Putting on the Armour:
A Response to Richard Utz

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There was a time not all that long ago when what is now known as medievalism was largely disregarded, so I take it as a mark of distinction to have my book *Medievalism: A Critical History* scrutinised as closely as it has been and given such generous attention by Richard Utz. Utz's work in the field, over a long period, is one of the reasons that medievalism is now taken as seriously as it is. As a still somewhat inchoate field, medievalism is still a volatile and changeable one, it seems to me. The following remarks are offered more in the spirit of keeping a critical conversation going within that context, than out of any desire to correct or to "get it right."

In my book, I spend some time on the novels of Thomas Hardy. Hardy was a writer finely attuned to questions of the Middle Ages in modernity, and he uses the term "medievalism" more than any other nineteenth-century novelist. In the first chapter of his *Jude the Obscure* (1895), the village of Marygreen is briefly described and we learn that it has a church, "a tall new building of modern Gothic design, unfamiliar to English eyes..." This has replaced the medieval original, the stones of which have been "cracked up into heaps of road-metal in the lane, or utilized as pig-sty walls, garden seats, guard-stones to fences, and rockeries in the flower-beds of the neighbourhood." The description of the two churches seems, at this early stage of the novel, incidental to the narrative and it is only later, when Jude becomes a stonemason who works on the renovation of medieval buildings, that his choice can be seen as related to the contrast between the two churches. Hardy

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himself, of course, had begun his working life as an architect engaged in precisely the kind of modernising which he here describes as having been perpetrated by "a certain obliterator of historic records who had run down from London and back in a day." As the sardonic attitudes in *Jude* suggest, Hardy had long since turned against the vogue for refurbishing or replacing of medieval churches.

What Hardy seems neatly to exemplify here is the distinction between the artefacts of, one the one hand, the Middle Ages and, on the other, of medievalism, between the real thing and the simulacrum. The two churches in *Jude* might further suggest a distinction between what might be called "found" and "made" medievalism. As Louise D'Arcens has recently put it, the first derives from contact with actual medieval artefacts and gives rise in modernity to the various disciplines of medieval studies, while the second "encompasses texts, objects, performances, and practices that are not only post-medieval in their provenance but imaginative in their impulse..."[1] But things are not always so neat and this distinction, as D'Arcens immediately goes on to point out, does not hold. Creative responses to medieval artefacts have always existed alongside the scholarly ones, sometimes inextricably so. In my example from Hardy, the original church would not have been an uncomplicated medieval artefact but rather a *mélange* of work from different periods of the Middle Ages and subsequent eras. No medieval church really exists entirely pristinely but already embodies medievalisms of later eras. D'Arcens uses the example of the discovery of the remains of Richard III in 2012, which has led to historical study and also "public ceremonies, television programs, and innumerable Internet memes" (3). In literary study, too, things are problematic: the distinctions between editions of original works, translations of those works, and modern works inspired by original works in practice leave blurred lines between the categories.

So when I set out to write about these complicated matters, I was guided by this sense that medieval studies and medievalism could never

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1 Louise D'Arcens, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 2.

be so easily disentangled. At an early stage, I made a linguistic discovery which was small enough in itself but which helped me to think further about nineteenth-century medievalism. This was, simply, that the terms "medieval" and "medievalism" were a little older than the second edition of the *OED* had it. While it was useful to redate the earliest uses of these terms, more important to me was the question of the words' shades of meaning. When I found the earliest uses of the term "medieval" (around 1817), it seemed clear to me that it was designed to be a scholarly term free from the derogatory senses which, of course, already attached to the Middle Ages at the time. By contrast, when the noun "medievalism" began to be used in the early 1840s, it was with strong derogatory intent. In other words, in their earliest uses the two words apparently enshrined the distinction between the found and the made, the real and the simulacral. As I have argued in my book, the way in which a neutral and value-free adjective in the early nineteenth century was quickly succeeded by a value-laden noun shows, yet again, how distinctions collapse together.

Among other things, what this seemed to me to point to was the importance (for British medievalism at least) of the 1840s. In my book I located this period as the key phase of the development of ideas about medievalism. It is not simply that the word was coined then, but that key works appeared in the period: Carlyle's *Past and Present*; Pugin's *True Principles* and the second edition of *Contrasts*; Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture*. The Ecclesiological Society established itself in London, the Oxford Movement was in full flow, and near the end of the decade the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood launched the careers of some noted enthusiasts for medievalism. (Similarly important things were happening at the same time in continental Europe which I discuss in the book.)

As I argued, this was a time in which medievalisms - political, artistic, architectural - were clearly in vogue. And medievalism was not just a set of ideas, modish or foolish depending on one's orientation, but the subject of very practical application. This was evident not least in the building of the Houses of Parliament in Westminster. Correspondingly, it seemed to me, there was something of a falling away after a high point of interest marked by Pugin's celebrated Mediaeval Court at the

Great Exhibition of 1851. Certainly, the very specific form of medievalism represented by Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* was a major literary manifestation in the second half of the century. The neo-gothic wave of building, especially in ecclesiastical architecture, also continued. But the second half of the century - I argued - did not see a significant place, for example, for the medievalist novel, among major artforms. If medievalist painting was still in evidence, it was not particularly dominant, culturally, and it shared a cultural space with equally important interests in classicism, Biblical themes, Egyptology, and so on. Or, as one could put it more simply, the theme of art was History, whether legendary or otherwise. Here, I queried the idea of a "boom" in medievalism, not because I do not think medievalism was important, but because I think its place in late nineteenth-century culture can be, and has been, exaggerated. Or perhaps it would be better to say that it has been viewed in isolation, via case studies which have turned up medievalism in all kinds of unlikely places. That was a necessary phase of work in medievalism, but arguably work in medievalism now needs to be reconnected to a larger, richer, more thickly described cultural history.

As Richard Utz has said, it is possible to criticise this strand of my thinking. Utz refers to my use of Raymond Williams' term "residual"; I apply it to say that in my view of things, what is left when medievalism is residual in a culture are "mere substrates" and "mere tropes." I am grateful for the opportunity, here, to clarify what obviously was not clear enough in my book because in my view, there is nothing "mere" about substrates or residual tropes. I did not intend to create a hierarchy and it is unfortunate that the term "substrate" (which I certainly did use) does inevitably imply something that lies "below" something else. To say (as I do) that medievalism is a substrate in a modernist icon such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* is not, in any way, intended to place the medievalism in a subordinate position. After all, Eliot himself indicated the pivotal position of Jessie L. Weston's work on the grail in the genesis of the poem. Rather, I meant to point out that, like most high modernism, Eliot's poem is not committed to any single cultural discourse but is made up of a tangle of wildly disparate

cultural strands, from which, Weston notwithstanding, medievalism does not emerge as especially dominant.

My larger concern here is to do with the kind of cultural history that emerges from a consideration of medievalism. The study of medievalism began with the premise that medievalism had been largely overlooked. Consequently, for several years, there was an emphasis on the way in which medievalism was in fact a powerful force in many areas of culture. One consequence of this phase of analysis is the risk - not always avoided - that medievalism can come to be isolated as a phenomenon and abstracted from its larger cultural context and in turn, arguably accorded more cultural autonomy than it actually had (again, this is a result of the "case-study" phase). While Utz does absolve me of some of the positions he constructs, he is concerned that I might be writing into existence a distinction between "central" and residual medievalisms. He is concerned about my contention that in general - the 1840s aside - medievalist art falls outside normative canons of value and he goes on to suggest that I am positing medievalism's "high-art ambitions" "as the measuring rod for its centrality or marginality."

For me the key word here is "normative." I do not think that canons of value at any given time are necessarily predictive of a work's cultural durability or utility. But there are always canons of value, nevertheless, and it is of interest to me that for the most part, medievalist art sits only uncomfortably in relation to them. (This part of my argument relates particularly to Anglophone culture; I think things are different in many continental cultures.) In this context what I am interested in is the extent to which medievalist artefacts accrue or have conferred on them distinction, in Pierre Bourdieu's sense. I am interested in how canons of value are constructed, and conversely I am not at all interested in distinction as an imagined *intrinsic* property of a given medievalist artefact. Whether medievalism and its art were central or otherwise at a given period is surely a question of interest to any of us. But I am not trying to imply that this historical centrality should be a yardstick of cultural value. Utz says (although he does not want to read me this way) that I risk suggesting that "medievalism can

only ever be said to be central to a culture when that society's cultural elite is involved in originating medievalist works of art." He adds that I run close to taking a highbrow attitude to culture regarded as lowbrow. Perhaps I failed to make it clear how genealogical, rather than evaluative, I intended much of what I wrote to be. To put it another way, I enjoy an episode of *Game of Thrones* as much as the next person. I think it is highly significant that this part-medievalist television show is reputedly the most expensive thing ever put on the small screen and correspondingly also the most frequently pirated. It has been invested with enormous amounts of capital and has accrued all kinds of distinction. It is still, of course, bound by its genre, which is first and foremost that of fantasy. That is not a value judgement of mine but an attempt to place it relative to other cultural forms and instances. The cultural capital of fantasy is simply different from, and usually not as well valued as, that accorded to works of realism. Again, that is not my value judgement but a reading of positioning within a cultural field.

As I say, Utz clearly backs away from the imputation that I am engaged on sorting sheep from goats, high art from low. Ultimately his concern, following Kathleen Verduin, is the proposal that it is medieval studies which is secondary to medievalism and not the other way around. I and other medievalists, Utz argues, map medievalism "as a subset of medieval studies." This, he says, seems logical, "but only if we accept [Matthews'] positing of medieval studies as a somehow superior epistemology. Similarly, [Matthews'] recommendation to practice medievalism in analogy to cultural studies is based on the conviction that formal academic training, something called 'studies,' must always precede and have priority over other kinds of engaging with medieval culture." There are indeed all kinds of ways of engaging with medieval culture, as Utz rightly states here. One obvious instance, to which I give some space in my book and which is a phenomenon which increasingly insists on attention, is that of re-enacting. Another, which I also discuss, is a phenomenon well exemplified in the Château de Guédelon, the castle in northern Burgundy which has been constructed over the past twenty years using medieval building techniques, but which has no authentic medieval original behind it.

In my book, however, I do not place medievalism as a subset of medieval studies. What I say is that medievalism and medieval studies are not only part of the same thing but are at certain points of contact indistinguishable from one another. I point out, taking a line here from Kathleen Biddick, that what was once regarded as medieval studies (for example, Percy's *Reliques*) is later constructed as medievalism. I say this, however, to suggest that the terminology is inevitably thereby vitiated. And consequently we need a new way of thinking about the field and that, I suggested, could be done simply by thinking of medieval studies/medievalism as cultural studies. In practice, today, there are all kinds of ways in which medievalism and medieval studies not only cannot be, but *should not be*, distinguished from one another. For example, at the time of writing I am in the last stages of planning a conference, the Middle Ages in the Modern World, at which among other things I am looking forward to a presentation given by members of the Royal Armouries in Leeds. What is a suit of armour and set of weapons when it is made, in modernity, with modern techniques according to medieval designs? When it is made by a Tory aristocrat in the 1830s, it is conservative medievalism. When it is made by a museum in the twenty-first century, it is a form of creative study. By all means, let us liberate the Middle Ages from the cage of "studies." But let's not fool ourselves, either. I am, for better or for worse, an academic medievalist; it is not so much that I have the conviction "that formal academic training, something called 'studies,' must always precede and have priority over other kinds of engaging with medieval culture." It is more that I do not believe that I, nor any other academic, can escape that training, nor pretend that I do not have it. What academics do, even when they engage with the creative wing of the artefacts under scrutiny, is a form of study.

That is the armour that I put on, anyway, when I go out to the daily battle.

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