Introduction

Helen Cooper

Shakespeare, it has been said, was Britain's greatest medieval writer. That remark was, admittedly, made by a medievalist (Derek Brewer), but it is an epithet that still has power to startle. It is, however, only an extension of an approach to Shakespeare that has been gathering in intensity and conviction over the last few years. As recently as at the turn of the millennium, it might have seemed perverse to title a book 'Medieval Shakespeare'. Classical Shakespeare is thoroughly familiar; Renaissance Shakespeare is so much taken for granted as to seem tautologous; Early Modern Shakespeare, to update the much-debated term 'Renaissance' and to relocate him in his own historical moment, has been an intensive focus of attention over the past few decades; and Shakespeare for our time is inevitably a source of fascination. 'Medieval Shakespeare', however, would until very recently have suggested nothing much beyond the history plays, and to some readers may still do so. Any medieval elements in him beyond those were widely regarded as random anachronistic survivals in a writer customarily promoted as marking the emergence of the modern world and all those ways of thinking that characterize our modern selves: explicitly or implicitly, he was thus regarded as marking the final obsolescence of the medieval. That he was in fact a writer deeply embedded in the Middle Ages, who inherited many of his shaping ideas and assumptions about everything from stagecraft to language from the medieval past, will probably still seem strange to many readers. The evidence, however, is there, and increasing numbers of studies are calling attention to what was for long overlooked. This book brings together and adds to the major elements in that accumulating hoard of argument and evidence.

Our reluctance to think of Shakespeare in terms of England's own past has a long history, dating indeed back to his own time. As contributors to this volume note, 'the Middle Ages' did not exist as a concept in the sixteenth century. It was only in Shakespeare's lifetime, in the writings of the ecclesiastical historian John Foxe, that the period before the Reformation

came to be seen as a 'middle age' between the purity of the early Church in the late Classical era and its restoration under Anglicanism; the antiquarian William Camden, in 1605, was the first to think of such a 'middle age' in the terms more familiar now, as the cultural period between the Classical era and the great Elizabethan literary revival. The former measured the new age in religious terms, the latter by the concepts familiar to us as humanism and the Renaissance. The plural 'middle ages' appears to be first used by Donne, writing in the same year as Camden, but again with a theological emphasis; 'medieval' does not appear until the nineteenth century (Morse 2006). For both theologians and humanist scholars and writers, however, there was a sense that something had changed; and furthermore, they wanted to emphasize that change, to insist that they were different from those who had gone before. Protestantism and humanism continued to hold the dominant place in English religion and education for centuries to come; and with that dominance, what had originally been a polemical position hardened into what looked like fact. Received ideas such as Shakespeare's invention of modernity, scepticism and even 'the human', have become institutionally embedded.

The concept of the medieval was thus ideologically loaded from its very inception: it did not just designate a historical period, but everything Foxe and Camden wanted to reject – hence its continuing idiomatic use to mean 'an all-purpose alternative to whatever quality the present has wished to ascribe to itself' (Patterson 1991: 7). The complexity and richness that characterized the centuries preceding the advent of humanism have been overwritten by formulations such as those made in the mid nineteenth century by the great cultural critic Jacob Burckhardt, who enlarged that sense of change into an entire world view. He described human consciousness in the Middle Ages as 'dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil', the veil of faith, and the Renaissance represented the great awakening (Burckhardt 1960: 81). Later commentators took such a conception as a reason to dismiss the medieval, to the point where now it sometimes serves as an implicit excuse, in this age of information overload, to remain in ignorance of what the Middle Ages actually achieved. The emergence of subjective personality, which Burckhardt selects as a key constituent of the awakened consciousness, can be traced far back, and has indeed perhaps always existed (see Patterson 1991: 7–12 and Aers 1992). Medieval texts and habits of thought and discoveries helped to shape Petrarch and Michelangelo and Galileo, the output of Caxton's printing press, and the impetus behind Luther's bursting on the European scene. Sometimes too the changes advocated by the humanists were actively resisted, and rightly

so: if they had had their way, English drama would have regulated itself by the Classical unities, and we would not have had Shakespeare's plays at all.

No one, of course, would want to argue that change began only after the Reformation. The four centuries between the Norman Conquest and the arrival of the Tudors, the period customarily bracketed off as the English Middle Ages, constituted a period of constant change, in thought and culture and politics and technology. Those centuries saw the founding of the universities, and of representative democracy in the form of Parliament; it saw English develop from 'Old' into 'Early Modern', with a major literature of its own along the way; it made possible the construction of buildings that were more glass than stone; it invented the mechanical clock and, with that, the commodification of time; it saw the introduction of paper (and an accompanying rise in bureaucracy), the expansion of trade, the invention of credit and international exchange and double-entry bookkeeping. Its scientific thought laid the ground for Copernicus and Newton (Hannam 2010). Change calls attention to itself much more than the already-there, and that is what those who argued for a new age noted; but the already-there remained too, and it was its continuing existence alongside the new that made change visible. Shakespeare's contribution to the English language, to take a leading example, was built on the accumulating absorption into English of French and Latin and words of all different etymologies over the previous half millennium; that gave English a subtlety of register unique in Europe, and he exploited it to the full. The speech of his less educated characters, as for all the Elizabethan playwrights, is marked by its heavy reliance on Old English-derived words; but equally, his most forceful lines are more likely to be formed from Germanic monosyllables than from high astounding Latinate terms, and he is a master at highlighting meaning or subtext by bringing the two registers into sharp juxtaposition. His much commented upon neologisms (many of them in fact attested earlier) rely on the ease with which English can create new compounds or new usages from words already there, a process helped by the loss of many grammatical endings over the course of the Middle Ages. What makes his style so remarkable is not just his capacity for invention, but how he used the lexical resources of the whole language he inherited.

It is the premise of this volume that 'the medieval' must be recognized, not only in specific works Shakespeare read, but pervasively in his whole conception of language and theatre and culture. To take one example, so vast it is easy to overlook: the plays for the public theatres *acted their*

action.[1] We still take it for granted that this is what plays do; but in historical terms, it is by no means so obvious that performance, staged action, should be given such priority. Greek theatre emphasized music and dance alongside speech, and humanist theatre adopted its practice of moving much of the action off stage, to be reported to the audience or other characters in messenger speeches. It is medieval secular theatre – secular in the sense that it took place outside the Church, so dividing the vernacular action-rich cycle plays or saints' plays from the music-dominated and ritual-oriented Latin liturgical drama – that passed on its rich heritage of stage freedom to the Rose and the Globe. 'All the world's a stage' was the premise of both biblical plays and many morality plays as they were acted across Europe; the form it supposedly took in the motto ascribed to the Globe, 'Omnis mundus agit histrionem', is itself slightly adapted from the twelfth-century John of Salisbury.[2] It assumes, and enables, a kind of drama very different from the humanist rules that specified strict generic division into those mutually exclusive and still alien notions of comedy and tragedy, each with their social and rhetorical levels precisely prescribed. The standard English term was 'play': a term that generously embraced generic mixture, gravediggers alongside princes, fools as well as kings, but which is so deeply familiar that we rarely notice its existence, and still more rarely its importance.

Attempts to understand the influences that shaped Shakespeare's mind and imagination often similarly start from the Classics, from the Latin curriculum he is likely to have encountered in his schooldays. The testimony of later writers, however, indicates that we need to look earlier, to his infancy and childhood. Shakespeare never recalls his first encounters with stories or poetry, as a number of Romantics and the Victorians do; but what authors as various as Wordsworth and Dickens tell us is how important to them was their early childhood encounter with works, often fantasy works, that adults might well despise – in their case, with the *Arabian Nights* (Irwin 1994: 265–71). For Shakespeare, we have to extrapolate from other sources, but what those suggest is reinforced from within his plays. Plenty is known about what was printed and sold as mass-market literature in the sixteenth century, and a number of cultural commentators give accounts (usually disapproving) of the kinds of thing that children

[1] See further Cooper 2010a: 42–54, Smith 1988, and Tom Bishop's essay below (Chapter 8).

[2] *Policraticus*, III.viii (John of Salisbury 1595: 146; the text is known to have been familiar to a number of Elizabethans, including Ben Jonson, though the edition they used is not known); translation by Joseph F. Pike as *Frivolities of Courtiers and Footprints of Philosophers* (John of Salisbury 1972: 175). There is no contemporary evidence that it was indeed the motto of the Globe: see further Stern 1997.

learned from their mothers or nurses. And these, again, were medieval in origin: black-letter romances, folktales and ballads such as were familiar at every social level but were increasingly seen as the preserve of the young and the provincial. They included such things as Robin Hood, invoked in *As You Like It*; or the fugitive Edgar's recall of 'fee, fie, foh, fum' and Child Roland, or the couplet he quotes from one of the best-known of the romances, *Bevis of Hampton*, all of which would have been plausibly known both to an earl's son and to the destitute Tom o' Bedlam (Belsey 2007, Cooper 2004a).

It is easy to imagine medieval stories surviving in oral form, whether literally as traditional ballads, or as acquiring their wide familiarity by being read out to the less literate from the cheap quartos sold by peddlers – the kind of literary history summarized in the Prologue to *Pericles*. In addition, however, the new technology of print was the most important medium by which medieval texts were transmitted, and not just the romances that fed the imagination of children or the less literate. Large numbers of texts originally written in the Middle Ages were transmitted to the sixteenth century in printed form: they were indeed much more widely disseminated and read then than in the manuscript age when they were newly written. The great Middle English classics, not least Chaucer, and translations from French medieval works, formed the more respectable end of the English printing market; early histories and chronicles were given a new accessibility in their adaptations in Holinshed; and medieval material appears in all kinds of unexpected forms and places. One oddity about Shakespeare's attested medieval reading is that so much of it depended upon editions published before he was born or in his early childhood, even for works that were reprinted or updated or issued in more respectable form in his adulthood. His *Recuyell of the Hystoryes of Troye* was not the modernized 1596 edition, but one published at the latest in the 1550s. Speght's edition of Chaucer appeared in 1598 and inspired a flurry of new plays, but Shakespeare was already using Chaucer before that, so his edition must have been that of 1561 at the latest. The couplet from *Bevis* that Poor Tom quotes in *King Lear* appears there in its archaic form, which last appeared in an edition of 1565 before being modernized away. Such details provide a glimpse of the editions Shakespeare read, perhaps even a hint as to the time or circumstances in which he read them; but they testify more fully to the lifelong imaginative engagement he found with medieval material.

'Medieval Shakespeare', then, is not a field of scholarship that attempts to return him to an earlier world, nor is it merely an exercise in source

study. The whole area has recently become one of the most active fields in Shakespeare studies. For a long time criticism seemed to rest content with a small number of notable books published in the decade from the mid-1950s, as if they had summed up all that there was to say: Willard Farnham on tragedy (1956 [1936]), Bernard Spivack on the representation of evil (1958), Glynne Wickham on stages (starting in 1959), David Bevington on morality plays (1962). The 1970s produced a few more that have similarly become classics: Emrys Jones on the idea of cycle drama (1977), Ann Thompson on Shakespeare's Chaucer (1978), and Robert Weimann on popular theatre and the mystery plays (1978). Geoffrey Bullough's mighty anthology of sources, published from 1957 to 1975, called attention to some of Shakespeare's medieval reading, though it sometimes overlooked or downplayed a more important medieval source in favour of a more critically respectable one: Chaucer's *Troilus*, for instance, which supplies the entire love half of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, gets less attention than Chapman's Homer, which contributes only a few lines. Now, however, interest is picking up speed and energy at an impressive rate, to the point where the centre of Shakespeare criticism and scholarship is beginning to shift. Within the five years before the writing of this Introduction, besides a steadily increasing number of monographs, there have been three major essay collections on Shakespeare and the Middle Ages and two more on the presence of the medieval in the Early Modern more broadly (Bruce Smith writes more on these in his own chapter below).[3] The essay collection format allows for focused scholarly interventions at the points where the scholars in question have the greatest expertise, but often this expertise is weighted more towards the Early Modern than the medieval. This has two consequences that the current volume seeks to redress. First, Shakespeare's medieval past has tended to appear as no more than a residual element in his work rather than as bedrock underlying his thought, his stagecraft and the expectations of his audiences. Second, the focus has sometimes been very narrow, illuminating a few lines rather in the manner of traditional annotation. Traditional editorial practices have indeed not served Shakespeare's medieval background well. This is partly because the impact of that background shows in much larger areas than can be addressed by annotation; and also because quotation and close allusion, the staples of much annotation, are much more rarely drawn from medieval texts compared with the abundant Classical references that Renaissance playwrights

[3] The Shakespeare collections are Perry and Watkins 2009, Driver and Ray 2009, and Beckwith and Simpson 2010. The Early Modern collections are McMullan and Matthews 2007 and Cummings and Simpson 2010.

liked to flourish, and when they do occur they are not always identified. The recent turn to historicism, which emphasized the importance of the immediate historical and political context, also brought with it as one of its side-effects a cessation of interest in, and reluctance to deal with, the transhistorical.

One aspect of this volume that distinguishes it from other recent collections is the double expertise of most of the contributors in medieval as well as Early Modern literature, which enables them to give a more equal weighting to those two aspects of Shakespeare's work. They are all characterized by a commitment to discussion of the close connection of specific aspects of medieval literature and thought with Shakespeare's plays and their theatrical, linguistic and cultural context. As a preliminary to the writing of their contributions to this volume, a group of scholars and critics who were doing some of the most significant and interesting work in the broad field of 'medieval Shakespeare' gathered together in a small conference held at the Notre Dame Center in London and at Shakespeare's Globe in the summer of 2010, to talk and exchange ideas with other Shakespeareans with similar interests, with the creation of this book in mind. As the 'Notes on Contributors' show, they all had established credentials in working on both sides of that artificial and invisible boundary between the medieval and the Early Modern, across the whole culture in which Shakespeare operated. The speakers approached the question of his medieval heritage from a whole range of angles: periodization and language, the Reformation and secularization, his own ideas of 'the medieval' contrasted with our own, performance in the sixteenth century and the twenty-first. The essays in this volume grow from the papers they gave then and on the conversations they generated with the other participants in the audience. Among those participants was David Bevington, the scholar who perhaps did most to alert Shakespeareans to the importance of the premodern in his plays, and who provides a Conclusion to this volume. What follows below outlines both the main areas where the links between Shakespeare and the medieval past emerge most strongly, and the contribution of the volume's essays to each of those.

SHAKESPEARE'S MIDDLE AGES

A collection of this kind raises as its first question, what did the Middle Ages mean to Shakespeare, given that the term had barely yet been invented? Is our use of it so anachronistic as to be meaningless in their own terms? Foxe's and Camden's different conceptions of the 'middle age' pointed in

two very different directions, both marking rupture, but neither concerned with a sense of the past as such. Foxe's was a religious and ecclesiastical period, a dark age between the early and the reformed Church; Camden's more overtly literary usage, as the period between Classical literature and the revival of poetry earlier in the sixteenth century, likewise cast it as an era of darkness. The medieval bedrock of so much Elizabethan culture and technology, politics and the ordinary processes of daily living, was not what interested them. Yet that emerging sense in the late sixteenth century that there was a qualitative difference, and not just a progression of years, between the present and what had gone before, makes it all the more legitimate to investigate how both the sameness and the difference were conceived. The first two essays address this question from different directions, though both stress the emerging self-consciousness about the past and its uses in Early Modern theatrical and reading practices.

The issue is represented in material form – one might say, in emblematic form – in what is now Southwark Cathedral, at a point midway between the City of London and the Globe Theatre. Built as the priory church of St Mary Overy, it became, as St Saviour's, the parish church for the area that included the Globe Theatre. Its imposing bulk embodied Foxe's shift from the 'middle age' to the new: a physical edifice that remained essentially unchanged but whose theological and political meanings had crossed over into a different world. On the north side, it contains the tomb of John Gower, who wrote the source of *Pericles* and appears as its presenter; on the south is a monument recording the burial there of Edmund Shakespeare, William's younger brother. St Saviour's is accordingly the starting-point for Bruce Smith's 'Shakespeare's Middle Ages', which approaches the issue by way of Shakespeare's own interest in 'middles', and the valency they carry in terms of time and space as well as history, in theatrical and medical, as well as conceptual senses. A counterintuitive example of how unexpected things can move into this middle ground is Shakespeare's notion of the 'antic': a word that frequently appears in Shakespeare's texts as both homophonous and synonymous with the antique, but often used to mean not the Classical, but the grotesque – the kind of disordered image or behaviour most associated with medieval margins or mummings. Smith here associates it with the distinctive kinaesthetic understanding of experience given by inherited theories of the humours and the imagination, and with the incorporation of peripheries into the centre of focus.

Bart van Es's 'Late Shakespeare and the Middle Ages' looks to the early seventeenth century as the fulcrum in the understanding of the medieval, the tipping-point between the inherited medieval and a

conscious medievalism, with *Pericles* as the text that makes the distinction most apparent. The play draws both its story and its method from the great flowering of romance in the Middle Ages, but it was written as that flowering was giving way to its glorious sending up in *Don Quixote*: a text that reached England just as Shakespeare was writing his own late romances. The early seventeenth century marks the point when medieval texts could still be recognized for the full literary and cultural force they carried, but when equally they could be seen as outdated, not to be taken seriously, as their element of the fantastic was coming hard up against a rising interest in more naturalistic modes. Where Smith picks up Foxe's definition of the 'middle age', van Es picks up Camden's; between them they return that anachronistic-looking term 'middle age' to its proper place in the Early Modern world, to show how important it was to that world's own definition and understanding of itself.

BOOKS AND LANGUAGE

A high proportion of the books printed in the sixteenth century were medieval texts. The early decades saw the production of an abundance of devotional works, which did not just disappear once the Reformation struck: as the survival of large numbers of copies demonstrates, people kept them on their shelves, and their children read them. Catholicism did not, as we too often need reminding, disappear in the 1530s: it was alive and vibrant in the late 1550s as well, and was thoroughly familiar to the older generation of Elizabethans. Not only texts, but habits of thought, speech and belief, kept their hold widely over the populace, far beyond the many active recusant households. More obvious lines of continuity come through the printing of earlier secular texts by Caxton and many of his successors into the seventeenth century. Caxton himself set the pace, and the fashion, with his translations of a number of French works that were medieval in origin: his *Recuyell of the Hystoryes of Troye*, for instance, the first book to be printed in English, was a translation of a fifteenth-century Burgundian work that was itself based on earlier medieval originals, and it remained the most widely disseminated account of the Trojan story for some 250 years, taking in *Troilus and Cressida* along the way. Some fifty Middle English romances were printed, often in multiple editions, and formed the pulp literature of Tudor and Elizabethan popular reading; a number were given dramatizations on the Elizabethan stage. Three Middle English poets, Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate, were also granted foundational status and were extensively mined for the stage, Chaucer in particular.

Ever since the Norman Conquest, French texts had been imported into Britain, had been translated, and had influenced the writing of new English works. It is sometimes overlooked how strongly that process continued through the sixteenth century. Print magnified the process of translation and assimilation, but it was a technology as conservative of medieval inheritances as it was revolutionary in form. Anne Coldiron, in 'The mediated "medieval" in Shakespeare', gives an overview of the range of texts and habits of mind entering England from continental Europe that we now, with periodizing hindsight, identify as 'medieval', but which might rather have seemed familiar, comfortable, even commonplace, to Early Modern audiences. Francophone culture was the major such element, but ancient texts too came to Shakespeare as they had come to prior generations, through the good offices of textual transformers (scribes, compilers, translators and others): the Classical often reached the Elizabethans by way of medieval literature in both Latin and French before it became English. Such texts helped Shakespeare's audiences and readers know the past in very particular ways, inevitably filtered, adapted and reworded. Coldiron reminds us that medieval texts and habits of mind structure the uptake of that past in the Tudor and early Stuart eras.

Shakespeare's preferred medium was not print but the stage, the word spoken rather than read. Scholars and biographers have often expressed surprise as well as pleasure that he should have chosen the much denigrated medium of the theatre for his life's work, but the value attached to speech as the primary form of language may go some way towards explaining his choice. Doubtless the young Shakespeare was stage-struck, and increasingly recognized where his true genius lay (not to mention the prospect of a reliable income); but the privileging of the spoken perhaps helped to bolster the faith of writers for the stage, in the teeth of both humanist and religious opposition, that what they were doing was no trivial activity. This value accorded to spoken language is the subject of Jonathan Hope's '"Not know my voice?": Shakespeare corrected, English perfected – theories of language from the Middle Ages to modernity'. Continuity is here demonstrated in terms of linguistic theories, in so far as they shared that conception of language as privileging the spoken over the written. It was not until the Restoration, not least in the arguments of Dryden, that the balance tilted towards the written. With that came a set of assumptions about the standardization of English into a single correct form. Shakespeare does not need to concern himself with correctness as such, for all his sensitivity to register and idiolect. He belongs to an age that still privileges 'voice', the medium of the acted word, over the silent written record.