Women Writers and the Medieval

Clare Broome Saunders

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores the ways in which medievalism gave intellectual and politically astute women the imaginative means to discuss contemporary social issues and problems without facing the censure that more open social comment might induce. Using medieval linguistic translations, themes, motifs, and settings for diverse artistic, religious, and socio-political purposes, many women writers expressed subversive and challenging opinions: while others, like Charlotte Mary Yonge, offered tales of gentlemanly chivalry and iconic femininity that upheld conservative ideas about society and gender. Women writers' paradoxical uses of medievalism were seen most clearly in the literature of the Crimean War, and embodied in the role of the reigning monarch, who was both passive chivalric icon and modern ruler. From Anglo-Saxon scholarship to courtly fifteenth-century images, invocations of the Middle Ages provided women with a rich source of allegory and comparison. Many writers perceived the Middle Ages as a time of greater social freedom than their own nineteenth-century experience: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Augusta Webster explored imaginatively the position of women in Victorian society through medieval settings. Many writers used medieval figures to illustrate contemporary issues: Joan of Arc became an emblem of social equality and an icon for the suffragists, and the legendary Guinevere was used to highlight the confines and injustices of contemporary marriage legislation. By focusing on the work of women writers, this chapter highlights their often overlooked contribution to the development of the medievalist discourse in the nineteenth century.

Keywords: medievalism, women writers, women's rights, translation, Arthurian legend, women's suffrage, Crimean War, Queen Victoria, chivalric gender roles.

> [T]he rapturous acclamations that drowned the pealing of the bells and the thunders of the artillery, at the recognition of our beloved liege Lady, Queen Victoria, in Westminster Abbey, can never be forgotten by those who then heard the voices of a united nation uplifted in assent.[1]

NINETEENTH-CENTURY women used medievalism to describe their social and imaginative experience, from the accession of the 'liege Lady, Queen Victoria' to the suffragists who marched in the guise of Joan of Arc at the beginning of the twentieth century. Post-Conquest England could be perceived as a time where women enjoyed a climate of greater rights and freedom than their nineteenth-century present, the Middle Ages 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'.[2] At the same time, the duty, obedience, security, and purer life other writers saw in a medieval society made it an appealing exemplar for the questioning, fraught turmoil of their industrial, modern day. During the Victorian age, the medieval revival, always present in post-medieval British culture, reached its apotheosis: the Anglo-Saxonisms and medievalisms in women's literary, social, political, and historical writings through the century offer a complex variety of views and debates.[3]

(p. 569) Victoria continually manipulated chivalric ideas in her self-presentation, to win support for herself and for her German consort. It was through images of legendary and historical kings that Victoria directed a public relations campaign for her husband, both during his life and to safeguard his memory. Victoria was variously a damsel in distress, in need of the chivalric support of government and nation, a liege Lady demanding and deserving the fidelity and love of her people, and, during the unpopular Crimean War, the epitome of the lover/mother/sister waiting for news of returning warriors. Responding to the press reports of the hesitant new Queen's accession speech, which had focused on Victoria's maidenly weeping, that she '*burst into tears*', which continued to 'flow in torrents down her now pallid cheeks',[4] Elizabeth Barrett (EBB) considered the actual potency of Victoria's display of feminine fragility in two commemorative poems, 'The Young Queen' and 'Victoria's Tears', both first published in *The Athenaeum* in 1837.[5] 'The Young Queen' takes its epigraph from Victoria's accession speech: the poem attributes the queen's power to traditionally feminine qualities: 'A nation looks to thee / For steadfast sympathy: … And as thy mother joys in thee, in them shalt thou rejoice'. In 'Victoria's Tears', EBB muses on the contradiction that in displaying weakness Victoria strengthens her authority: 'the tyrant's sceptre cannot move, / As those pure tears has moved!'. As George Eliot also later recognized, 'Our little humbug of a queen is more endurable than the rest of her race because she calls forth a chivalrous feeling'.[6]

Medievalism and the literary marketplace

From the beginning of Victoria's reign, commentators like Agnes Strickland characterized her monarchy using medieval terms of reference: the concept of queenship, and the reappraisal of the role of queen, infused Victorian literature. Biographies of historical queens and queenly women, 'role model anthologies', flooded the literary market.[7] The historical purpose of these works is often secondary to the didactic one—to show how a contemporary woman should behave through the praise or censure of a historical woman's conduct. In addition to royal queenship, these anthologies developed the idea of domestic 'queenship', further promoted by Ruskin among others. These historical biographies of

eminent women were complicit in the commodification (p. 570) of a nineteenth-century ideal of domestic femininity, propounded in the annuals and gift book market that had emerged from the late 1820s: but they also offered a crucial commercial publishing outlet to professional women writers and historians. While history 'was the principal non-fiction genre and assumed to be a distinctly male preserve',[8] publishers were eager to exploit the growing public appetite for historical biography, and were willing to commission women like Louisa Stuart Costello, Anna Jameson, and Agnes Strickland to undertake life writing. Through this outlet, and in articles for annuals, gift books, and journals, women historians could express their interest in medieval history, and in the changing role of women through history.

Costello and Jameson found a further vehicle for their scholarship in medieval history and art criticism, respectively, through the new and developing genre of travel writing. The end of the Napoleonic Wars reopened the possibility of continental travel: the establishment of the first travel agency by Cook in 1845, and the emergence of the guidebook publishing by Murray and Baedeker in the same decade, heralded the rise of tourism rather than Grand Tourism, and a corresponding surge in travelogues, essential reading for those who considered themselves travellers rather than tourists. The greater numbers of women travelling to the Continent meant that this was a market in which women writers could excel. Jameson used her travel writing in works such as *Visits and Sketches at Home and Abroad* (1834) and *Memoirs and Essays Illustrative of Art, Literature, and Social Morals* (1846) to springboard her incisive works of art criticism in a male-dominated market. Costello's successful and acclaimed travel books, *A Summer amongst the Bocages and the Vines* (1840), *A Pilgrimage to Auvergne from Picardy to le Velay* (1842), and *Béarn and the Pyrenees: A Legendary Tour of the Country of Henry Quatre* (1844), and *A Tour to and from Venice* (1846) recount her journeys around France and Italy. However, they crucially provide a medieval history of both countries, a platform for the professional writer to publish her academic medieval studies, and to express her interest in regional changes and variations in Arthurian literature. The commercial success of her travel books was influential in Costello's publishing success with a range of biographies of medieval French figures: Catherine de Medici (1841), Jacques Coeur (1847), Mary, Duchess of Burgundy (1853), and *Anne, Duchess of Brittany, Twice Queen of France* (1855).[9]

Translations

Costello's travel books also enabled her to continue the quest she began with *Specimens of the Early Poetry of France* (1835) to introduce medieval French literature 'to the (p. 571) English public', publishing translations of regional poems, and rewriting her own versions of the varied Arthurian Celtic myths she encounters.[10] Costello does not shirk from subjects which society might deem unsuitable for a woman writer: for example, the two *Lais* of Marie de France that she chooses to include are *Chevrefoil*, a tale of the adulterous love of Tristan and Yseult, and *Bisclavret*, the story of a werewolf trapped by his adulterous wife and her lover. However, to ensure the circulation of the poems, and to at-

tempt to guide them to a positive reception, Costello avoids a direct translation of lines with sexual or violent content. So while, in a literal translation, Bisclavret's wife propositions the suitor knight 'I offer you my love and my body; / make me your mistress!'[11], in Costello she swears a toned down 'deadly oath of love' (54). Like many nineteenth-century translators, Costello often uses archaisms to emphasize the poetic beauty of the medieval language, and to increase the appeal of the work by instilling a sense of antique charm.

While Costello's most recent templates came from male writers, such as George Ellis's *Specimens of the Early English Poets* (1790), she was actually building on a tradition of scholarly women translating from medieval languages and Anglo-Saxon which had been established at least the century before, most prominently by Elizabeth Elstob. Historically, linguistic translation was a female stronghold: since translators worked with texts written mainly from a viewpoint of male authority, their work did not threaten the establishment in the way that original writing, expressing personal opinions, might—which image facilitated the widespread use of translation as a screen for subversion. A century after Elstob's first publication in 1709, Anna Gurney took up the linguistic Anglo-Saxonist mantle, publishing *A Literal Translation of the Saxon Chronicle* in 1819, an exceptionally scholarly work with clear and professionally presented notes and references. Ann Hawkshaw retells the history of Britain from the earliest times to the Norman Conquest in her *Sonnets from Anglo-Saxon History* (1854), which built on some of the Anglo-Saxons poems in her first poetry volume, *Poetry for My Children* (1847). Hawkshaw 'responds to, and challenges, prominent Anglo-Saxon scholars of her day through her reflective and suggestive response to history and through the idiosyncratic formatting of her volume', as 'each of her sonnets are faced with a short prose extract from the work of prominent historians of the Anglo-Saxon period or early nineteenth century translations of Anglo-Saxon texts'.[12] Hawkshaw here is interacting with historians rather than citing sources, expressing her own poetic vision of history at a time when King Alfred was emerging as a symbol of all that was best in British Empire and nationhood.

In her translation of *The Mabinogion* (1838–45), Lady Charlotte Guest was responding to the literary and cultural antiquarianism of the Romantic period, especially the Celtic interests of Scott and the scholarship of Southey's 1816 popular edition of (p. 572) Malory. Guest dedicates her translation to her children, in the hope that they will 'become early imbued with the chivalric and exalted sense of honour, and the fervent patriotism' shown in the historical Welsh tales.[13] Guest's translation displays the expected euphemism, like Costello avoiding sections of the original text with explicit sexual or violent content: sex in Guest is couched in terms of marriage, where characters speak of becoming brides and taking wives, rather than in the more explicit original. For all that, Guest is faithful to the story and characterization of Enid from the Welsh tale, even though at the 'very heart of this subversive story is the willed disobedience of Enid', who deliberately and consistently goes against her husband's wishes and speaks out of love for him.[14] Enid, in Guest's translation as in the original, is consistently rational, active, and in need of speech: her disobedience is virtuous as it makes Geraint realize his false categorization of women, while proving her enduring love for her husband. When Tennyson came to use Guest's

Mabinogion as a source text for his *Idylls of the King*, however, the social message and moral framing of his text leads him to transform the role of the female characters. Marriage and the idea of 'true wife' are central to Tennyson's version: in 1873, when marriage legislation was at the heart of social discussion in the run up to the 1874 Married Women's Property Act, Tennyson split his 'Enid' into two parts, one of which focuses on 'The Marriage of Geraint'. Geraint and Enid are 'wedded with all ceremony' in Tennyson,[15] a Victorian marriage not the rather vague 'usual bond made between two persons was made between Geraint and the maiden' (235) of Guest's *Mabinogion*. For Guest, Gwenhwyvar appears *only* as a benevolent queen, accorded all the rights and respect of the court, rational and of sound judgement: the marriage of Gwenhwyvar and Arthur is one of trust, equality, and authority, unlike the stern judge and grovelling penitent at the end of the *Idylls*.

Arthuriana

Arthuriana was a consistent and powerful strain of the medieval revival. With Arthurian chivalric ideals at the heart of the cult of the English gentleman, Arthur became a potent image, and a focus of reassessment for writers throughout the century. Arthurian legend 'is so very representative of patterns of failure in social and cultural life' that writers, who sought for the purer religious and social ideals that they saw in the Middle Ages, used the characters of Arthuriana to reflect on the problems in their modern society.[16] Tennyson's publication of his first four *Idylls of the King* as 'The True and the (p. 573) False' demonstrated how easily the women of Arthurian legend could be used to categorize types of womanhood. Dinah Mulock Craik's short story 'Avillion: or the Happy Isles' (1853), another source for Tennyson's *Idylls*, is a didactic tale of the afterlife, which preaches the reward of eternal peace for a Christian life.[17] The focus is the justice of Guinever's eternal punishment for adultery, Craik negating Guinever to 'False queen, false wife, false woman' (72). Guinever is denied the right to articulation permitted to Elaine la Blanche, upon whom her role as constant lover is displaced, and who appears in her funeral barge, to tell how she still loves Launcelot in Paradise. Conversely, many women writers, often influenced by the assertive heroine of William Morris's 'Defence of Guenevere' (1858), use the Arthurian queen to reflect critically on women's role in Victorian society. In an analogous poem, 'Queen Guinevere' (1861), Mary Elizabeth Braddon uses Guinevere to explore issues of particular contemporary significance: the expectations of a woman in a public role, and restrictions placed on women in areas of love, sexuality, and marriage.[18] Similarly, through the Guinevere figure in 'Lancelot and Guinevere'(1872), Violet Fane explores love in a society where marriage was often a contract rather than a choice for women.[19]

In an age where women's behaviour and rights were codified more than ever before, many women writers found inspiration from the female characters of Arthuriana, which often jarred with more traditional interpretations of Arthurian legend. While the figures of Enid and Elaine, chaste wife and pure maiden, held particular appeal for conservative views of woman, some women writers used these figures more subversively. As early as

1829, Louisa Stuart Costello had presented a Lady of Shalott who was a far cry from Tennyson's cursed maiden, and the 'sweet and serviceable' Elaine of his *Idylls*. Translating from the original Lady of Shalott story in the medieval *Cento Novelle Antiche*, Costello's Lady, in 'The Funeral Boat', is the lucid mistress of her actions and her space, one who is not simply pining away through love but, seduced and betrayed by Launcelot, is making a choice to surrender her life.[20] In a society where women's reputation is all, loss of good name is tantamount to death, and the Lady chooses to die. The richness and beauty of the jewels, fabrics, and flowers with which the Lady decorates the funeral boat are imbued with the allegorical significance they have in the medieval literature of the French Romance tradition in which Costello was steeped. Writing for *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap-Book* for 1833, Letitia Elizabeth Landon offers another version of the Lady of Shalott in 'A Legend of Tintagel Castle'. Lancelot is here guilty of causing his lover's death, deserting the lady after a sexual relationship (p. 574) and replacing her in his affections with 'the proud and the beautiful queen, / Whose image was treasured as her's once had been'.[21] Both Costello's and Landon's poems appear in the literary annuals that, on the surface, offer an ideal view of domestic femininity and beauty, 'but they frequently suggest contexts that threaten to disturb the domestic fabric'.[22] Women writing in these annuals often distanced their subjects by using mythological or medieval imagery to maintain the surface respectability of their subjects, and to 'quiet evangelical protestations of impropriety' (96).

War and politics

Medievalism gave intellectual and politically astute women the imaginative means to discuss contemporary social issues and problems without facing the censure that more open social comment might induce. Amelia Opie had demonstrated how medievalism could be used for political reasons in 'The Warrior's Return' (1808), in which she criticized the wars with France, especially the bloodiness of the Peninsular Wars and the political vanity that had caused Britain to enter many unnecessary wars. When Anna Barbauld published her searing and finely wrought *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812) on the same theme four years later, the unmitigated, appalled critical backlash destroyed Barbauld's poetic career, and brought into focus 'the limits imposed on women's direct, historically informed and unsentimental intervention in the most crucial aspects of national culture'.[23] Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon followed Opie's example and used medieval images and settings in poetry that considered women's contemporary social position, and contemporary politics. Hemans, like Opie, demonstrates a particular interest in the position of women in war, in that, across cultures and through history, women have been the victims of men's power struggles, as she explores most obviously in *Records of Woman* (1828). The young poet was fascinated by the war: yet, beneath the apparent simplicity of many of her patriotic eulogies, Hemans's work often manifests the same tension that was apparent in public opinion of the day, between the enthusiasm that made iconic heroes of Nelson and Wellington, and the concern about the wars that had dominated the first quarter of the century. In a letter to her aunt in 1808, the teenage Hemans, then Browne, identifies the central irony of women's discussion of war at the turn of the nineteenth

century, (p. 575) namely that although women were bound up in war by the presence of their brothers, fathers, husbands, and lovers, 'females are forbidden to interfere in politics'.[24] Hemans decided not to publish two political verse satires 'The Army' (9 March 1816) and 'Reform' (n.d. 1816/17), both dealing with post-war economic distress and financial cuts to the armed forces, 'because such overtly satirico-political verse would have been considered by many to be unfeminine' (22). Instead Hemans presents 'unfeminine' subjects in a 'feminine' framework. Contrary to expectations set up in the title, the subject of *The Domestic Affections* (1812) is war, and the ways in which the 'domestic bliss' of home is destroyed by the horrors of war. War here is not glorious, Hemans writing instead of 'carnage', 'rage of combat', and 'the ensanguined plain'. Hemans's most thought-provoking works on the effects of war and women's role in war and politics were two retrospective ones, both of which have historical settings: 'The Abencerrage' (*Tales and Historic Scenes*, 1819), is set in medieval Andalusia, and the dramatic poem *The Siege of Valencia* (1823), inspired by two late thirteenth-century city sieges, charts an imaginary siege of the city by Moors.

Similarly Landon, in the feminine guise of her persona 'L.E.L.', uses medievalism as the screen through which to write about the socio-political topics that interested her. Landon's early war poetry focuses on the plight of the families of the combatants. In *The Improvisatrice; and Other Poems* (1824), shielded behind the Italianate discussion of female genius in the title poem, Landon explores the position of women in the Napoleonic Wars that had ended nine years earlier: the widow in 'The Deserter'; a bereaved lover who dies of grief in 'The Grey Cross'; the wife and child mourning a soldier who had returned from the war, but never recovered in 'The Soldier's Grave'.[25] Despite the contemporary focus in these works, the majority of the war poems in the volume use a medieval setting as a screen through which Landon can offer a critique of war. In 'Roland's Tower: A Legend of the Rhine' (129–42) Isabelle is served a double blow: Roland leaves to fight for her father, but in his haste to win military glory, Roland kills her father by mistake, echoing the fatal error in Opie's 'The Warrior's Return'. The protagonist of 'The Crusader' (304–7) returns from 'the sainted battles of Palestine' to find his lover and family dead and his home destroyed: he returns to the battle in desperation to find death. After a courtly preamble that describes the parting of knight and lady, the field of battle in 'The Warrior' (308–12) comes as a hideous contrast, where 'the crow and the raven flock over head / To feed on the hearts of the helpless dead' (310). Chivalry and courtliness may screen war, but cannot erase its horrors.

Professional writers like 'L.E.L.' and Hemans, who had to publish relentlessly to support themselves and their family, found the screen of medieval distance a useful vehicle to safeguard commercial success.

Form and gender

(p. 576) With perhaps less financial reason to need a strategic historical screen, EBB demonstrates a fascination with medieval poetic forms and imagery throughout her ca-

reer. Her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), once dismissed as wifely outpourings of love for her poet-husband, demonstrate EBB's long-held fascination with the medieval sonnet form that predates her correspondence with Browning. EBB throws her work, and a poetic form dominated from its medieval origins by men, into a female focus and remoulds it to create a language of equality. While the traditional sonnet sequence employs the language and expectations of courtly love, EBB subverts the set roles, of the iconicized (female) beloved and active (male) lover, primarily through her very act of (female) composition. Finding the role of beloved humiliating, EBB 'does not simply reverse the sexual roles; she disturbs them',[26] refashioning them to suggest an equality and interdependence between the lovers. Other women writers followed EBB's lead in using the sonnet sequence in innovative ways, although in the preface to her *Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets* (1881), Christina Rossetti overlooks EBB's achievement when she emphasizes her intention to give voice to the silent 'lady' of the traditional love sonnet.[27] George Eliot later expressed filial love in her *Brother and Sister* sonnets (1874), while Augusta Webster used the sonnet sequence to describe maternal rather than erotic love in *Mother and Daughter* (1895).

Just as EBB overhauled the medieval form of the sonnet, she also used the ballad form in innovative way, employing 'the starker power structures of medieval society to foreground the status of women as objects in a male economy of social exchange, and to unmask the subtler preservation of gender inequities in contemporary Victorian ideology'.[28] While Aurora Leigh dismisses medievalism, 'I do distrust the poet who discerns / No character or glory in his times, / And trundles back his soul five hundred years, / Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court' (book V, 422, ll. 189–92), EBB herself 'was not just brushed by the fringes of Romantic and Victorian medievalism,…she was a serious medievalist, that is a scholar who applied her knowledge seriously; and…her familiarity with primary medieval texts,…was not temporary or superficial, but developed and woven into the fibre of her art'.[29] EBB uses medievalism to show contempt for contemporary gender ideals that demand female passivity; what she called in a letter to Mitford, 'the sin and shame of those divine angels, called women, daring to tread in the dust of a multitude, when they (p. 577) ought to be minding their clouds'.[30] The disguised page in 'The Romaunt of the Page' sacrifices herself in disillusionment at her knight-husband's hypocrisy, and because of the social impossibility of her position as 'False page, but truthful woman' (193, l. 297). Brought to cynical despair by the realization that she has risked herself for an unworthy husband—'Have I renounced my womanhood / For wifehood unto *thee*' (193, ll. 276–7, EBB's emphasis)—the page ultimately achieves the final victory by her death. In a reversal of the usual chivalric roles, the woman page dies as champion of the (unknowingly) passive, and therefore socially emasculated, knight, recognizing her triumph over her social confinement, and so dying 'With smile more bright in victory / Than any sword from sheath' (194, ll. 325–6). As in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, EBB's revisions for the 1844 version of the poem demonstrate the constrictions of the chivalric code for men as well as women: the male knight is also a victim, forced into a marriage of obligation with a woman whom he had never seen. Similarly, in 'Rhyme of the Duchess May', a striking reworking of 'Edom O'Gordon' from Percy's *Reliques*, Sir Guy is a victim

of the gender structures he propagates. Guy's error is to misjudge his wife and expect her to slot into a dutiful role when she had shown her determination to follow her own will in marrying him. The Duchess refuses to leave her husband, as to do so would be 'unwomanly' in her terms: 'Meekly have I done all thy biddings under sun /…/ But by all my womanhood, which is proved so, true and good, / I will never do this one' (236, ll. 321–2, 324–5). While the wife in 'Edom O' Gordon' is, with her children, a sitting target in her castle, the Duchess May demands the right to choose a noble death with her husband, rejecting the position of woman as war-chattel: 'Go to, faithful friends, go to! judge no / more what ladies do' (236, ll. 297–8).

Mid-century novelists also use medievalism to criticize the passivity of women in their society, and to explore the social transitions occurring in their 'modern' world. In her landmark study *George Eliot and the Discourses of Medievalism*, Judith Johnston explores how 'Eliot, recognizing that "many things were possible" in medieval literature, utilizes its discourses both for their potential for subversiveness and their potential for mediation, to affirm that many things are possible socially, culturally, and politically in her modern contemporary world, if only the opportunity is there'.[31] Eliot uses the structures of Arthurian discourse in *Daniel Deronda* 'even as she shifts and distorts them at will' (144): the eponymous hero undertakes a chivalric quest for religious and spiritual revelation, and Gwendolen Harleth is cast as a disrupted Guinevere figure, a character who embodies lust, loss, tears, and penitence. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot uses medievalism to articulate Dorothea Brooke's precarious position as 'a woman on the cusp of a radically and rapidly changing world' (27). Medieval hagiography expresses the complexity of Dorothea's place in society, associating her with numerous female saints and martyrs, in particular the scholarly St Theresa of Avila. In addition to her intellectual engagement with nineteenth-century medievalism, Eliot was also a keen (p. 578) scholar of medieval texts: Lewes reported to John Blackwood in 1861 that she was 'buried in the Middle Ages' in preparing material for *Romola*.[32]

Eliot was not the only novelist to imbue her novels with medieval imagery to explore contemporary issues. Margaret Hale's reversal of the 'damsel-in-distress' icon of passive chivalric femininity in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854–5) allows her to cope with the public and private turbulence in her life. In a key scene she goads John Thornton into action to face his workers, with reference to chivalric qualities: 'If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man'.[33] Subverting the usual gender roles of chivalry, Margaret protects him with her body, the thrown pebble striking her head instead: 'She threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond' (179). Similarly, at the novel's close, it is the independent Margaret who can save Thornton by providing the financial backing to keep him at Marlborough Mills. Like Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë also negotiates the gender stereotypes of chivalric romance. The independent and wealthy Jane Eyre returns to save the damaged and powerless Rochester: despite still calling him 'my dear Master', it is Jane who was forced to embark on a quest to save herself, and Jane who returns on her own terms and able to make her own choices.[34] Shirley Keeldar, from a family who 'by virtue of their antiquity, and their distinction of lords of the manor, took precedence of all', is in-

troduced like a courtly gentleman: ‘I am an esquire: Shirley Keeldar, Esquire, ought to be my style and title. They gave me a man’s name; I hold a man’s position: it is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood.’[35] Medievalism supplies a wealth of images through which women novelists could explore the complexities of women’s changing positions in society, and demand a reappraisal of their social roles.

Conversely, medievalism was used to uphold the status quo and ideas of gentlemanly chivalry that ‘became a shaping force in British imperialism which contributed in no small measure to the spread of Britain’s colonial power’.[36] Charlotte Mary Yonge, a leading proponent of the Oxford High Church movement and a friend of John Keble, saturates the nineteenth-century chivalry in her writing with her deeply held religious beliefs in discipline, obedience, and a ‘resolute fulfilment of duty’.[37] Sir Guy Morville, hero of *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853), is, in the words of his cousin Charlotte, a ‘true knight’: he is ‘a very chivalrous lover; the polish and courtesy that sat so well on his frank, truthful manners, were even more remarkable in his courtship’, and a (p. 579) contemporary Galahad, the character he defends so vehemently.[38] The women in *The Heir* serve only as foils to the male characters, and seem ‘to exist less for themselves than to complete the lesson offered by the men with whom they are linked—we encounter them largely as daughters, sisters, lovers, mothers, wives, and their role in the novel is to complement the male programme’ (xx). *The Heir* was influential for a generation of medievalists, like William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. Charlotte’s younger brother, Julian, told her that most of his fellow subalterns in the Rifle Brigade serving in the Crimea had a copy of *The Heir*, and in the crowded hospitals of Scutari it was the book most constantly requested.

Crimean War

During the Crimean War the clash between those writers for whom the values of chivalry were ideals on which to build an Empire, and those using medievalism to critique the status quo and demand new possibilities for society, was brought into high relief. The imagery of the medieval crusade is most obviously exploited in the vast range of poetry written to commemorate the now infamous example of military mismanagement, the Charge of the Light Brigade, at the Battle of Balaklava (25 October 1854). Caroline Hayward writes of Lord Cardigan’s succeeding to the ‘lion-heart’ of the crusading Richard I; Helen Macgregor suggests ‘No shade hath past o’er England’s star, / No rust hath dimmed her steel’, despite the fact that the Charge was a demonstration that contemporary ‘strife prove harder, / Than e’en in days gone by’.[39] Louisa Stuart Costello’s use of a medieval setting to communicate an anti-war stance comes as a direct confrontation to this morale-boosting chivalry with its echoes Walter Scott and Charlotte Yonge.[40] In her long poem *The Lay of the Stork* (1856), Costello shrinks neither from the vivid description of the horrors of war with the ‘full tides of crimson gore / And mangled forms, from either host, / Hurl’d down, and in abysses lost’ (66), nor the suffering enforced on the waiting women: ‘Sisters! there your brothers lie: / Mothers! there your sons are prone / Wives! your husbands mangled die, / Bleeding-fever’d-crush’d-alone! (71). Costello blurs the boundaries of the medieval and the present: she does not indicate that she is telling a contemporary

story until the mention of Scutari almost three-quarters of the way through the poem, when the ‘band of pilgrims blest, / Speeding onward to the East’ (72) become identifiable as Nightingale’s nurses. Lila, Costello’s female protagonist, is cast as the Lady of Shalott, who lives in a ‘shelter’d castle’ (3), the subject of local legend. Unlike the Lady of Shalott, Lila’s (p. 580) solitary life is self-enforced to aid her search for knowledge, so she can think away from the ‘falseness and imperfect show’ (10) of society. Her physical separation reflects her enforced mental and spiritual position, as a woman absorbed in thinking about world issues in a society which bars her from political discussion. *The Lay of the Stork* highlights the cost of women’s exclusion from politics, and the contribution women could make if given the opportunity. When Lila’s message of peace, sent tied around a stork’s neck, is ignored, she takes the only active option open to her: joining the ‘angel band’ (73) of Nightingale’s Scutari nurses. Lila’s message, which Khalid has held at his breast, saves his life by shielding him from a blade, symbolizing its life-affirming nature: if the message had been heeded, it could have stopped the death and misery of war. Peace, when it comes, brings with it shame at the ‘angry past’ and war (94).

When a Day of Fasting and Prayer was declared at the outbreak of the Crimean War, *Punch* (6 May 1854) printed a complex image of Victoria dressed in armour, *England’s War Vigil* (Fig. 34.1). Here Victoria represents Britannia, shield and helmet in the background: however, the kneeling woman offering her sword to God in this image has most obvious echoes of Joan of Arc.[41] The cross-dressing, arms-wielding Joan fascinated the nineteenth century, particularly influenced by the historical records of her life and death as presented in Jules Michelet’s 1841 ‘Jeanne d’Arc’ volume for his *Histoire de France*, and Jules Quicherat’s ground-breaking publication of the first valid edition of the records of Joan’s trial and related documents (1841–9), which were translated into English in 1869. For many politically conservative women, Joan was an icon of womanhood and female piety, who paid the ultimate sacrifice by putting patriotic duty before her own safety. The market was littered with female-authored didactic tales for girls who held the complex Joan as an exemplar—‘the most womanly of women who ever breathed’.[42] The historical facts of a woman who could be saint, warrior, and presenter of her own lucid self-defence were inspirational, at the same time, to supporters of women’s suffrage at the end of the century. Joan’s fate was a demonstration of the irrational fear of martially and politically active women, refused a ransom by the country that she saved because of its unease at the power of her role. In 1866, Barbara Leigh Smith proposed the first petition on women’s suffrage to John Stuart Mill, signed by 1,521 people including Leigh Smith’s cousin, Florence Nightingale, and Mill made his first presentation of the Private Members’ Bill to the House of Commons. In the same year, Augusta Webster published her *Dramatic Studies*, which include the dramatic monologue that gives expression to the compelling and lucid voice of ‘Jeanne D’Arc’. Joan examines her role, her difference from other women, the tragedy of her isolation, and the enormity of her sacrifice for the public good:

Figure 34.1. ‘England’s War Vigil’, *Punch*, 669 (6 May 1854): 185

> Ah! I like other women might have lived
> A home-sweet life in happy lowly peace,
> (p. 581) And France had not been free …
> But I obeyed the visions: I arose,
> And France is free—And I ere the next sun
> Droops to the west shall be whitened mass—
> Dead ashes on the place where the wild flames
> Shot up—oh horrible! (35–6)

Joan was an icon for the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) in the fight for women’s suffrage, and became closely associated with Christabel Pankhurst, organizing secretary of the WSPU and editor of *The Suffragette*, the newspaper that claimed ‘Joan is the militant women’s ideal’.[43] Joan of Arc appeared on many covers of its issues, and on advertising posters: women on horseback, dressed as Joan, led many WSPU demonstrations.[44] The age which opened with the image of the medieval damsel in distress, closed with the icon of the medieval militant woman, before the madness and (p. 582) horror of the First World War exploded all images of Victorian chivalry, in the noise of the armaments factory, and the mud, mutilation, and carnage of the battlefield.

Suggested reading

Broome Saunders, Clare, *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism* (New York: Palgrave, 2009).

Broome Saunders, Clare, *Louisa Stuart Costello: A Nineteenth-Century Writing Life* (New York: Palgrave, 2015).

Byrd, Deborah, ‘Combating an Alien Tyranny: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Evolution as a Feminist Poet’, *Browning Institute Studies*, 15 (1987): 23–41.

Davis, Kathleen, and Nadia Altschul (eds),. *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World The Idea of ‘the Middle Ages’ Outside Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

Gordon, Felicia, and Gina Luria Walker (eds), *Rational Passions: Women and Scholarship in Britain, 1702–1870* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2008).

Hoagwood, Terence Allan, and Kathryn Ledbetter, *‘Colour’d Shadows’: Contexts in Publishing, Printing, and Reading Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Hodder, Karen, ‘Elizabeth Barrett and the Middle Ages’ Woeful Queens’, *Studies in Medievalism*, 7 (1995): 105–30.

Johnston, Judith, *George Eliot and the Discourses of Medievalism* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).

Pugh, Tison, and Angela Jane Weisl, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

Yonge, Charlotte Mary, *The Heir of Redclyffe*, ed. Barbara Dennis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Notes:

([1]) Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England, from the Norman Conquest*, 12 vols (London: Colburn, 1840–8), i, p. xvi.

([2]) Deborah Byrd, ‘Combating an Alien Tyranny: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Evolution as a Feminist Poet’, *Browning Institute Studies*, 15 (1987): 23–41, 33.

([3]) Pugh and Weisl echo Davis and Altschul’s astute observation that medievalism ‘can only be considered in the plural’, stressing the necessity of considering ‘the various intersections of medievalisms uniting in a given work’. Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 3. See also Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul (eds), *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of ‘the Middle Ages’ Outside Europe* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2009), 7.

([4]) *The Times*, 22 June 1837, original emphasis.

([5]) *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: John Murray, 1914), 137–8. All references to EBB’s poetry are taken from this edition.

([6]) *The Letters of George Eliot*, ed. G. S. Haight (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954–78), i. 254.

([7]) See Alison Booth, 'Illustrious Company: Victoria among Other Women in Anglo-American Role Model Anthologies', in Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich (eds), *Remaking Queen Victoria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 59–78.

([8]) Felicia Gordon and Gina Luria Walker (eds), *Rational Passions: Women and Scholarship in Britain, 1702–1870* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2008), 15.

([9]) For further discussion of Costello's medievalism, historical biographies, and travel writing see Clare Broome Saunders, *Louisa Stuart Costello: A Nineteenth-Century Writing Life* (New York: Palgrave, 2015).

([10]) Louisa Stuart Costello, *Specimens of the Early Poetry of France* (London: William Pickering, 1835), p. vii.

([11]) *The Lais of Marie de France*, tr. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 95, l. 115.

([12]) *The Collected Works of Ann Hawkshaw*, ed. Debbie Bark (London: Anthem Press, 2014), 318–19.

([13]) *The Mabinogion*, tr. Lady Charlotte Guest (London: Dent, 1906), dedication.

([14]) Jeanie Watson, 'Enid the Disobedient: The *Mabinogion*'s *Gereint and Enid*', in Carole Levin and Jeanie Watson (eds), *Ambiguous Realities: Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 114–32, 116.

([15]) *The Poems of Tennyson in Three Volumes*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 2nd edn (Harlow: Longman, 1987), i, 349, l. 839.

([16]) Judith Johnston, *George Eliot and the Discourses of Medievalism* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 18.

([17]) Dinah Maria Mulock Craik, 'Avillion: or the Happy Isles', *Avillion and Other Tales*, 3 vols (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1853), i. 1–115.

([18]) Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Garibaldi and Other Poems* (London: Bosworth & Harrison, 1861), 269–71.

([19]) Violet Fane, *From Dawn to Noon: Poems* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1872), 131–6.

([20]) Louisa Stuart Costello, 'The Funeral Boat: A Legend', *Forget Me Not; A Christmas and New Year's Present for MDCCCXXIX* (London: R. Ackermann, 1829), 185–92.

([21]) Letitia Elizabeth Landon, *Selected Writings*, ed. Jerome McGann and Daniel Riess (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1997), 211–16.

([22]) Terence Allan Hoagwood and Kathryn Ledbetter, *'Colour'd Shadows': Contexts in Publishing, Printing, and Reading Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 97.

([23]) Fiona Robertson (ed.), *Women's Writing, 1778–1838: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 51.

([24]) Felicia Hemans, *Selected Poems, Prose, and Letters*, ed. Gary Kelly (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2002), 412.

([25]) L.E.L., *The Improvisatrice and Other Poems* (London: Hurst, Robinson & Co., 1824), 185–92, 289–90, 319–21.

([26]) Angela Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), 99.

([27]) *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. R. W. Crump, 3 vols (Baton Rouge, LA, and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), ii. 86.

([28]) Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), 108–9.

([29]) Karen Hodder, 'Elizabeth Barrett and the Middle Ages' Woeful Queens', *Studies in Medievalism*, 7 (1995): 105–30, 107.

([30]) *The Brownings' Correspondence*, ed. Philip Kelley and Ronald Hudson, 16 vols (Winfield, KS: Wedgestone Press, 1984–2007), x. 84.

([31]) Johnston, *George Eliot*, 8.

([32]) Johnston, *George Eliot*, 22.

([33]) Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (1854–5), ed. Angus Easson, 1973, 1982; introd. Sally Shuttleworth, 1998 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 177.

([34]) Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847), ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, 1988), 440.

([35]) Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (1849), ed. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford. Oxford University Press, 1979; 1998), 194, 200.

([36]) Johnston, *George Eliot*, 16.

([37]) Charlotte Mary Yonge, *A Book of Golden Deeds of All Times and All Lands* (London: Blackie, 1864), 7.

([38]) Charlotte Mary Yonge, *The Heir of Redclyffe*, ed. Barbara Dennis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 345, 150–1.

([39]) Patrick Waddington,*'Theirs But to Do and Die': The Poetry of the Charge of The Light Brigade at Balaklava, 25 October 1854* (Nottingham: Astra Press, 1995), 111, 47.

([40]) Louisa Stuart Costello, *The Lay of the Stork* (London: Cash, 1856).

([41]) Especially if *England's Vigil* is compared with John Everett Millais's 1865 portrait of the French saint.

([42]) Amabel Kerr, *Joan of Arc* (1895; London: Catholic Truth Society, 1950), 32.

([43]) *The Suffragette* (9 May 1913): 501.

([44]) Many of these are shown in Diane Atkinson, *The Suffragettes in Pictures* (Stroud: The History Press in Association with the Museum of London, 1996, 2010).

Clare Broome Saunders

Clare Broome Saunders is a member of the English Faculty at the University of Oxford. Her research interests include nineteenth-century women's poetry, nineteenth-century uses of history, and nineteenth-century women travel writers in Europe, in which fields she has published widely. Her most notable recent publications include: Louisa Stuart Costello: A 19th Century Writing Life (2015); Women, Travel Writing, and Truth (2014); and Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism (2009). Current projects include a book on medievalism and politics in the nineteenth century.