

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86843-3 - Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England

Edited by Gordon McMullan and David Matthews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

*Introduction: reading the medieval in
early modern England*

David Matthews and Gordon McMullan

I

The printed text of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, a Shakespeare and Fletcher collaboration first performed in 1613 though not published until 1634, opens with a prologue noting the play's debt to Geoffrey Chaucer and *The Knight's Tale*, a debt expressed as a sense of responsibility to the poet of the medieval past:

If we let fall the nobleness of this
And the first sound this child hear be a hiss,
How will it shake the bones of that good man
And make him cry from under ground, 'Oh, fan
From me the witless chaff of such a writer
That blasts my bays and my famed works makes lighter
Than Robin Hood!'¹

Elaborating both on this responsibility and on the impossibility of reaching the same heights of poetic achievement as Chaucer, the writer of the prologue (who may be John Fletcher, though the 'we' seems to encompass both the playwrights and the acting company) pursues his modesty topos: to aspire to Chaucer's art involves a 'breathless swim / In . . . deep water' (24–5) and the audience is asked to hold out 'helping hands' while the playwrights 'tack about / And something do to save' themselves (26–7). The extended metaphor becomes so overblown that the effect is humorous; we know, as of course we are supposed to know, that Shakespeare and Fletcher are not really cowering under Chaucer's long shadow. For all the awe that he inspires, Chaucer is in the grave. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* may be only a 'child' of Chaucer's work, but this child lives and Chaucer does not.

By 1613, interest in Chaucer was in fact declining. As Ann Thompson notes, a cluster of Chaucer-inspired plays around 1599–1602 may reflect interest sparked by the two Chaucer editions of Thomas Speght (1598 and 1602), but thereafter the medieval poet's influence on drama declined

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86843-3 - Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England

Edited by Gordon McMullan and David Matthews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

markedly and Speght's 1602 edition was to be the last for more than a century.² The prologue, then, offers a nod to a poet whose influence is declining and the prospect of an unquiet Chaucer does not, finally, feel unduly daunting to the play's authors or to their interpellated audience: 'You shall hear / Scenes, though below his art, may yet appear / Worth two hours' travail. To his bones sweet sleep!' (27–9). Chaucer does not actually pronounce the speech of complaint the prologue puts in his mouth which is in any case contingent on the play failing in performance, something which the prologue, at its end, seems confident will not happen.

The spectre of Chaucer has nonetheless been raised and the play's indebtedness acknowledged. While the prologue moves from threatening the appearance of an inconvenient ghost from the medieval past to the exorcism of that ghost, it is still Chaucer's version of the story that lives 'constant to eternity'. By mentioning Chaucer at all, Fletcher (or whoever it is) raises the possibility both that the sleep of the spectral medieval past might not be as easy as he would wish and that the medieval continues not just to be read and received in his own day but also works to construct the ways in which it is read. The prologue might be playful, even lacking in the respect it professes, but it also acknowledges that, without its source, the play would not exist.

In this example of reading the medieval in early modern England, then, some of the ambivalences in the process of that reading can be seen. On the one hand the medieval past is, like Chaucer, safely in the grave and sweetly sleeping. But on the other, that past threatens both to speak from the grave to complain of shaken bones and to shape the way the present conceives it: medieval culture thus addresses attempts later made to adapt it and, behind the rhetorical construction of early modern superiority, it manages to insert a certain anxiousness into that later work. At the same time as it gestures toward the sense of rupture between medieval and early modern, the prologue to *The Two Noble Kinsmen* shows an anxiety about the legacy of the one for the other and the possibility of *continuity* between them. This legacy and its ramifications – the anxious attempts to suppress the early modern period's medieval heritage, the continuities that nevertheless make themselves felt, and the ways in which the early modern was in fact constructed by way of the medieval – form the subject of *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England*.

In English literary and historical studies, the borderline between the Middle Ages and the period known, depending on the disciplinary or theoretical

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86843-3 - Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England

Edited by Gordon McMullan and David Matthews

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

affiliations of the writer, either as ‘the Renaissance’ or as ‘the Early Modern’ has in recent years become increasingly – and, to some, unexpectedly – permeable.³ There should, though, be nothing surprising about this as a development. As long ago as 1948, Wallace Ferguson argued that the period known as the ‘Middle Ages’ had been deliberately constructed as a time of obscurity and superstition, the dead past against which a self-consciously renascent culture needed to define itself.⁴ More recently, Jacques Le Goff has consistently argued for the relative unimportance of ‘the Renaissance’ in any overarching framework of periodisation when compared with, on the one hand, the Middle Ages and, on the other, the Industrial Revolution. ‘I ask only that the Renaissance be seen in proper proportion, as a brilliant but superficial interlude’, says Le Goff provocatively, adding: ‘In history there is no such thing as rebirth. There is only change, in this case camouflaged as a return to antiquity.’ ‘Renaissance’ is thus not something that marks the end of the Middle Ages but is rather ‘a recurrent feature of a very long period of time during which men were constantly seeking authority in the past, in a previous golden age’.⁵ For Le Goff, in other words, the terms ‘Medieval’ and ‘Renaissance’ do not mark distinct, discrete time periods, but are, rather, interrelated – each, in its way, the product of the other.

Le Goff’s views might seem extreme but they in fact have considerable value in focusing attention on the lack of equivalence between two terms usually considered consonant. It is fundamental to these terms that they be seen to refer to two completely different periods and to imply that they naturally arose from those periods. Yet both are early modern coinages, the one designed as derogatory suppression of a culture, the other as celebratory rebadging. As Ferguson argued at length in *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, the terms have their own history and, though it seems now that they have existed for ever, he shows that the use of ‘Renaissance’ to refer to a general phase of European history did not commence until the nineteenth century. Yet despite the depth of the recognition in the late twentieth century of the inadequacy of the firm line drawn between ‘Medieval’ and ‘Renaissance’, this division, given its most famous expression by Jacob Burckhardt in the mid-nineteenth century, has proved remarkably persistent.⁶ In separate but equally trenchant critiques of early modernists’ historical assumptions published in the early 1990s, David Aers and Lee Patterson took aim not, as might be expected, at old historicists but at cutting-edge cultural materialists, attacking their ‘presentist’ orientation and their use of an imagined monolithic ‘medieval’ as a foil for their understanding of the early modern period as the birthplace of individualism.⁷ This habit reflected the thoroughgoing opposition apparent in criticism in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86843-3 - Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England

Edited by Gordon McMullan and David Matthews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the 1980s – especially in Britain – between residually philological medieval studies and burgeoning French-theory-inspired modern studies. At the institutional level, this opposition unhelpfully and in a sense paradoxically, bearing in mind the cultural materialists' self-image as mould-breakers, entrenched an understanding of the medieval which in fact barely differed from the Burckhardtian vision of the previous century.

As James Simpson observes in his essay in this collection, '[s]trict periodisation, especially between medieval and early modern, always implies a choice to be made', a choice requiring certain exclusions or rejections. He continues:

The passion with which we reject one alternative necessarily determines the passion by which we choose another. They are forms of each other, determining, often unconsciously, the forms of the work we do, and committing us to repetitive rehearsal of a five-hundred-year historical agon. (29)

This collection of essays, we believe, marks a moment when there are at last signs that this agon may be nearing its end. Over the last few years, in English literary and historical studies at least, the troubled and increasingly porous border between the Middle Ages and the early modern period – and hence between Medieval and Early Modern Studies – has been under renewed and insistent challenge. Medievalists now range far into the sixteenth century as a matter of course – a tendency abundantly clear in the *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* edited by David Wallace (1999) – as well as in his *Premodern Places* (2004) – and in James Simpson's volume *Reform and Cultural Revolution* for the *Oxford English Literary History* (2002), each of which offers an overarching account of the 'Medieval' that reads the English Reformation as a more significant event for a modern understanding of medieval culture than some of the usual suspects – the end of the Wars of the Roses, say, or the Tudor accession.⁸ Of course, chronology is not the only thing at stake here: much that has been traditionally considered the invention or discovery of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries has been re-examined in the light of medieval precursors – perhaps most notably the hotly contested concept of the individual, directly addressed in the polemical reassessments of Patterson and Aers.

At the same time (and despite the resistance inherent in institutional structures), early modernists too have begun to reject the policing of strict boundaries between periods. The historiographical and theological debates initiated by such groundbreaking interventions as Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars* – in which the notion that the Reformation in England created a clean break with Roman Catholicism is taken to task – or the essays

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86843-3 - Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England

Edited by Gordon McMullan and David Matthews

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

of Berndt Hamm – who asks ‘Why should the “Age” of the Reformation not be understood along with the Late Middle Ages as a stage in a larger era of cultural, institutional, intellectual and religious history?’ – have set the proponents of continuity against those of caesura, enforcing a reassessment of the nature and impact of Reformation and prompting early modern literary scholars to rethink their understanding of the relationship between their period and its inheritance.⁹

This activity fits well with the established cross-period engagement of early drama specialists who, encouraged by the substantial materials on early performance history collated by the *Records of Early English Drama* (REED) project, have for a while now been emphasising the continuities rather than the differences between so-called ‘Medieval’ and ‘Renaissance’ or ‘Early Modern’ drama: books as distinct as Greg Walker’s *Plays of Persuasion* (1991), Paul White’s *Theatre and Reformation* (1993) and Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean’s *The Queen’s Men and their Plays* (1998) have made convincing claims about Reformation and post-Reformation theatrical practice which refuse to be limited by an unnecessary fixity of division between ‘medieval’ and ‘early modern’ drama.¹⁰ The title of John Cox and David Scott Kastan’s *New History of Early English Drama* (1997) and the name of the journal set up in collaboration with REED – *Early Theatre* – mark the developing emphasis on theatrical continuities over the last decade, as does the inclusion of the ‘medieval’ plays *Mankind* and *Everyman* in the forthcoming Arden Early Modern Drama series.¹¹

This recognition is by no means confined to the field of early theatre studies. A string of recent publications – by SunHee Kim Gertz, Derek Pearsall, and Pearsall and Duncan Wu – has proposed continuities between Chaucer and Shakespeare or between Chaucer and Spenser.¹² And a range of recent books – by, *inter alia*, Helen Cooper, Benjamin Griffin and several of the contributors to the current collection, notably Cathy Shrank, Jennifer Summit and Deanne Williams – extends this sense of continuity and dependence by assessing textual phenomena from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries.¹³ The influence of the New British History initiated by J. G. A. Pocock and others – and subsequently of the developing field of Archipelagic Studies – has similarly encouraged early modernists such as Andrew Hadfield and Philip Schwyzer to read the creation of national structures in terms of continuity rather than disjunction between the periods: they argue, despite the reluctance of many early modernists working in this area to look back further than the early sixteenth century, that the construction of English nationhood cannot be mapped through period parochialism.¹⁴

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86843-3 - Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England

Edited by Gordon McMullan and David Matthews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The implications of these reassessments of periodicity for the study of both the medieval and the early modern are abundantly clear. Early modernists have begun to acknowledge for the first time in a generation the importance of the late (and sometimes also the early) Middle Ages in the construction of post-Reformation understandings of literary tradition, nationhood and the self. Medievalists, equally, are beginning to grasp the importance of the re-reading in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of their period and of the impact this re-reading has had in shaping the modern vision of the medieval. And while the latter are, for institutional reasons, perhaps more eager than the former to embrace this development, both publishers' catalogues and recent conference programmes suggest a considerable pace of change. Seth Lerer's *Chaucer and His Readers* and Theresa Krier's collection *Refiguring Chaucer in the Renaissance*, for instance, are groundbreaking contributions to the emerging field.¹⁵ Both focus specifically on Chaucer studies rather than on wider medieval culture, but the agendas of recent conferences suggest a broadening of interest beyond Chaucer: in 2004 alone, John Watkins's seminar on 'Shakespeare and the Middle Ages' at the Shakespeare Association of America conference, the three sessions organised by Sarah Kelen under the heading 'Renaissance Retrospection' at the International Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo, and the seminar entitled 'Medievalism in English Renaissance Literature' run by one of our contributors, Deanne Williams, for the MLA meeting in Philadelphia all suggest the currency of the topic. In 2006, the conference 'Renaissance Medievalisms' at Victoria College, University of Toronto sustains the theme.

Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England marks the emergence of this renewed recognition of the close relationship between the 'medieval' and the 'early modern' by exploring the full range of ways in which the Middle Ages were constructed and reconfigured in the early modern period. The essays in this collection are not only concerned, however, with the early modern re-reading of the medieval, a unidirectional move that might tend simply to reinscribe the old boundaries; they also, as we have begun to suggest, address the ways in which the early modern was constructed through or in negotiation with the medieval. Our contributors emphasise continuities, but they also acknowledge the inevitability of certain kinds of period boundary – when, for instance, Bernhard Klein notes a fundamental shift between medieval and early modern cartography – while also noting the ways in which the early modern, even as it marks its difference from the medieval, also acknowledges its fundamental dependence upon what preceded it. It will be immediately clear to readers that the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86843-3 - Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England

Edited by Gordon McMullan and David Matthews

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

term ‘Reformation’ is central to the concerns of this volume in a way that ‘Renaissance’, say, is not. This is perhaps best explained by way of Jennifer Summit’s formulation: writing about Leland, she reads early modern English geography as ‘the product less of Renaissance than of Reformation – less, that is, of a newly awakened, classicised self-consciousness than of an ongoing, politically driven struggle to redefine and contain the nation’s own medieval past’ (160). The construction of the nation is in fact central to the understanding we develop in this collection of the relationship between different versions of the past: we wish to argue that the early modern must be defined not in distinction from the medieval but through it, that the urge to periodise and the development of the concept of nationhood are wholly interpenetrated, and that the reading of the medieval in early modern England has in several ways bequeathed to us our understanding of both the medieval and the early modern.

III

This collection of essays had its origin in connected conferences run by the editors at King’s College London in November 2002 and at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, in August 2003. Three further essays were specially commissioned in order to complement and complete the set of essays that emerged from the conferences, and each contributor has revised his or her individual essay in light of the whole. The result, we believe, is an innovative and distinctive collection with an overall coherence and identity that emerges from the shared point of origin of the essays and the relationships developed between them. There are five sections, covering ‘Period’, ‘Text’, ‘Nation’, ‘Geography’ and ‘Reformation’, which engage with questions of periodisation, the technology of print, nationhood, visual and cartographic culture, and religion – sections which, we believe, build up a full account of the difference it makes to address medieval and early modern materials outside the usual period boundaries. The sections are interconnected: we expect readers will wish to dip in and read individual essays and we believe each essay in its way broaches the principal issues of the collection as a whole, but we think too that reading the essays consecutively builds a narrative that might not be wholly apparent from selective reading.

We begin with considerations of periodisation, initially through James Simpson’s informal yet polemical reflections on the subject, for which he draws on his experiences researching and writing *Reform and Cultural Revolution*. His essay is, in a sense, a stock-taking in the wake of the publication

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86843-3 - Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England

Edited by Gordon McMullan and David Matthews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of the book in which he describes the exhilaration provoked by writing a literary history that traverses the 1530s, a decade defined by the Act of Supremacy but decisive also in forming specific kinds of memory and ways of processing memory. Simpson argues that this decade initiated both the theme of the 'Middle Ages' and the methods we still use to study the centuries embraced by that term and he proposes breaking out of 'the binary, revolutionary logic that underlies the very notion of periodisation in the first place' in order to find ways for medievalists to address early modernists through historicising the alleged rupture between the periods and estranging both by '[r]epeated traversing of the medieval/early modern divide' (28, 30).

Extending Simpson's demonstration of the shortcomings of periodisation, Deanne Williams turns to a specific text – Robert Greene's play *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* – as a base from which to explore the self-consciousness of early modern writers as they engaged with and constructed ideas of the medieval past and to demonstrate the double reading made of that past as one of religious credulity yet nascent national consciousness. Using Paul de Man's idea of a 'rhetoric of temporality' as her model, Williams assesses the various ways in which the play deconstructs Elizabethan ways of understanding the past, noting for instance that the title character, Friar Bacon, is drawn in ways that seem both to reiterate a homogeneous, fixed conception of the medieval and at the same time to undermine any sense of 'a linear and compartmentalised vision of history' (47). By way, she argues, of a range of tropes – principally irony, melancholy and doubling – Greene rejects, even as he apparently sustains, an early modern vision of the medieval as magical and stable, reading it instead as a 'site of conflict' (48).

The printed word was of course a principal focus for conflict in the Reformation and the second section – on questions of the text – addresses certain issues of print culture as they become apparent through the examination of early modern editions of medieval texts. Larry Scanlon, extending the critique of periodisation begun by Simpson and Williams, offers a new account of the first edition of *Piers Plowman*, produced in three impressions in 1550 by the radical printer, Robert Crowley. This edition has usually been regarded as a Protestant misreading of an essentially medieval, Catholic text and, although Scanlon is by no means trying to deny the impact of Protestantism on Crowley's text of the poem, he argues that that Protestantism is expressed 'in terms that are primarily philosophical, poetic and political' and that any sectarianism *per se* in Crowley's *Piers* should be seen as 'occasional and secondary' (58). Crowley looks beyond Langland's

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86843-3 - Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England

Edited by Gordon McMullan and David Matthews

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

Catholicism, valuing the ideals of his poem and articulating continuities that are, for Scanlon, ‘too subtle, too ambiguous and too complex to be subsumed under notions of appropriation or misrecognition’ (58). Analysing Crowley’s paratextual material, Scanlon finds in it only a minimal anti-Catholicism, turning instead to what he regards as the primary ideological purpose of the edition, that is, its commitment to vernacular literacy and the extension of the text to a wider audience which he will equip with the information necessary to understand the poem. In this respect, Crowley’s most important ideological ambition coincides entirely with Langland’s own, Catholic, advocacy of vernacular literacy.

Just as Langland was taken up in the context of Protestantism, so was Chaucer increasingly refashioned as a proto-Protestant in the sixteenth century. Like Scanlon, David Matthews is particularly interested in the paratexts of Tudor editions, focusing on the prefatory material and glosses in Thomas Speght’s two editions of Chaucer. Speght is evidently dealing with a thoroughly medieval figure in Chaucer, but his project is also a modernising one which looks to dignify the poet and to direct interpretation for a late sixteenth-century readership. Speght draws Chaucer into line with the Reformation by portraying him as an ever more anticlerical poet. Like John Bale, who wants, in Cathy Shrank’s words, ‘to regulate and contain the interpretations of his readers’, Speght produces a Chaucer who will overtly satisfy the likely ideological demands of Tudor readers (191). But no more than in the case of Crowley is Speght motivated simply by anti-Catholicism. There is another project at work, Matthews argues, one underpinned by a notion of continuity. Speght promotes the poet in his role as an adherent of the Lancastrian cause, a move which Matthews relates to Speght’s own desire for advancement in the Tudor state via his dedication to Queen Elizabeth’s minister, Robert Cecil. Speght’s hints of a patronage relationship which would mirror that which he constructs between Chaucer and John of Gaunt offers a clear sense of ideological continuity between medieval and early modern.

A major site of both continuity and conflict across the centuries is the gradual development of English and British nationhood, particularly as expressed through contested myths of origin. Our third section provides three angles on the early modern engagement with, or evasion of, the medieval materials of emergent nationalism. Stephanie Trigg opens by re-assessing the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century appropriation of the foundational story of the Order of the Garter, examining the quest in early modern historiography for the imagined true origins of the Order’s famous motto, *honi soit qui mal y pense*. This motto, Trigg argues, ‘encapsulates

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86843-3 - Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England

Edited by Gordon McMullan and David Matthews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

DAVID MATTHEWS AND GORDON McMULLAN

the mixed inheritance of the medieval past for early modernity' (105). Early modern historians writing on the Order cannot reject the medieval because they are drawn to the continuity of national tradition that the Order represents; at the same time, they wish to impose their own critical judgements on the medieval past, producing the medieval period as a historical object worthy of study and dispute within antiquarian discourse. These early modern considerations, in turn, are appropriated in more recent and official histories of the Order which perpetuate certain foundational mythologies, reproducing the medieval narrative of feminised origins passed on to them by early modern writers only in order, again like the early modern writers, to displace those origins with the voice of masculine common sense and reason.

Like Trigg, Anke Bernau is concerned both with sixteenth-century chronicle history and its reuses of the medieval past and with the gendering of that history and that reuse, focusing on the sixteenth-century negotiation of Galfridian history. Again like Trigg, she assesses in particular the early modern displacement of feminised origins. As her exemplar, she recounts and describes the reception of the myth of Albina in early modern England, noting the particular challenges and opportunities offered to Elizabethan and Jacobean historiographers by a specifically female myth of origin. The myth, which was considered threatening in offering an alternative to, for instance, the tale of Brutus, was effectively suppressed, yet nevertheless retained an ability, alongside parallel myths such as that of Boudica, to unsettle and undermine the gendering of English/British nationalism. Such explorations of national origins through female figures, Bernau argues, 'allowed historiographers to articulate – however inadvertently – the ambiguities and fearful uncertainties of writing such histories' and opened up continuing uncertainties both about concepts of racial authenticity and about the possibility of clear, unified points of origin for the nation (117).

Extending the question of the representation of nationhood, Gordon McMullan examines the Jacobean theatre's engagement with the early British past. Responding to an observation made at the London conference by Clare Lees that too often current work crossing the boundaries between the medieval and the early modern focuses only on a narrow period covering the very late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, McMullan chooses to analyse the Jacobean theatrical representation of Anglo-Saxon and mythic British pasts and traces their relationship with – indeed their centrality to – the developing ideology of nationhood, arguing that individual plays with early settings form 'part of a larger theatrical project to interpret Elizabethan and Jacobean Britain through the reconstruction of a range of