

Title

Medievalism: new discipline or scholarly no-man's land?

Author

Richard A. Marsden

Institution

The Open University

Abstract

The term 'medievalism' refers to how people have, since the fifteenth century, conceptualised the thousand years of history preceding that date. The study of medievalism is therefore not about the Middle Ages per se, but rather the ways in which the medieval period has been imagined in the centuries since it ended. Yet the field's origins date from as recently as the 1970s. Medievalism Studies is thus still finding its feet and must consequently deal with some existential questions about its scope and remit, its methodological underpinnings, its implications for how history is periodised, and its relationship with more established disciplines. It also faces criticisms of Anglo-centricism as well as hostility from some historians thanks to the doubts its practitioners raise over established delineations between scholarly and creative depictions of the medieval period. Nonetheless, this new field offers a much-needed challenge to the calcified disciplinary boundaries that shape academia today.

Keywords

Medievalism. Medievalism Studies, Neomedievalism, interdisciplinary, academic disciplines, gothic, periodisation

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Dimitra Fimi, Leighton James and Anna Plassart for their generous and insightful comments on a draft of this essay

Biography

Richard A. Marsden is a Lecturer in History at the Open University, UK. He completed his doctorate at the University of Glasgow in 2010 and has since held teaching and research posts at Cardiff University, Cardiff Metropolitan University and the University of South Wales. He specialises in the ideological uses of the past in Britain, from the eighteenth century to the present day.

Introduction

In 2015 David Matthews proclaimed that 'the ghosts of the Middle Ages are unquiet'. He went on, 'it is the task of medievalism studies [...] to hunt these revenants'. (Matthews, 2015, p. 10). This definition, sepulchral as it sounds, cuts right to the heart of the matter. According to two of its leading practitioners, the study of medievalism is 'the investigation into different ways in which the Middle Ages have been perceived and constructed by latter periods' (Berns and Johnston, 2011, p. 97). The term 'medievalism' thus refers to how people have, since the fifteenth century, conceptualised the thousand or so years of history that preceded that date. The academic study of medievalism is therefore not about the Middle Ages per se, but is rather concerned with the myriad ways in which the medieval period has been imagined and depicted in the centuries since it ended. Yet the examination of what

Louise D'Arcens and Andrew Lynch call 'medievalism's ubiquitous presence in popular culture' (D'Arcens and Lynch, 2014, p. 10) only began in earnest during the 1970s, and has gained broad acceptance as a valid arena of academic enquiry only within the last two decades.

Medievalism Studies is thus still finding its feet and must consequently deal with some challenging existential questions about its scope and remit, its methodological underpinnings, its implications for how European history is periodised, and its relationship with more established disciplines. It also faces criticisms of Anglo-centricism as well as hostility from some historians thanks to the doubts its practitioners raise over established delineations between scholarly and creative depictions of the medieval period. These issues will be addressed in more detail later in this essay. First, however, we need to get a sense of the territory to which this new area of study has staked its claim.

A Brief History of Medievalism

The notion of 'the Middle Ages' is neither absolute or intrinsic. No-one in Europe during the eighth, or the eleventh, or even the thirteenth century thought of themselves or the time in which they lived as 'medieval'. From its inception, the idea of the Middle Ages was a subjective one that was conferred by those who came afterwards. The origins of the label lie with the literati of Renaissance Italy, who used the idea of 'middle time' to mark a lengthy political and intellectual nadir between the accomplishments of Greek and Roman civilisation and the rediscovery of classical learning in their own time. Indeed the phrase 'dark ages' had already been coined by the fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch to refer to the centuries following the fall of Rome (Pugh and Weisl., 2013, pp. 1-2). This negative view of the Middle Ages was reinforced across much of north-western Europe by the religious Reformation of the sixteenth century. The Protestantism that resulted took a variety of forms, but all of them differentiated and justified themselves through attacks on the Roman Catholicism of the medieval period (Jones, 2016, pp. 89-90). Assumptions of medieval barbarity were further bolstered by the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. This Europe-wide movement contrasted the 'light' of reason and objectivity against the superstitious 'darkness' that had supposedly characterised the medieval period (Matthews, 2015, pp. 5-6). As a result, the perception of the Middle Ages as a backward and barbarous age, and thereby a foil against which to measure the achievements of modernity, became both commonplace and powerful.

Crucially, however, a positive interpretation of the Middle Ages can also be traced back to the fifteenth century. An early example of this affirmatory view is Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), a re-working of earlier Arthurian romances which, although itself a product of the late medieval period, nevertheless helped to create an idealised and enduring image of the Middle Ages as a time of honour, chivalry and courtly virtue (D'Arcens, 2016, pp. 3-4). Although such depictions were subsequently eclipsed by the Reformation, interest in the Middle Ages was kept alive by the diligent if sometimes unpopular work of antiquaries, many of whom were Catholic and thus lacked a Protestant prejudice against the Pre-Reformation era (Smith, 1987, pp. 11-70). However, these antiquaries did not define themselves as medievalists; their interest was in the past more broadly. Whilst they were of course aware of the generally accepted periodisation of European time into ancient, medieval and modern, they were not bound by it in the way that the historical

disciplines are today (Simmons, 2001, pp. 3-4). Nevertheless, almost all forms of medievalism can be assigned to one or other of two broad camps which have together shaped our perceptions of the Middle Ages over the past half millennium: either as a regressive and repressive era, or a golden age of heroism, order, and cultural achievement.

Wider interest in the Middle Ages began to flower again with during the second half of the eighteenth century. This romantic movement defined itself in opposition to the rationalism and objectivity of the Enlightenment, which had in turn aligned itself with the intellectual and cultural inheritance of classical Greece and Rome. Romantic thinkers roundly rejected the neo-classicism that dominated literature, art and philosophy at that time, finding it dry, constraining and lacking in nourishment for the soul. Instead they called upon the medieval era, when passion rather than reason had supposedly predominated, as a means of stimulating and celebrating the emotions (Simmons, 2001). The result was what Pauline Stafford has called 'the great age of medievalism' in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Stafford, 2007, p. 8). This new fashion for the Middle Ages manifested in numerous forms, the first and most visually arresting of which was the Gothic Revival in architecture. This movement began in the 1740s, championing the ecclesiastical architecture of the later Middle Ages and deriding what its advocates perceived as the stale symmetry of neoclassical design. The form reached maturity in the nineteenth century as pseudo-medieval castles, churches and public buildings were erected on a grand scale across Europe. Perhaps the most famous example of this was the rebuilding of the British Houses of Parliament in Westminster in an unashamedly Gothic style (Lewis, 2002). At the same time, the literary sphere was witnessing a comparable vogue for the remote and heroic past that was expressed through ballad-collecting and folklore. A rash of poetry inspired by medieval themes soon followed, exemplified by the work of William Morris, Christina Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne and Alfred, Lord Tennyson. At the same time Gothic fiction was on the rise, from Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764) to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) in Britain, and novels such as Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831) in France. Such works used the supernatural elements that were at the time associated with the 'darkness' of the medieval period as a means of exciting an emotional response in their readers. In that way, Gothic literature critiqued the Middle Ages whilst at the same time relishing their potential to provide scandalous and titillating plots (Chandler, 1971, pp. 12-51, 83-122). The art world, meanwhile, saw the growth of movements such as the Nazarenes in Germany and later the Pre-Raphaelites in Britain, who rejected the neo-classical values espoused by the artistic establishment and turned instead to the vibrant religious art of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries for inspiration (Chandler, 1971, pp. 184-230).

These celebrations of the medieval period were a far cry from the longstanding view of it as a fallow and backward age. Some examples were openly nostalgic, although they were often viewed askance by contemporaries. The Eglinton Tournament, a medieval joust for aristocrats held in Scotland in 1839, was one such (Wilson, 2013, pp. 135-6). Yet whilst it was ridiculed at the time, the tournament's legacy lives on in the widespread popularity of historical re-enactment today. Other imaginings of the Middle Ages, however, were infused with urgent contemporary relevance. As intellectuals across Europe reacted against the upheavals and conquests of the French Revolution and Napoleonic era, medieval origin myths became central to the

new nationalisms that were developing throughout the continent. That trend continued during the nineteenth century, and the Middle Ages soon came to be seen as the crucible in which national characters and cultures were forged (Marchal, 2001). Viewed from this perspective, the Neo-gothic architecture of northern Europe could act as an articulation of national pride as well as an expression of romantic nostalgia (Wilson, 2013, pp. 113-132). The same forces were at play in the medieval revival in literature, whether in the chivalric affectations of Alexander Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* (1844), Alfred Lord Tennyson's poetic recasting of Arthurian legend (Barczewski, 2000), or the racial Anglo-Saxonism found in works such as Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820) and Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or the Two Nations* (1845) (Simmons, 1990, pp. 78-112). The work of philologists and antiquaries were key to this process, as medieval vernacular languages such as Anglo-Saxon, Old French and Middle High German to be seen as the vessels in which nascent nationality was held. The *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, a prodigious initiative to publish a vast array of German medieval texts, is a prime example of this. Begun in 1826 and continuing to the present day, the series' motto, 'Holy love for the fatherland gives the spirit', makes an explicit link between medieval origins and the modern German nation (Bartlett, 2001, p. 18). As Patrick Geary provocatively puts it, the history-writing of the nineteenth-century 'has turned our understanding of the past into a toxic waste dump, filled with the poison of ethnic nationalism' (Geary, 2002, p. 15).

For many members of Europe's political and intellectual elite, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries constituted an age of improvement; an era whose progress had left the ignorance and savagery of the Middle Ages far behind. For others, however, it was a time of social and spiritual destabilisation. For them, the Middle Ages offered a vision of the world as it had once been; stable, ordered and built upon traditional beliefs and virtues. In England, for example, the Oxford Movement sought to reinvigorate Anglican worship with the mystery and awe of medieval Catholicism (Alexander, 2007, pp. 92-97). The Arts and Crafts Movement, meanwhile, rejected the mechanical production methods associated with industrialisation in favour of artisan techniques and ornate designs inspired by the Middle Ages. This was part of a wider tendency for intellectuals like Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and William Morris to use an idealised vision of the medieval period as a rebuke to the evils that they divined in the industrialised capitalist society of their own day (Agrawal, 1990, pp. 235-53). In that context, medievalism was part of a wider debate about the direction of history itself. From an Enlightenment perspective, the modern age represented the triumph of reason, the march of progress and, as such, a return to the glories of the classical world. Indeed, the pejorative connotations with which the Middle Ages were originally associated remained powerful throughout this period. Yet romantically-minded thinkers from many fields were uncomfortable with that interpretation. Whilst they mostly shied away from revolutionary solutions, they were in a sense conservative radicals who sought remedies for the ills of the present by reaching back to the medieval past (Chandler, 1971, pp. 4-7). For them, the Middle Ages represented a time of creative and religious feeling, chivalric virtues, and a paternalistic social order to which, in a range of senses and to varying degrees, they wished to return (Kudrycz, 2011, pp. 55-80).

Since the late nineteenth century, the presence of medieval motifs in popular culture has become all the more pervasive. As Umberto Eco put it with admirable

directness, 'people seem to like the Middle Ages' (Eco, 1983, p. 61). The success of films such as *The Vikings* (1958) *Braveheart* (1995), and *A Knight's Tale* (2001), to name just a few, prove that the medieval period can be a draw at the box office (Bildhauer, 2016). Meanwhile, the fantasy fiction of authors like T. H. White, J. R. R. Tolkien, Terry Pratchett and George R. R. Martin is set in quasi-medieval worlds, as is the role-play of *Dungeons and Dragons* and its many derivatives both online and off. Such works can be seen as heirs to the Gothic fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet they can also operate as expressions of national and regional identity, albeit in subtle and veiled ways, just as invocations of the medieval have done since the age of Enlightenment (Kaufman, 2010). Across Europe, popular understandings of history still locate the origins of nations in the Middle Ages. Englishness, for example, is today commonly traced to events such as the arrival of the Saxons in the sixth century and the hard-won liberties of Magna Carta in the thirteenth (Turner, 2003, pp. 183-207). In Germany, meanwhile, pseudo-medieval fantasies were an element of Nazi ideology and the goal of a Greater Germany was built upon nineteenth-century conceptualisations of the medieval *volk* (Wood, 2013, pp. 245-67). Even the Balkan Wars of the 1990s were in part the result of territorial and racial claims based on the misappropriation of medieval history (Berger, 2007). The repugnant nature of such misuses has helped to give renewed impetus in the postwar era to the condemnatory use of 'medieval' as a synonym for 'barbaric' or 'backward', especially in political contexts, thus moving closer to the original, pre-romantic meaning of the label as a foil for the triumphs of the modern age. Nevertheless, both visions of the Middle Ages, the 'grotesque' and the 'romantic' as David Matthews calls them, remain prevalent and potent in contemporary Western culture (Matthews, 2015, pp. 19-35).

Debates and Challenges

The Middle Ages have been perceived and portrayed in a variety of ways over the past five centuries. Yet the scholarly study of those representations is of recent origin. Interest in the use of medieval motifs in post-medieval literary contexts began in the 1960s, with books like *Enchanted Ground: the Study of Medieval Romance in the Eighteenth Century* (Johnston, 1964) and *A Dream of Order: the Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth Century Literature* (Chandler, 1971). Medievalism Studies arose from those foundations in the late 1970s, in large part thanks to the efforts of the American scholars Leslie J. Workman and Kathleen Verduin. Workman championed the new field throughout the 1970s, and in 1979 founded *Studies in Medievalism*, the first academic journal dedicated entirely to the subject. Comparable developments had been occurring in Germany and by the late 1970s works on *Mittelaltar-Reception*, literally 'medieval receptions' had begun to appear (Matthews, 2015, pp. 6-8). The field was given a major boost by the publication of Umberto Eco's essay 'The Return of the Middle Ages' (Eco, 1983). There Eco, already by then something of a superstar academic, highlighted a host of ways in which notions of the medieval play out in popular and political culture across the contemporary Western world. In this way he contributed to something that Workman and Verduin were already working towards; the expansion of Medievalism Studies from the restricted confines of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature to encompass the totality of western culture.

The study of medievalism is therefore still an embryonic field of inquiry and consequently faces a number of challenges. Workman's journal *Studies in*

Medievalism has, for the last forty years, opened with the following quote from the late nineteenth-century historian Lord Acton:

Two great principles divide the world, and contend for the mastery: antiquity and the Middle Ages. These are the two civilizations that have preceded us, the two elements of which ours is composed. All political as well as religious questions reduce themselves practically to this. This is the great dualism that runs through our society. (Utz, 2001, p. 108)

Acton's words allude to one of the main issues with which Medievalism Studies is concerned; that of periodisation. The medieval era, along with the classical and the modern, is part of a widely accepted three-age schematic of European time (Alexander, 2007, pp. xxvii-xxviii). Indeed, the very idea of the Middle Ages is a subjective construct which serves in part to align the self-styled 'modern' era with classical antiquity. For that reason, the study of medievalism as an isolated cultural phenomenon is problematic. By its very nature the notion of the medieval is given meaning only through comparison with what went before and what came after. Yet scholars of Medievalism and Classical Receptions, which is concerned with modern responses to Ancient Greece and Rome, stand accused in some quarters of competing over the relative importance of their respective fields instead of exploring the interactions between them (Warren, 2012). Moreover, this conceptual dualism has a tendency to colonise other imaginings of historical time and space. The epic poetry of James MacPherson, published in the 1770s and spuriously attributed to the Gaelic bard Ossian, is frequently treated as a product of medievalist romanticism. However, Ossian was supposed to have lived during the third century A.D., before the beginning of the Middle Ages proper, and was at the time of publication hailed in overtly classicist terms as the Scottish Homer (Moore, 2004, pp. 22-32). Viewing Ossian through the lens of medievalism can be justified if we accept the notion of the Middle Ages as an all-purpose 'other' designed to give contrast, whether positive or negative, to the supposed characteristics of modernity. Yet such approaches also risk rolling other historical motifs into a homogenising definition of medievalism that becomes too broad to be useful.

If issues relating to periodisation are a concern, then so too is the potential for geographic chauvinism. Since the Middle Ages originated as a specifically European way of thinking about the past, the phenomenon that scholars now call medievalism has, quite legitimately, a predominantly Western centre of gravity. That said, it is only by interrogating European assumptions about time and historical progress that we can properly understand Western visualisations of non-Western cultures (Berns and Johnston, 2011, pp. 98-99). Valuable work has already been done in this area, for example on the relationship between medievalism and orientalism (Ganim, 2008) and the interactions between medieval motifs and postcolonialism (Davis and Altschul, 2009). Nevertheless, there is an ongoing tendency to see Britain as the fountainhead of medievalism, based in part on myths about the supposed continuity of English society from the Middle Ages to the modern era. (Emery and Utz, 2014, pp. 2-3). Indeed it has been argued that Britain was a particularly fertile seeding ground for positive representations of the Middle Ages because, unlike the rest of Western Europe, it remained relatively untouched by the anti-medieval legacy of the French Revolution (Utz, 2011, p. 105). Arguably, however, medievalism remained vigorous as an ideological force in France long after the revolution. Napoleon, for

example, saw himself as a second Charlemagne. At the start of the twentieth century, meanwhile, historians like Ernest Lavisse were hugely influential in positioning the early medieval Gauls and Franks as the progenitors of the modern French nation (Weber, 1991, pp. 21-39). An Anglo-centric outlook therefore unduly marginalises the significance of medievalism on the continent. It can also, as the Ossian example above demonstrates, result in the appropriation of 'Celtic' themes and tropes, such as druidism in Wales and Highlandism in Scotland, for which medievalism may not be the best analytical fit. It is worth remembering that there is no consensus on either the temporal and geographic boundaries, or the defining characteristics, of the Middle Ages. They are a vast and amorphous territory encompassing King Arthur, Charlemagne, the Crusades, Geoffrey Chaucer, the Spanish Inquisition, monasticism, mummery and crop rotation, to name but a few (D'Arcens, 2016, pp. 7-9). The result is that scholars of medievalism are able to identify representations of the Middle Ages in the unlikeliest of places. Authors such as George Eliott (Johntson, 2006) and Ernest Hemingway (Moreland, 1996), as well as films like *Groundhog Day* (1993) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) (Bildhauer, 2016, pp. 48-49), have all been considered from the perspective of Medievalism Studies. Such approaches, whilst fruitful, lay the field open to accusations of disciplinary opportunism born of a 'seek and ye shall find' mentality.

Despite such concerns, in 2016 the study of medievalism was rightly recognised with its own Cambridge Companion. This, as the volume's editor stated, was 'a sign [that] the field has gained enough momentum and maturity to reflect on its own progress' (D'Arcens, 2016, p. 1). The chapters found there, on subjects from poetry and architecture to international relations and translation theory, demonstrate how all-embracing the field has become. This is certainly indicative of its vitality, but also raises the existential question asked in the title of this essay. Although originally concerned primarily with artistic and literary high culture, scholars of medievalism now claim a vast swathe of territory as their remit, from film, TV and computer games, through fantasy fiction, role-play and historical re-enactment, to social theory, theology, and the use of medieval motifs for political and polemical ends. As such, the study of medievalism transcends existing disciplinary boundaries. It is an arena in which scholars of art, history, literature, music, religion, political science and sociology have come together, all bringing to bear the methods and approaches associated with their own particular disciplines. Since the 1990s the field has witnessed an explosion of new publications and approaches. However, in the main the result has so far been a dispersed and eclectic series of case studies. This is because each contributor tends to bring his or her own subject expertise to bear on examples that happen to sit within their own disciplinary territory. That is not to say that there is no meaningful cross-pollination between approaches – there most certainly is, as works like *The Historical Present: Medievalism and Modernity* (Kudrycz, 2011) and *Medievalism: a Critical History* (Matthews, 2015) show. But as Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, two leading scholars in the field, point out, Medievalism Studies still lacks a unifying theoretical and methodological underpinning. (Emery and Utz, 2014, pp. 8-10).

It is perhaps because of this that the boundary between scholarly and creative interpretations of the Middle Ages also remains unsettled. Attempts have been made to distinguish between 'found medievalism', which uses historical evidence as a departure point from which to present the period accurately, and 'made medievalism'

or 'neomedievalism' which does not. This latter category refers to imaginings of the Middle Ages for which authenticity is either a secondary or non-concern, and which consequently do not engage directly with the physical, documentary or conceptual remains of the medieval past. However, such categorisations can easily come unstuck. The distinction between, for instance, online gaming and evidence-based academic research seems superficially obvious. Yet even there things are not as clear-cut as they seem, since computerised strategy games have been used to model medieval battle tactics (Burkholder, 2007, p. 515). Even less clear is where we should place a film like *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), which displays little concern for historical accuracy yet has nonetheless been informed by a significant amount of historical expertise beyond the popularly-accepted clichés about the period (Pugh and Weisl, 2013, pp. 3-5). It can be equally difficult to categorise historical writing and collecting from previous centuries. Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), for example, was regarded as serious scholarship at the time of its publication. But today the extent to which Percy embellished and misattributed his material is recognised and the work is of interest only to those interested in medievalism, rather than in the Middle Ages themselves (Matthews, 2015, pp. 165-73). Some of those working in the field argue that, whilst the lines between 'found medievalism' and 'made medievalism' are blurred, they are nonetheless useful categories that can be separated according to authorial intent (Alexander, 2007, pp. 264-8). However, other scholars of medievalism are moving towards the view that attempts to demarcate boundaries between authentic and creative representations of the Middle Ages are ultimately futile (D'Arcens, 2016, pp. 2-3).

The problems described above have made it difficult for the study of medievalism to gain academic credibility. This has been exacerbated by the contemporary politicisation of medieval allusions. In 2001, George W. Bush famously referred to the newly declared War on Terror as a 'crusade', a term subsequently adopted by many far-right anti-Muslim groups. Conversely, atrocities by non-Western terror groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS are frequently labelled 'medieval' by the media (Elliot, 2017). Such controversial appropriations of the medieval past, based on popular assumptions about historical progress and the superiority of the present, have a profound and often negative effect on how the Middle Ages are conceptualised. Indeed, they represent a return to the original pejorative use of the term developed in the early modern era. Despite these challenges, however, over the last decade or so Medievalism Studies has begun to enter the intellectual mainstream and is now on the syllabus in hundreds of universities (D'Arcens, 2016, pp. 1-2). A cynic might argue that this is as much about attracting students by making popular culture the subject of study as it is a genuine symptom of scholarly acceptance. Indeed, whilst its origins lie within the literary discipline, as medievalism's remit has expanded to encompass popular as well as elite representations it has become increasingly associated with another mongrel discipline; that of cultural studies (Berns and Johnston, 2011, pp. 97-8). Both fields have been assembled from a number of older disciplines and approaches. Both are the product of a desire, growing within academia since the 1970s and initially fuelled by the postmodernist countercultures of the 1960s, to question accepted truths and disrupt established hierarchies of knowledge (Matthews, 2015, pp. 177-180).

Nevertheless there is still a tendency, amongst medieval historians in particular, to scorn Medievalism Studies. Its lack of a unified approach and its interest in de-historicised and unscholarly depictions of the Middle Ages have contributed to its dismissal as anachronistic and whimsical next to the serious study of the 'real' medieval past. Yet the distinction between scholarly and creative representations of the past is now under sustained attack. (Utz, 2011, pp. 106-9). A telling example of this is *Inventing the Middle Ages* (Cantor, 1991), in which the lauded historian Norman Cantor identified a host of contemporary influences that had helped to shape the work of some of the twentieth century's most esteemed medievalists. This was the first major admission by a professional historian that modern scholarly interpretations of the Middle Ages were not the product of Olympian detachment, but were instead moulded by the times and places in which they were produced. Indeed, one of the fundamental tenets of medievalism studies is 'presentism'; the idea that responses to the Middle Ages reveal as much about the time and place of their creation as they do about the period itself. The logical extension of that position, however, is that presentism applies not just to poets, artists, re-enactors and gamers, but also to professional historians. That in turn raises doubts over the historical profession's claim to be able to uncover the 'truth' of the past - one of several such challenges from a number of quarters that have taxed the tempers of History Professors around the globe over the past fifty years or so. This is perhaps why medievalism studies has, until recently, been slower to gain acceptance from historians than from practitioners of other disciplines (Emery and Utz, 2014, pp. 3-8).

Conclusion

It would be difficult to characterise Medievalism Studies as a discipline in the traditional sense. Like cultural studies, or indeed religious studies, it is rather a confluence of perspectives and methodologies brought together in order to further the study of a particular phenomenon. Yet arguably this empowers rather than diminishes it. Synthesising several approaches is undeniably challenging and the chances of failure, of doing a bad job, as it were, are therefore higher. Yet the potential rewards are also proportionately greater. In that sense, scholars of medievalism operate in a 'high risk, high reward' environment. As such, the concerns and controversies outlined above are indicative not of conceptual weakness or a lack of rigour, but are rather part and parcel of the field's development. Richard Utz recently celebrated Medievalism's status as an 'undiscipline which (like Cultural Studies) explodes existing canons, retrieves excluded voices, and remains in a state of productive uncertainty about its disciplinary boundaries' (Utz, 2017., p. 85). When considering his words we would do well to remember that academic disciplines, seemingly so solid and immutable, are actually little more than a century old. Whilst the desire to traverse multiple intellectual terrains is today often dismissed as dilettantism, that was not always the case. Prior to the late nineteenth century, over-specialisation was decried and the polymath was celebrated for his or her ability to bring multiple approaches to bear on a wide range of subjects (Burke, 2012, pp. 160-84). From that perspective, Medievalism Studies can be lauded as part of an ongoing effort across the Arts and Humanities to break down restrictive barriers between overly-regulated areas of expertise.

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