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Studies in Medievalism XXIII: Ethics and Medievalism; Medievalism: A Critical History

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Published in:
English Studies

DOI:
[10.1080/0013838X.2016.1175220](https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2016.1175220)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kuipers, N. (2016). Studies in Medievalism XXIII: Ethics and Medievalism; Medievalism: A Critical History. *English Studies*, 97(5), 568-570. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2016.1175220>

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To cite this article: Nadine Kuipers (2016) Studies in Medievalism XXIII: Ethics and Medievalism; Medievalism: A Critical History, English Studies, 97:5, 568-570, DOI: [10.1080/0013838X.2016.1175220](https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2016.1175220)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2016.1175220>

Published online: 31 May 2016.

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REVIEW

Studies in Medievalism XXIII: Ethics and Medievalism, Karl Fugelso (ed.), Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2014, xiii + 264 pp., £50.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-84384-376-4

Medievalism: A Critical History, David Matthews, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2015, xv + 229 pp., £50.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-84384-392-4

In *Medievalism: A Critical History*, David Matthews traces the developments of *medievalism*—post-medieval cultural responses to the Middle Ages—and *medievalism studies*—the academic discipline that studies this phenomenon. A product of this discipline is the essay collection *Ethics and Medievalism*, edited by Karl Fugelso. Its premise is to encourage *medievalists*, here meaning those who actively generate post-medieval responses, and scholars of medievalism studies who study such efforts in turn, to reflect on their choices in codifying morals and ethics.

The multiple senses of the word *medievalism* and its derivatives used above are symptomatic of what Matthews calls “a paralysing of self-definition that currently afflicts medievalism” (p. 178). To cure this affliction, his first chapter problematises the taxonomy of the Middle Ages as the subject of both medieval studies and medievalism studies. To the former discipline, the Middle Ages are a “real” period, fixed in time. By contrast, the focal period of the latter cannot be defined by a temporal framework, as in medievalism, the Middle Ages always permeate the present. Therefore, Matthews opts to speak of “spaces” of medievalism instead, which allow us to enter multiple versions of past and present-day Middle Ages (p. 41).

In the following chapter, Matthews guides his readers through these spaces, highlighting the layers of medievalism that reflect, for instance, in the architecture of rebuilt Warsaw, or the anachronistic replica castle Château de Guédelon. Next, he arrives at a discussion of medievalised society and identity, illustrated by surveys of re-enactment groups. Without becoming exhaustively descriptive, Matthews’s example-laden narrative underlines that medievalism is unaffected by borders of language, locality and temporality.

The multiplicity of medievalism is also evident in Fugelso’s objective: on the one hand, *Ethics and Medievalism* establishes a discourse in which medieval culture acts as a mirror to post-modern ethical thought. On the other, it analyses the morality of medievalism as it manifests in plays, films, television, novels, art, popular culture and video games. The authors of the fourteen collected papers often employ a language of oppositions, addressing such topics as social inclusivity and exclusivity in a restaging of *Everyman*; attitudes towards the moral Other in the television show *Vikings*; ability, disability, gender and politics in *Game of Thrones*; and religious antagonism in Stothard’s etchings of effigies. Furthermore, in Kevin and Brent Moberly’s reading of Dan Brown’s *Inferno*, the concept of the Middle Ages as a period fulfils the role of moral Other against (post)modernity. In the novel, the threat of a relapse into the immoral “Dark Ages” provokes a vision of transhumanism in which our own future becomes a new renaissance. An opposite view is offered in Michael R. Kightley’s chapter on William Morris’s adaptation of *Beowulf*. Informed by socialist ideals, his *Beowulf* presents early medieval society as a precursor to modern culture.

The work of Morris is also one of Matthews's many case studies, and Morris's ideas accord with what Matthews describes as the "childhood of modernity" trope, one of the many perceptions of the Middle Ages that surface in his book. Matthews's examples eloquently support a larger discourse which aims to illustrate that medievalism studies is based on anomalous foundations: short bursts of post-medieval responses have been taken as normative for the discipline (p. 118). There are also persistent myths, such as the antagonism between medievalism studies and medieval studies. Moreover, medievalism has yet to shake off its stigma as a discipline that produces articles, not monographs (Trigg quoted in Matthews p. 120). To counter these ideas, Matthews advocates that medievalism studies "embrace[s] its cultural studies identity", and that medieval studies embraces the importance of medievalism studies (p. 178).

The limitations of a discipline existing mostly in essay format do sporadically materialise in *Ethics and Medievalism*, as the latter part of the book mainly focuses on the shadow-sides of medieval morality: eugenics, sacrifice and horror. For instance, two chapters are dedicated to the 2007 film adaptation of *Beowulf*, and a third chapter discusses multiple adaptations of the poem. There are missed opportunities here: a comparison of the ethics in *Beowulf* and contemporary medievalist warrior films, such as *Mongol* (2007), for instance, would have generated a rounder picture of the ethics and topicality in medievalist film. Nonetheless, despite occasional repetitiousness in an otherwise eclectic and thought-provoking collection, the individual papers in *Ethics and Medievalism* will be useful to both medieval studies and cultural studies of the (post)medieval periods. In the words of Nickolas Haydock, medievalism "encourage[s] us to refocus our attention" (Fugelso p. 125), and thus the contributions to *Ethics and Medievalism* not only remind us how modern ethics inform our perception of the Middle Ages, but highlight how medieval ethics continue to shape modern cultural expressions, redirecting us to their premodern origins.

This interaction is further exemplified in *Medievalism: A Critical History*, which proves to be an invaluable guide to both medievalism and medievalism studies. Comprising clear working definitions and solutions to methodological and terminological problems, it questions where medieval studies and medievalism studies converge, and where they depart. Matthews's conclusion, in which the validity of medievalism studies is explored, stands out as a plea for an all-encompassing field of medievalism (p. 180).

In sum, while *Ethics and Medievalism* shows the inner workings of the discipline in motion, *Medievalism: A Critical History* clearly outlines the complicated history of medievalism. Matthews reiterates Norman Cantor, who stated that every scholarly approach to the Middle Ages is in itself a product of medievalism—but this is still not a ubiquitously appreciated view. He adds that, while today's scholarship into the Middle Ages is seen as medieval studies, "medievalism is always a generation ago" (p. 176). Nonetheless, it is clear that both Matthews and the contributors to *Ethics and Medievalism* are indebted to medieval, medievalism and cultural studies. Matthews seems rightly hopeful that medievalism will not rupture at its fringes, but coevolve into a "conjoined medieval-medievalism studies" (p. 179).

Afterthought

In his chapter on the 2007 film adaptation of *Beowulf*, Nickolas Haydock points out that recent scholars are increasingly appreciative of the central role of monsters in *Beowulf*. Since film adaptations induce and affirm this notion, the interaction between medievalism and medieval(ism) studies is evident. In his conclusion, Haydock posits that "the vanishing mediator in this strange coupling of scholarship and popular culture is theoretical discourse, now

every bit as influential on mass-market productions as it is in academia” (Fugelso p. 146). The reality of such a symbiosis is tangible when Stephen Smallwood, executive producer of a forthcoming ITV production of *Beowulf*, told *Chronicle Live*: “I don’t think any *Beowulf* academic is going to relate to this. No doubt they’ll say they hate it ... but the original poem is filled with monsters and we are recreating them”.¹ Smallwood seems genuinely unaware that his *Beowulf* will affect both medieval and medievalism studies.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2016.1175220>

Romanticism in the Shadow of War: Literary Culture in the Napoleonic War Years,
 Jeffrey N. Cox, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 276 pp., ISBN: 978-1-107-07194-0, £60.00 hb

The topic that one tends to connect least with Romanticism is war, even though the Romantics wrote at a time that was sorely afflicted by war, strife and insurrection. Dancing daffodils do not tally with Byron’s depictions of war atrocities; contradictions of this sort were commonly circumvented by critics, who suggested that Byron should be read as a poet who exceeds the narrow boundaries of Romanticism and, like the German Heine, reveals the pursuit of the blue flower as a hoax. In his recent book, Jeffrey Cox veers from this well-trodden path in reading Romanticism and argues that war is predominant in Romantic literature and, what is more, that Romanticism seems to exist in and is almost absorbed by, the long and portentous shadow of war. In this context, Jeffrey Cox’s hypothesis is as intriguing as it is daring: Romantic literature is not only more indebted to the Napoleonic wars, their crises and reverberations than has hitherto been purported; literature also reflects the strategies of war and uses the instrument of intertextuality in a manner that is tantamount to a cross-boundary raid and a foray into foreign cultures.

Starting on the assumption that the imagery of war in Romantic poetry has been sufficiently dealt with, Cox focuses on the styles and genres of Romantic works. One of the genres that not only seems to have come into existence at that time, but is also supposed to be a product of war is melodrama, a genre that has hitherto been neglected as pop culture pandering to the low tastes of the broader theatre audience. In a most thought-provoking chapter on the Romantic melodrama, Cox maintains that melodrama is expressive of the insecurity of a war-torn time in which the categories between comedy and tragedy have become vexingly blurred. This mixing of tragedy and comedy also has implications of political radicalism, since melodrama straddles the boundaries between “major and minor theatres”, between high and low culture, and between what Cox calls “the patent theatres with their monopoly on the drama of the spoken word” and the so-called “illegitimate theatres” with their leanings towards spectacle, music and pantomime. Since melodrama is always invested with “a strong sense of conventional order” (p. 48), its political radicalism is, however, mitigated and it eventually remains

¹David Whetstone, “We visit the set of ITV’s mighty *Beowulf* production in County Durham,” *Chronicle Live*, 17 April 2015, <http://www.chroniclive.co.uk/whats-on/film-news/visit-set-itvs-mighty-beowulf-9068009>, accessed 11 June 2015.