; Michael Alexander, *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England*. However, as Judith Johnston comments in her recent excellent study *George Eliot and the Discourses of Medievalism*, “Women’s writings have rarely been associated with Victorian medievalism” (7). The time frame of this omission can be extended to include the majority of previous work on Romantic medievalism as well, although Fay’s thought-provoking work on Anna Seward, Mary Robinson, Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Mary Shelley, alongside their male counterparts, is a notable exception.

Chandler’s socio-political study of Victorian Medievalism is still the most thorough treatment of the topic: it traces “the growth and meaning of the medievalist ideal through a detailed study of the books that proclaimed it” (11). Apart from brief mentions of Catherine Macaulay, Ann Radcliffe, Clara Reeve and Charlotte Mary Yonge, the literary focus of this extensive book is entirely male. Girouard offers a study of “how the code of mediaeval chivalry, and the knights, castles, armour, heraldry, art and literature that it produced, were revived and adapted in Britain from the late eighteenth century until the 1914-18 war” (Preface, n.p.). The scope of his wide-ranging text is huge, but focuses on the better-known version of knighthood in the work of Scott, Tennyson, Ruskin and Kingsley, to demonstrate the socio-political influence of this chivalric medievalism. Alexander’s entertaining and engrossing *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England* offers a wide account of the expression of medievalism in literature, but apart from two lines on Jane Austen does not consider any women writers. Similarly Kevin Morris, in his study of religious

medievalism, and Clare Simmons's consideration of the contrast between Saxon and Norman versions of the medieval in nineteenth-century literature, are male-focused.

Supplementing these studies, *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism*, focuses on "female" medievalism and forces a reassessment of the work of women writers.³ Works such as Elizabeth Elstob's *English-Saxon Homily on the Nativity of St Gregory* (1709), with an English translation and preface, and Susannah Dobson's translation of De Saint-Pelaie's French *The Literary History of the Troubadours* (1779) and *Memoirs of Ancient Chivalry* (1784) demonstrate women's consistent use of medievalism for subversive purposes. Elstob produced her work, the first grammar of Anglo-Saxon, for a "young lady" who was eager to learn the language, thus assisting the education of women. Dobson's translation is also an interpretation, in which she adapts the linguistic translation to reflect her own views on chivalry.

These two writers directly influenced women in the nineteenth century, such as Anna Gurney, who produced her translation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 1819, and Louisa Stuart Costello, in her efforts to revive interest in medieval literature through her authoritative studies, *Specimens of the Early Poetry of France* (1835) and *The Rose Garden of Persia* (1845). While male contemporaries and scholars of the previous century also influenced these writers, these nineteenth-century women were also contributing to a historical tradition of female medievalism, offering an acute socio-political perspective in response to events and expectations of woman's role in their present day society.

“Female medievalism” often differs decisively from male medievalism, the Middle Ages offering a different appeal for many women writers. Joan Perkin writes that, “In Anglo-Saxon England women had rights to property, to a share in control of domestic affairs and of children, and even in the last resort to divorce or legal separation, departing with children and half the marital goods [...] It was the full imposition of feudalism by the Normans, based on military service by male barons and knights, which destroyed the legal rights of women” (1). Even then, women often perceived post-conquest England as a climate of greater rights and freedom than the nineteenth century: as Deborah Byrd suggests, the Middle Ages was an appealing background for the work of Victorian women poets because it was envisioned, “as a time in which at least some women had control over their property and destiny and the courage to venture into the ‘male’ arenas of politics and war” (33).

Nonetheless, these women writers do not unquestioningly hold to a vision of a Utopian past: they consistently use medievalism to highlight and critique what they viewed as a revival of past errors in the present age. They were particularly critical of the modernized code of chivalry that flourished from the accession of the young Queen Victoria, which encouraged an ideal of female passivity. Hemans, Landon and, most obviously, Elizabeth Barrett⁴ in the medieval settings for many of the ballads in *Poems* (1844), display frustration at the chivalric social constrictions for women, which was as relevant to the ideology of their contemporary society as to the medieval past they recreate. Yet even the famously outspoken Barrett does so using, “ambiguous wording to hide from the unsympathetic reader the fact that she is protesting against middle-class Victorian definitions of the good wife and good daughter” (Byrd, 33).

Barrett's screening of her criticism highlights a further exceptional appeal of medievalism for women writers in contrast to their male counterparts. Medievalism provides women writers with a masquerade, a means of upholding the appearance of conformity, while offering the opportunity to comment imaginatively on contemporary socio-political issues that were not considered their sphere. When Anna Barbauld published *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812), a work that openly criticizes the continuing war between Britain and France and prophesies that England would eventually dwindle and be surpassed, it provoked unmitigated, vitriolic criticism, which centered on the grotesqueness of a woman producing such political dissent. This aggressive attack demonstrates the constrictions placed on women's social and political debate: it destroyed Barbauld's confidence and her career, and led other women writers to shy away from presenting open political arguments.

The contrast between the sensation that accompanied the publication of the first two cantos of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. A Romaunt* in the same year, and the abject scandal aroused by a work on a similar political theme written by a woman demonstrate that the writer's sex was an essential consideration for the harsh criticism. The medievalism of Byron's work is used to highlight, not conceal, his criticism of contemporary society and the wars of the time, but his work was influential to writers like Hemans and Landon. These women found they could use similar medieval settings of warfare as a way of screening and shielding their critique of the war and the chivalric values expounded at the time, and thus safeguard their livelihoods. Commercial success and popular appeal were essential for these two women writers who were sole providers for their families.

During the last decade, critics have widely debated the existence of socially realized separate gender spheres that, “underwrote an entire system of institutional practices and conventions at mid-century, ranging from sexual division of labor to a sexual division of economic and political rights” (Poovey, 8-9). Recently some historians have challenged Davidoff and Hall’s seminal thesis, which suggests that gender was essential to the structuring of a new middle-class culture as the very concept of separate gender spheres made middle-class identity distinctive. Amanda Vickery states:

At a very general level, eighteenth and early nineteenth-century women were associated with home and children, while men controlled public institutions, but then this rough division could be applied to almost any century or culture -- a fact that robs the distinction of analytical purchase. If, *loosely speaking*, there have always been separate spheres of gender power, and perhaps there still are, then ‘separate spheres’ cannot be used to explain social and political developments in a particular century, least of all to account for Victorian class formation. (413)

Vickery argues that the manuscripts of women themselves, from all aspects of daily life, demonstrate their engagement with public life. Far from suggesting an oppressive domestic sphere, these manuscripts show how women use their role in the private sphere to their own advantage. Certainly many nineteenth-century women did challenge and rewrite the position in which the dominant ideology had placed them. Queen Caroline and Caroline Norton are famous examples of women who use the

idea of female defenselessness to their own advantage in pleading their own causes. However, a combination of social, cultural and political elements from the late eighteenth century--including the revival of medievalism and related gentlemanly chivalry, the accession of a young queen, post-French Revolution trauma and the desire for secure public life, industrialization and the emergence of the middle-class and the separation of work and home, the Evangelical Revival which articulated the domestic as the sphere of morality and religious experience -- led to what Shoemaker terms, “an accentuation, rather than emergence, of separate spheres” (318). This meant that men and women were expected to behave, and significantly to write, in a certain way, engaged with specific gender-inscribed areas of life. The Foucauldian idea that the very existence of power relationships depends upon, “a multiplicity of points of resistance” (1978, 95) is apposite here: the necessity for codified ideas of gender demonstrates that, within society, women were struggling against existing social restrictions and demanding a redefinition of these structures. Medievalism often gave women an imaginative means to express this struggle.

Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism demonstrates the prevalence of female medievalist writings; explores how medievalism provides women with an empowering discourse of expression, in that it allows the forbidden to be said without censure; and explores the complexities of medievalist texts by women and their relationship with the male version of medievalism in the canon.

Chapter 1 considers how women writers use the traditionally acceptable medium of translation to produce socially subversive works, particularly in the translation and transformation of poetic forms such as the sonnet sequence. Chapters 2 and 3 explore how medievalism allows women writers of the middle and upper-

middle classes the means to express criticism of contemporary wars without unmitigated censure, focusing chronologically on the Napoleonic and Crimean Wars. These chapters consider how, through medievalism, women writers demonstrate the confining nature of socially structured definitions of femininity, and challenge particularly the idea that women should not engage in politics. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss how women writers consider historical figures who by their activity (Joan of Arc) or role (as queens) cannot be contained within the socially-constructed gender discourses; and how their exploration of queenship and the chivalric lady, at a time when the reigning monarch was both passive icon and active ruler, allowed women writers a means of expressing discontent at the received social constructions and expectations of femininity. Chapter 5 further explores the “queenly” women of Arthurian legend, and the prevalence of presentations of Enid and Elaine in the nineteenth century. The final chapters of the book concentrate on presentations of the Arthurian queen Guinevere in poetry and book illustration, and how William Morris’s medieval vision of the queen and Tennyson’s morally chastized nineteenth-century version influence women writers and artists.

Many of the writers discussed have been the focus of recent critical recovery, poets such as Amelia Opie, Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Augusta Webster. *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism* also offers a reassessment of the work of lesser-known writers, notably the long unjustly ignored Louisa Stuart Costello (1799-1870), who was a talented translator of medieval and contemporary European languages, a poet, novelist, travel writer, historian, biographer and painter. Her translations of medieval French poetry and reworkings of medieval legends, most notably her presentation of the Lady of

Shalott story, offer an insightful critique of her own society from an academic standpoint steeped in the literature and culture of the medieval period. Widely published and distributed throughout her long life, her contemporaries regarded Costello so highly that in 1845 her request for a civil list pension was granted.

However, she has received scant attention in the recent selection of anthologies of nineteenth-century women poets, which have developed from the surge of recent work in this field, and is now largely forgotten. Her fascination with the medieval was to pervade her life and work, as she acknowledged in a letter to Stacey Grimaldi in July 1848: “Those illustrious names you mention carry me back to days of chivalry and romance, to which I blush to confess, living in these days, that I am devoted.”⁵ *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism* shows the significance of Costello’s wide-ranging work, demonstrating how richly it deserves reassessment. Her life and work, spanning as it does seventy years of the century, demonstrates the permeable nature of the divisions between Romanticism and Victorianism, and consequently Romantic medievalism and Victorian medievalism, as does the work of her near contemporary Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism is not an exhaustive study of the huge number of nineteenth-century women writers and artists who use medievalism in their work. The volume of such medievalist work by women is immense: only a sample of the vast range available is the focus here. Not all women use medievalism in new ways: many writers, like Charlotte Mary Yonge, used medievalism in support of the traditional, conservative gender ideas of the age, and applaud chivalry as a discourse in which men can inhabit an active sphere, while women remain passive and iconic. What *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century*

Medievalism uniquely identifies is the strong alternative tradition of women using medievalism as a discourse to facilitate a hidden and acceptable means of subversion, transgression, and ultimately empowerment, providing these writers with freedom of expression.

¹ *Ancient Ballads and Songs* (1790), as shown Arthur Johnston, 80.

² For a summary of the Disraeli and his supporters in the Young England group, the three Tory aristocrats who came into Parliament in their early twenties, filled with chivalrous zeal and steeped in the Middle Ages, see Girouard 82-86.

³ In her dissertation, *The Appropriation of the Medieval Motif by Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers*, Natalie Woodall provides the only other study of women writers using medievalism. Woodall's dissertation explores a range of previously under explored uses of medievalism, mentioning some interesting instances of working class women writers who use medievalism. Woodall focuses on the development of the medieval damsel image in the work of women writers and offers a traditional analysis of the work of some writers: for example Woodall suggests that Hemans, "felt obliged to glorify the passive, retiring damsel whose life was literally linked to a male's because contemporary women were expected to consider marriage their 'career'" (220). Part of Woodall's thesis was published in the article "'Women are knight-errant to the last': Nineteenth-Century Women Writers Reinvent the Medieval Literary Damsel". In Gentrup ed. 1998.

⁴ The question of how to refer to the poet who became Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but only after achieving fame as E.B.B. or Elizabeth B. Barrett, is complex. Throughout *Women Writers and Nineteenth Century Medievalism*, she is referred to as Elizabeth Barrett in discussions of work that pre-date her 1846 marriage, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning when referring to her post 1846 works, and when making more general points about her work as a whole.

⁵ Letter from Louisa Stuart Costello to Stacey Grimaldi, July 1848: British Library: Additional MS 34189, f.357.