Recensão a *Medievalism: A Critical History,* de David Matthews

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Medievalism: A Critical History:
A Response

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In his 2015 study, *Medievalism: A Critical History*, David Matthews proposes that, after a period of modernity during which medievalism appeared in some of the central cultural practices in the western world, much of the medievalist energy and excitement visible in canonical texts, architecture, and the arts gradually diminished from the this general domain and concentrated around the various institutionalized forms of inquiry of medievalia at the modern university. As a result, medievalism was displaced from the central cultural position it held during Britain's Victorian or America's pre- and post-Civil War periods to an increasingly marginal one. Matthews declares that this move to the margin ironically rendered medievalism almost omnipresent, albeit in smaller doses and with lesser consequence. Matthews terms this kind of medievalism "residual," remarking how medievalism now left its mark no longer with the lead genres, authors, and texts of its time as in the works of Tennyson, Scott, and Thomas Carlyle, but as mere substrates, implications, and references as in Joyce, Eliot, or Pound, or as mere tropes in twentieth-century genre fiction by Eco, Fuller, or Unsworth. Similarly, Matthews expounds, there are no English-language medievalist movies that have achieved both popularity and won sufficient cultural capital to be thought of as canonical.

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At first glance, Matthews has a point: It is during the nineteenth century that the study of medieval texts and art progressively passes from the hands of antiquarians, bibliomaniacs, dilettantes, and enthusiasts into those of university-educated specialists; and it is during the nineteenth century that movements like the English Medieval Revival or the French Catholic Revival dominate certain subsections of cultural production; and it is also during the nineteenth century that terms such as "medieval," "Middle Ages," and "medievalism" enter into the vocabulary of those numerous scholars who would now historicize the past. However, as I was reading Matthews' chapter, I could not rid myself of the impression that the distinction between "central" and "residual" medievalism he is writing into existence is mostly a function of his tacit agreement of the theory that, by the end of the "Great War," the acceptance and adaptation of medieval ideas and teleologies became too complex, perhaps impossible. Following Michael Alexander and Alice Chandler, he confirms that medievalism had a "boom" in the nineteenth century, but had lost most of its vitality by the 1890s. According to Matthews, then, the aftermath of this boom is the reason why Tolkien created an "infantilized" version of the Middle Ages, often "on the edge of bathos" and "about the lives of satirically small people" in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* instead of the serious epic and "high-art vision" of English mythology he intended to write (137-38). The end of the "boom" can also be seen in Eliot's *Waste Land* which, while beholden to the Arthurian legend, also "draws heavily on Sophocles, Ovid, the Bible, Shakespeare, Donne, Baudelaire, and Verlaine" (122). Matthews summarizes:

> The general tendency [...] is one in which medievalist art forms have fallen outside normative canons of value and medievalist art has not regained the distinction conferred on it in the mid-Victorian period. The canonical status achieved for medievalism in that period in the spheres of art, architecture, and poetry was [...] an exception – in Britain at least, it was medievalism's bright shining moment.

> Subsequently, medievalism was transmuted by modernist
> poetry, and it is perhaps in contemporary poetry more than
> anywhere else that its high-art ambitions are fulfilled today:
> in the verse of Seamus Heaney and Geoffrey Hill, for exam-
> ple, and the creative translations and adaptations (in the
> wake of Heaney's *Beowulf*) of Simon Armitage (*Sir Gawain
> and the Green Knight*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, with
> *Pearl* to follow) and Lavinia Greenlaw (*Troilus and Crisey-
> de*) (138-39).

What is most surprising about this passage is not Matthews' un-
disputable claim of a boom time for medievalist activity in art, archi-
tecture, and poetry during the mid-Victorian era, but that he seems to
posit what he calls medievalism's "high-art ambitions" as the measuring
rod for its centrality or marginality. Matthews does admit that

> medievalism outlasted modernism and adapted, even-
> tually to take the place it currently holds in postmodern
> popular culture, where its presence in a range of cultural
> forms today is easy to detect – especially in films, computer
> games, graphic novels, music (from folk to heavy metal),
> heritage and tourism (122).

This passage could be read as 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. The way Mat-
thews describes the lower-level remnants of medievalism's Victorian
"boom," postmodern popular culture, films, computer games, graphic
novels, folk and heavy metal music, heritage, and tourism, sounds dan-
gerously close to what Hans Naumann once defined as *gesunkenes Kul-
turgut*, the kind of low-brow and merely imitative borrowing or copying
by socially inferior strata of superior and original cultural productions
springing from the upper social strata and intelligentsia. Naumann's

theory, which originates out of folklore studies right after the end of the nineteenth century, looked down on such borrowings as ignorant and 'degenerated' misunderstandings of their superior models.

Nothing could be further from Matthews' mind. He mentions early on in his study that he has gleaned his specific semantics of "residual" from Raymond Williams's 1977 book on *Marxism and Literature.* Based on Williams' keywords, "medievalism may be," so Matthews, "within a given phase of a culture, dominant, emergent, or residual," "a cultural formation 'effectively formed in the past, but ... still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but an effective element of the present'" (19). Channeling Williams further, Matthews states that he is specifically interested in whether "this residual cultural element has an 'alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture,' or whether it 'has been wholly or largely incorporated into the dominant culture'" (19).

In a chapter entitled, "Medievalism in the Crypt" he seems to indicate that medievalism's impact in a culture might actually be at its most pervasive when it is residual, i.e., fragmented, but omnipresent, rather than dominant, i.e., central and canonical, but limited to the social and intellectual elite. He then goes on to exemplify these fugitive and fragmented but omnipresent medievalist inklings in the dominant genre of the Victorian period, the novel, discussing Defoe, Charlotte Bronte, Wilkie Collins, Dickens, Elizabeth and William Gaskell, Hardy, and Allan Hollinghurst. At this point, readers may ask themselves: What is it now: Did medievalism slowly grow from early modern fugitive presences towards a "boom" in the nineteenth century, only to recede again into other fugitive presences? Do the also existing nineteenth-century fugitive presences actually constitute the most pervasive kind of medievalism even during that most centrally medievalist century? Do, in the end, "residual" and "central" mean the same, depending on one's cultural ideology?

In his "Conclusion" (which does not want to provide a conclusion and is called: "Against a Synthesis: Medievalism Cultural Studies, and Antidisciplinarity"), Matthews reveals why he has presented

his readers with these seemingly contradictory statements about the central or residual nature of medievalism. Hinting at the distinction, which he diagnoses at least for the British academy to exist between "the real thing" and the "simulacra of medievalism" (166), he likens the strained relationship between "medievalism" and "medieval studies" to that between "cultural studies" and "literary studies". Like cultural studies which, according to Matthews, forced literature departments to include noncanonical, nontraditional, and nonliterary forms of culture into their curricula, so medievalism managed to make medieval studies scholars become more aware of the epistemological limitations of their concept of the "real" Middle Ages, embrace their own imbrication in the full history of reception of medieval texts and artifacts and, in the best of cases, their own emotional involvement with their research and scholarship. Matthews recommends that medievalism replace its ongoing "paralyzing lack of self-definition" with the kind of "productive uncertainty" that defines the "undiscipline" of cultural studies. Matthews states emphatically:

> The study of medievalism would be greatly advanced by the recognition that rather than existing as a separate and new discipline, it is simply one part of medieval studies – and an inescapable part of it. This would be resisted from within both medievalism studies and medieval studies: in the latter, by those who wish to maintain their grandfather's Middle Ages; in the former, by those who cherish the idea of a separate discipline (178).

Matthews proposes two examples of what "the altered landscape with a conjoined medieval-medievalism studies" already looks like, Arthurian studies and Robin Hood studies.

While some of the practitioners of Arthurian studies see its medieval material as separate from, even more authentic than, the later material, the Arthurian material exists in an undeniable continuum from the twelfth century until today. There is, Matthews concludes, "evidently no authentic Arthur story, but rather multiply disseminating and proliferating texts, medieval, early modern, modern, and postmodern, none of them able to claim primacy" (179). Matthews sees Robin

Hood studies as owning "even more compellingly impeccable credentials" than Arthurian studies for a cultural studies approach. He states that the "exemplary peculiarity of Robin Hood from a disciplinary point of view is that this quintessentially medieval figure has in fact hardly any medieval existence. [...] As a result while Robin Hood as a figure is quintessentially medieval, almost all study of Robin Hood necessarily relates to modern phenomena. Hence the marginality of Robin Hood to medieval studies until relatively recently; despite good medieval credentials, Robin Hood could only be studied as a piece of medievalism. It took the advent of cultural studies to revolutionise understanding of the outlaw figure" (179-80). Matthews continues:

> Robin Hood studies, once dominated by discussions of Robin's authenticity or otherwise, can be taken as exemplary of a medievalist cultural studies. With its volumes of essays, its key monographs and its regular conferences, Robin Hood studies is a paradigm of how "medievalism" might work. It is a field founded on the Middle Ages, yet necessarily unconfined by traditional period boundaries. Today it is large-scale, but internally coherent and limited: it brings the medieval period into engagement with the post-medieval, and it draws on cultural studies methodologies to do so. Robin Hood studies has in fact developed the disciplinary coherence that "medievalism" cannot achieve (180).

David Matthews' mapping of medievalism as a subset of medieval studies sounds completely logical, but only if we accept his positing of medieval studies as a somehow superior epistemology. Similarly, his 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. I tend to agree with Kathleen Verduin (the former co-editor of *Studies in Medievalism*), who once stated:

"[I]f 'medievalism' as we define it denotes the whole range of postmedieval engagement with the Middle Ages, then 'medieval studies' themselves must be considered a facet of medievalism rather than the other way around."[1]

Matthews' two examples, Arthurian and Robin Hood studies, are well suited for proving his point, but leave to be desired when it comes to texts and artifacts without ongoing reception histories. How, for example, would his "cultural studies" paradigm deal with the likes of Margery Kempe, about whom almost nothing was known between the early sixteenth century and 1934? In addition, Matthew's concentration on cultural studies undervalues the pivotal role of feminism and women's studies (in concert with reception studies) for the more inclusive way of reading the Middle Ages that has been the hallmark of medievalism in the last 30 years. This is probably also the reason why Carolyn Dinshaw's name appears only four times on the 200 pages of the study; Aranye Fradenburg's seminal work does not appear at all; the word "feminist" appears twice, "feminism" not at all; "gender studies" appears once; "women's studies" not at all.

Historically, "medievalism" precedes "medieval studies," and it remains the more inclusive term semantically as it unites the continuing process of constructing and reconstructing the Middle Ages in postmedieval times. Central or residual, all instances of receiving the Middle Ages, and not only Arthurian and Robin Hood studies, can be read and mapped productively by abandoning the epistemological primacy David Matthews and many other medievalists continue to attach to the academic over any and all non-academic engagements with medieval culture.[2]

1 Kathleen Verduin, "Shared Interests of *SIM* and *MFN*," *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 23:1 (1997), 33-35.

2 I have tried to recommend some ways toward achieving this goal in "Don't Be Snobs, Medievalists," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 24, 2015.