

## Medievalism in English Renaissance Literature

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Do English Renaissance authors engage in medievalism? The term "medieval" is the creation of the nineteenth-century Swiss historian, Jakob Burckhardt, whose argument for the Renaissance required a conception of the Middle Ages to define what came before it. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the terms "medieval" and "medievalism" appear first in the writings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Ruskin, and A. W. N. Pugin, tying them to the nostalgia and aesthetic ideals of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the Gothic Revival, and the Arts and Crafts movement. The alternative term for the period is the "Middle Ages," first used by John Foxe, according to the OED, in his work of Protestant martyrology, *Actes and Monuments of the English Martyrs* (1570). Foxe refers to the pre-Reformation period as "the middle age," which he describes as "the primitive tyme of the church." Foxe is translating a Latin term, *medium aevum*, devised by Petrarch and other humanists to denote the period between the ancients and the moderns to describe England's Catholic past.

Medievalism and the idea of the Middle Ages are retrospective inventions, having less to do with the qualities of the period itself than with the agendas of those who seek to describe it. According to Brian Stock's oft-quoted formulation:

The Renaissance invented the Middle Ages in order to define itself; the Enlightenment perpetuated them in order to admire itself; and the Romantics revived them in order to escape from themselves. In their widest ramifications "the Middle Ages" thus constitute one of the most prevalent cultural myths of the modern world. (Stock 1990: 69)

Whether we regard the period through the nostalgic eyes of a Ruskin or Rossetti or, following Foxe, as a primitive time, our views of the Middle Ages are conditioned by certain value judgments. In *Reform and Cultural Revolution, 1350–1547* (2002), James Simpson argues that prevailing definitions of the Middle Ages are the result of Reformist institutions and policies of Henry VIII that enacted a contraction and simplification of the medieval literary culture that preceded it, producing a specific notion of the period and establishing strict boundaries between it and the Renaissance.

This chapter describes the culture of medievalism, *avant-la-lettre*. At a time when the idea of the Middle Ages itself was developing into a cultural myth, authors, texts, and histories that we now think of as medieval were exerting a profound influence upon Tudor literary culture. Illustrating the scope and range of Tudor responses to the Middle Ages, this chapter offers three major examples of Tudor medievalism (the better term is "medievalisms"). They include: The literary afterlife of Geoffrey Chaucer; Tudor editions and redactions of medieval romance; and Elizabethan dramatizations of medieval history. Illustrating acts of literary reception, contexts of reading, and forms of dramatic representation, these examples show how Tudor authors respond to the Middle Ages as a persistent and provocative presence, taking part in an ongoing dialogue with the past that is shaped by a variety of contexts and literary agendas that have little in common with subsequent impulses to idealize or demonize.

As England's first celebrated author, Chaucer was first described by John Dryden as "the Father of English poetry" in his Preface to *Fables, Ancient and Modern* (1700). His reception by Tudor authors displays his evolving association with history, genealogy, and authority. Chaucer gives Tudor readers and writers a past, but the genre of romance exists in a kind of ongoing present. The name "romance" itself signals its vernacularity, and the popularity of romance in the Tudor period illustrates not only the cosmopolitanism of its reading public, who especially enjoyed translations from the French, but also the continuity in literary tastes between medieval and Renaissance. Finally, as the Tudor period saw the birth of a popular, secular stage, English history – much of it medieval – replaced biblical and allegorical narrative as a dramatic subject. As they engage with medieval dramatic genres as well as histories, Elizabethan dramatists also address evolving notions of pastness. Looking back while moving forward, the Janus face of Tudor medievalism is predicated upon a strong sense of continuity with the past, either using the past to understand itself, or else proceeding blithely, as if nothing had been lost to begin with.

### A Dead Poet

Medievalism in England hinges on the memory of Chaucer, and most Tudor authors regard him as a distinguished ancestor whom they must emulate, rather than distance themselves from or repudiate. Tudor responses to Chaucer are divided between those majority, who honor him for endowing England with a literary history and identity, and those who treat him more like a colleague or poetic contemporary.

Chaucer was revered as a poetic trailblazer in the fifteenth century. John Lydgate dubbed him "Floure of Poetës / thorghout al breteyne" (*Siege of Thebes*, l. 40) and praised him for transforming the English language, once "rude and boystous" (*Siege of Troy* l. 43), into a viable poetic language, by importing French and Italian, as well as classical, terms and literary models. The sixteenth century, however, celebrates his antiquity. In the epilogue to his edition of Chaucer's *Boece* (1478), William Caxton

describes Chaucer as an author who "ought eternally to be remembrid," endowing England with a literary history, as well as a mandate. Thus, for early Tudor poets such as Stephen Hawes, the practice of writing poetry is inseparable from the tradition of remembering Chaucer (Lerer 1993). In *The Example of Vertu* (1504), the poet Stephen Hawes praises Chaucer, as Lydgate did, for his contributions to the English language: "O noble Chauser euer moost sure / Of frutfull sentence ryght delycyous" (ll. 24–5). But he also places Chaucer as an author of books "to be remembred without Impedyment ... This was the custume of antyquyte" (ll. 5–7). Defining Chaucer as "antique" and as a moral example, Hawes establishes an English literary history that mirrors the classics.<sup>1</sup>

However, Hawes also expresses the problem Tudor poets faced when confronted by this evolving mythos of Chaucer as a founding poetic father: He makes them feel "naked in depured eloquence" (l. 9), unable to reach the heights of pure poetry. Hawes responds to this problem by writing as much like Chaucer as he possibly can. Compare these lines from Hawes:

In Septembre in fallynge of the lefe  
Whan phebus made his declynacyon  
And all the whete gadred was in the shefe  
By radyaunt here and operacyon  
Whan the vyrgyn had full domynacyon  
And Dyane entred was one degre  
Into the sygne of Gemyne. ... (ll. 29–35)

with the opening lines of the *Canterbury Tales*:

Whan that Aprille with his shoures sore  
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote,  
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne. ... (ll. 1–8)

Hawes borrows the opening "Whan," the emblematic month; its astrological significance; the agricultural point of reference; and the classical god (or goddess). He even adopts the Chaucerian "vertu" in the title of his poem, highlighting the poet's exemplary status. However, the sense of fresh and exuberant inspiration conveyed by Chaucer's breath, the bathing, and the image of the young ram running becomes, in Hawes, a sense of bathos, of defeated expectations, and of decline and domination. The leaves have fallen, the wheat is gathered, and the virgin Diana is in charge: A goddess who turns men back into beasts. Hawes thus experiences Chaucer through the sense of uncouth belatedness, and, like the sign of Gemini, duplication.

Whereas Chaucer's antique authority diminishes Hawes, his colleague and rival John Skelton uses him, instead, as a stepping-stone for his own brilliant career. In *A Garlande of Laurell* (1523), Skelton is hailed by the troika of medieval poets, Chaucer, John Gower, and Lydgate, who presents him with a laurel crown to mark his success as a poet. Skelton's use of the Janus face highlights a clear distinction between past and present as a means of furthering his goal of succession:

Where I saw Ianus, with his double chere,  
Makyng his almanak for the new yere;  
He turnyd his *tirikkis*, his *voluell* ran fast:     [tricks; astronomical device]  
Good luk this new yere! the olde yere is past. (ll. 1515–18)

As a meditation on the relationship between history and literary authority, Skelton's poem revisits the concerns of Chaucer's unfinished *House of Fame*. Chaucer's poem undermines the past, suggesting the extent to which all history is fiction, and concluding, tantalizingly, just at the moment a "man of gret auctorite" (l. 2158) arrives. Skelton picks up where Chaucer ends, cannily taking on this authoritative role for himself, and using the past to his own advantage. With its multiple endings in a variety of tongues and styles, *A Garlande of Laurell* announces Skelton as Britain's "Poet Laureate," a position occupied by Petrarch, in Rome, and first associated, in England, with Chaucer. (Although the office of poet laureate was not created until the seventeenth century, Chaucer's name was attached to this distinction with his gift of a daily pitcher of wine from Edward III.)

As early Tudor poets promote Chaucer's antiquity, its printers construct Chaucer as a contemporary. In 1526, Richard Pynson, printer to Henry VIII, first bound together three separate collections of Chaucer's texts to make an edition of Chaucer's works. Following Lydgate, Pynson's *Proheme* praises Chaucer for achieving "ornate writynge in oure tonge," and his edition reflects the need to present Chaucer as a learned, cosmopolitan contemporary, suitable for the king's library. His additions of non-Chaucerian texts include *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, a translation of a well-known work by the French poet Alain Chartier, and the *Letter of Dido to Aeneas*, based on a French translation of Ovid by Octavien de St Gelais. These texts, respectively, reinforce Chaucer's reputation for bringing French language and poetic forms to England and reflect the humanist interests of the Henrician court.

William Thynne's 1532 *Workes of Geffray Chaucer* similarly treats Chaucer as a Tudor author, although in this case the emphasis is on his Reformist, rather than humanist, credentials (Walker 2005). Appearing in the year of the English Reformation, Thynne's edition aligns Chaucer with Henry VIII, printing "*cum privilegio*" (that is, with royal license) in large type on the title page, and dedicating the work "to the kynges highnesse." His addition of over twenty apocryphal works to the Chaucer canon, such as the proto-Protestant *Plowman's Tale* and the *Pilgrim's Tale*, expresses the king's Reformist agenda, as well as his doctrine of increase: This was the king, after all, who first declared England to be an empire.

Thynne and Pynson's representations of Chaucer as a royal poet inform Chaucer's appearance in manuscript compilations of poetry produced by members of the court. Alongside fresh compositions by contemporary poets such as Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, poems copied by hand from Thynne's 1532 edition of Chaucer appear in the Devonshire manuscript: London, British Library MS Additional 17492. Produced by members of Anne Boleyn's household, it is a major example of women's literary activity in the Tudor period (Remley 1994; Heale 1995). Scholars conjecture that as many as twenty-three people had (quite literally) a hand in its creation.

Through the processes of copying, compiling, and circulating, an anthology's makers and readers define themselves as members of a select group, with shared knowledge and frames of reference. The pleasure of compiling and reading this kind of anthology derives from identifying the work of the poet in its original context, and then comparing its position in the new set of poems. The Devonshire anthology also includes *centos*: Poems made up of lines drawn from other poems, for example, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. Supplying the same literary pleasures of quotation and identification, centos offer miniature versions of the anthology experience, allowing the creators to voice amorous pains and pleasures and to comment on their current experiences. As the Devonshire manuscript arranges and re-arranges its poems as an ongoing, playful discussion of the specific trials faced by lovers within the environment of the royal court, in this context Chaucer serves as both court poet and contemporary, valued not for his antiquity, but for his insights on love (Lerer 1993; Carlson 2004).

The success of Thynne's efforts to construct Chaucer as a proto-Protestant may be confirmed by the absence of new Chaucer editions during the reign of the Catholic Mary I. Three years after the coronation of Queen Elizabeth I, however, John Stow's 1561 edition of *The Workes of Geffrey Chaucer* heralds England's return to Protestant hands. Yet where Thynne sought to highlight Chaucer's contemporary values, Stow preserves the memory of England's first Protestant king by retaining Thynne's preface and dedication to Henry VIII (his daughter, Queen Elizabeth, gets no mention). Thomas Tyrwhitt, the pioneering eighteenth-century editor of Chaucer, describes Stow's Chaucer as a "heap of rubbish" for its inclusion of many non-Chaucerian works. Ann Hudson explains how Stow actually distinguishes between authentically Chaucerian texts, apocryphal Chaucerian texts, and texts in the Chaucerian tradition (Hudson 1984). Indeed, his criteria for inclusion are not determined by current notions of authority and authenticity, which tie a text and its author together inextricably. Instead, they have more in common with Henry VIII's notion of England as an empire, with the metropolitan centre represented by texts such as the *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the provinces by Chaucerian apocrypha and Chaucerian imitators. If Stow's edition reflects a kind of Chaucerian empire, it also envisions a Chaucerian family, with the non-Chaucerian texts retaining a kind of family resemblance to their original "father" Chaucer. The couplet that appears on Stow's title page, "Virtue florisheth in Chaucer still / Though death of hym, hath wrought his will," returns us to the Hawesean notion of Chaucer as an example of virtue, and

reminds us of the continuing, enabling power of the dynamic of death and remembrance enshrined by Caxton three generations before.

Edmund Spenser's poetic self-definition thus hinges upon constructing himself as Chaucer's rightful heir. As Dryden observes in his Preface, Spenser "more than once insinuates, that the Soul of Chaucer was transfus'd into his Body; and that he was begotten by him Two hundred years after his Decease." In Poet's Corner at Westminster Abbey his epitaph reads: "Hic prope Chaucerum situs est Spenserus, illi / Proximus ingenio, proximus ut tumulo" ["Here, buried next to Chaucer, lies Spenser, close to him in wit, and as close in his tomb"].<sup>2</sup> Chaucer's ancestral significance to Spenser, the precise architect of a poetic world that seems so far away from Chaucer's tolerant vision of a flawed but fundamentally congenial humanity, illustrates the genealogical as well as memorial impulse that informs the Tudor relationship to Chaucer.<sup>3</sup> From the recollection of Chaucer's Knight in the opening lines of *The Faerie Queene*, to the consistent invocations of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* in the *Daphnaïda*, to the elegiac presentations of Chaucer as Tityrus in the *Shepheardes Calendar*, and to the continuation of Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* in Book Four of the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser infuses his work with references to Chaucer. When, in Spenser's *The Mutabilitie Cantos*, the narrator pauses ceremoniously to salute "old Dan Geffrey (in whose gentle spright / The pure well head of Poesie did dwell)" (VII. ix. 3-4), he preserves and historicizes the foundational terms of Chaucerian reception as articulated by Lydgate. Spenser thus derives his own poetic self-conception not only through Chaucer's language and poetic narratives but also through the traditions of Chaucerian reception.

With a genealogical table, a glossary that identifies his vocabulary as archaic, and even an invented coat of arms, Thomas Speght's 1598 *Workes* offers a visual emblem of the Tudor Chaucer as *pater familias*. Derek Pearsall observes that Speght presents "Chaucer as a 'classic,' a writer of established reputation, a man of learning" (Pearsall 1984: 75). Speght also connects this image of Chaucer directly to the history of the Reformation, by embellishing a story from Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* that Chaucer was a friend of the religious reformer, John Wycliffe. In Speght, Chaucer is fined for beating a Franciscan friar. As a classic author, a royal poet, a father, and a Protestant, Speght's representation of Chaucer replaces the necessity of marking his death with an interest in the details of his life.

The Prologue to Shakespeare and Fletcher's 1613 *Two Noble Kinsmen* constitutes the apotheosis of the Tudor Chaucer:

We pray our play may be so, for I am sure  
It has a noble breeder and a pure,  
A learned and a poet never went  
More famous yet 'twixt Po and silver Trent.  
Chaucer, of all admired, the story gives:  
There constant to eternity it lives. (Prologue ll. 9-14)

The image of Chaucer as fatherly, scholarly, and gentle prefaces the play's reworking of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. Careful to distinguish Chaucer from Homer and Virgil

(both whom hailed from south of the river Po that bisects Italy), Shakespeare and Fletcher use the image of the dauntingly virtuous "breeder" Chaucer to confer prestige on their play and underscore its historicity. While the play's use of Chaucer signals its investments in notions of lineage and the past, its addition of the Jailer's Daughter to the Chaucerian narrative reveals the Janus face of Tudor medievalism at work: the codification of the fatherly Chaucer serves as a foil to the play's addition of an entirely up-to-date girlish character whose edgy emotionalism displays contemporary notions of melancholy and madness, reflecting the evolving tastes of the Jacobean stage.

### The Matter of Romance

Tudor readers loved medieval romance, that quintessentially medieval genre. Set long ago, if not always far away, medieval romances count among the first and most popular texts that were printed in Tudor England. Their popularity reflected the ongoing appeal of romance narratives that circulated, promiscuously, between England and France through the Middle Ages, and perpetuates a longstanding English interest in French romance and other literary forms (Williams 2004). However, during the Tudor period, the evolving discourses of humanism and antiquarianism made the act of reading medieval romance newly self-conscious. The Reformation heightened awareness of the genre's Catholic history and affiliations, associating them more directly with the contexts of their composition and dissemination. As the Elizabethan period drew to a close, a renewed interest in the genre was fed by Spenser's attempts to mitigate the genre's Catholic associations by recalling its classical and biblical origins, and by aligning it with the discourses of Protestantism and English nationalism.

The versions of the Robert the Devil romance that circulated in Tudor England illustrate the fortunes of the genre in the sixteenth century, allowing us to chart the different ways Tudor readers viewed medieval romance. Concerning the reform of a wayward duke, the Robert the Devil romance originates in the twelfth-century French *Roman de Robert le diable* and Etienne Bourbon's *Tractatus de diversis materiis predicabilibus*, completed around 1250. In most versions, the hero is Robert the Magnificent, Duke of Normandy, the father of William the Conqueror. Born to a long-childless duke and duchess, the hero is conceived when his mother is seduced by the same devil that sired Merlin. As an infant, he suckles wet nurses to death; as a young man, he enjoys rape, murder, and the destruction of churches. When he finally converts, he channels his destructive energies into defeating Saracens, marries an emperor's daughter and ultimately focuses his attention on good deeds. Presenting both the outer reaches of depravity and the human capacity for redemption, the narrative explores the appropriate channeling of violence, and the norms of courtly behavior that evolved during the Middle Ages.

The Middle English version of the romance, entitled *Sir Gowther*, relocates the hero's birthplace to Austria ("Estryke"), deflecting the awkward questions concerning



civility and barbarism raised, in post-Conquest England, by a hero who is the Duke of Normandy. The two manuscripts in which *Sir Gowther* now exists illustrate the romance's fundamentally religious contexts and affiliations. In the first, British Library Royal MS 17.b.43, it is collected with other texts concerning questions of damnation, redemption and the afterlife: *St Patrick's Purgatory* and *The Vision of Tundale*. This version of *Sir Gowther* concludes, *explicit vita sancti* [thus ends the saint's life]. In the second, National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1, *Sir Gowther* is collected with Lydgate's *Life of our Lady*, the ever-popular romance *Sir Isumbras* (a story of faith in the face of adversity), as well as *Stans Puer ad Mensam*, a treatise on table manners. Many details explain *Sir Gowther's* association with saints' lives, hagiographical romances and religious visionary writing, not to mention concepts of civility. The story of his birth, classified by folklorists as the Wish-Child motif, derives from accounts of the life of St Anne, the mother of the Virgin, and ultimately leads back to the biblical story of the Annunciation. The hairy demon that impregnates Gowther's mother, and the hero's transformation into a greyhound, dramatize themes of original sin and human abjection that recall the biblical story of Nebuchadnezzar, who is transformed into a beast for his sins and regains human form only when he repents.

In 1502 and 1518, Wynken de Worde printed the prose *Robert Deuyll*: A translation of the contemporary French romance *Vie du terrible Robert le diable*, based on the medieval *Dit de Robert le Diable*.<sup>4</sup> Tudor editions of the romance may have inspired the theme for a disguising of Robert the Devil during the reign of Henry VIII (Crane 1919: 10) and allow us to consider how the story would have resonated with the Henrician court. Beginning with a couple longing for an heir, and continuing with the wife paying the price for her infidelity by producing a demon-child, the romance raises Tudor anxieties about lineage, paternity, and the past. It also evokes the sense of being haunted by a diabolical history that motivated the early Tudor disavowal and destruction of Catholic relics. With its combination of megalomania and heartfelt piety, not to mention unhindered attacks on the clergy, the romance indulges in the excesses that defined the king's character: His equal devotion to God and to warfare.

As the century progressed, the romance genre in England came to be associated more directly with its Catholic history. Humanists had long complained about the genre, but the Reformation sought to eradicate it altogether. A different metrical version of *Robert Deuyll*, printed around 1519, illustrates this part of the history. The only complete form of it that now survives may be found in a manuscript, British Library MS Egerton 3132A, copied by the recusant Edward Banyster in 1564 (the print original now exists only as a fragment, Bodleian Library, MS Douce fragment f.4). Illustrating, like the Devonshire manuscript, the ongoing relevance and production of manuscripts during the age of print, Banyster's labors may have been prompted by the suppression and destruction of medieval romances in the decades following the Reformation. The other romances he copied in Bodleian Library MS Douce 261, such as *Syr Degore* and *Syr Eglamore*, are similarly hagiographic and penitential in nature.<sup>5</sup> The hero's family of origin in *Syr Degore* is unhappy, as he is abandoned by his mother,



left as a foundling, and ultimately forced to fight his maternal grandfather to regain his patrimony. And *Sir Eglamour*, in which the hero must slay a series of increasingly threatening mythical beasts, shares *Robert Deuyll*'s interest in Christian revelation and the intervention of divine providence. As Banyster copied *Robert Deuyll*, preserving its accounts of the destruction of monasteries, the burning alive of nuns, and other acts of violence against members of the church, all of which are heartily repented, he must have thought about their relation to his own, immediate, lived reality.

In the Elizabethan period, medieval romances were overshadowed by more contemporary continental romances by Cervantes, Ariosto and Boiardo: texts that were not burdened by association with pre-Reformation England. However, by the 1590s, Elizabethan readers revisited the medieval romances that had been vilified by humanists and suppressed by reformers. Thomas Lodge's prose romance, *The Famous true and historicall life of Robert second Duke of Normandy, surnamed for his monstrous birth and behaviour, Robin the Diuell* (1591), charts the hero's dramatic swing from sinner to saint, reflecting Lodge's fascination with and eventual conversion to Catholicism. Lodge is keen to highlight the antiquity of his text, describing it, in his address to the reader, as "drawn out of the old and ancient antiquaries." The term "antiquaries" aligns his work not only with that of "antique" medieval authors, but also with the work of antiquarians such as John Leland, who was commissioned by Henry VIII to comb the English landscape, recovering texts and other artifacts of Catholic Britain (see below). These words situate his romance within the proximate processes of destruction and salvation that shape English medievalism. Lodge is, throughout, highly conscious of the past: He offers an explicit date for his events "the year of our Lord 750," and often calls attention to differences as well as continuities between that time and his own, as well as to the moments in which he follows or departs from his sources or as he puts it, "historiographers."

As his tale invokes history, it also seeks to evoke the genre of the medieval dream vision and specifically, the *dit amoureux* ["lyrical love vision"]. The passages concerning his parents' dalliance in the grove are suffused with its conventions, such as the May morning and the lover's complaint to Fortune. Reinforcing the sense that Robin is conceived in an act of love and mutual pleasure, these poetic conventions highlight Lodge's most important deviation from the Robert romance tradition. Whereas Robert's paternity is typically ascribed to the devil, Robin's conception takes place under ideal, blissful, circumstances. Here Lodge runs contrary to longstanding beliefs that deformities – including spiritual ones – bore some relation to the experiences of conception and pregnancy. Whereas his sources are concerned with showing how even the devil's child can be converted, following a medieval system which attributes evil to Satan, Lodge gives Robin's evil an endogenous quality, one which highlights the rootlessness of human sin and the miracle of human perfectibility.

Although Lodge's change most obviously addresses theological questions, it speaks, as well, to the association of his romance with a discredited period in England's past. Lodge resists the attribution of evil to a discrete event in history, and frames Robin's violence toward fat friars and materialistic monks, typical objects of antifraternat satire

and Reformist critique, by an overarching and heartfelt repentance. As *Robin the Diuell* revisits medieval romance, complete with hermits, talking lions, and spirited didactic virgins, it reflects a confidence in the transformative capacity of redemption, which can make a saint out of a demon, consciously choosing the leap of faith and act of grace.

By the 1590s, however, the medieval is no longer irretrievably linked to Catholicism. The jousting and tournaments of Sidney's *Arcadia* (1590) do not so much recall medieval romance as reflect the performative, chivalric courtliness in vogue during the heyday of the Elizabethan court. Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590 and 96) revisits the medieval romances that were popular in the early Tudor period, transforming them into nationalist, Protestant allegory. The appearance of the dragon from *Bevis of Hampton* in Book One is a well-known example, and Spenser also draws heavily from French romances such as *Huon of Burdeaux*, *Arthur of Little Britain*, and *Valentine and Orson*. His frequent reference to Redcrosse Knight's status as an "Elfin's sonne" in Book One aligns his hero with Sir Gowther and Robert the Devil, underscoring the book's close connection to medieval penitential romances.

With its narrative roots in medieval romances such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum britanniae* and Layamon's *Brut*, Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1605?) illustrates a renewal of interest in romance on the Jacobean and Stuart stages. From the humbling of a high-born sinner to the juxtaposition of a pair of half-brothers, one demonic and one saintly, to its representations of wretchedness and abjection, *King Lear* reflects the major themes of the Robert the Devil romance. The Fool's curious visionary reference to "this prophesy Merlin shall make" (III.ii.95) gestures toward the play's medieval romance sources, and takes place within a passage that recalls Reformation and counter-Reformation violence, "no heretics burn'd" (84), and conjures images of reformed sinners, "and bawds and whores do churches build" (90). The Fool's point, that overarching rectitude will bring "The realm of Albion to great confusion" (91-2), suggests that what is most important in the Robert romance, and in the fortunes of medieval romance in the Tudor period generally, is its faith in the ultimately redemptive capacity of sin.

### The Explosion of History

John Bale's *Kynge Johan* (1538) is probably the first English history play. During the Middle Ages, Corpus Christi plays performed biblical history, from Creation to the Crucifixion, while allegorical Morality plays performed concepts such as *Wit and Wisdom*, or *Magnyfycence*. A former Carmelite friar turned radical Protestant, Bale uses the allegorical structure of the Morality plays, and the eschatological preoccupations of the Corpus Christi plays, to dramatize the stridently Protestant theology and policies that characterize the final years of Henry VIII's reign. Performed at the house of Archbishop Cranmer at Christmas, 1538-9 – at a time when England was expecting a Catholic invasion and /or Civil War any day – *Kynge Johan* renders England's

medieval history as propaganda for a present cause. Medieval plays continued to be performed in Tudor England, and the Corpus Christi cycles were not officially suppressed until 1559. Their religious concerns and allegorical structures maintained a hold on English drama, even as national history began to overtake biblical history as a major topic of interest.

The historical King John entered into a dispute with Pope Innocent III over the succession to the Archbishop of Canterbury. This led to a papal interdiction (a suspension of church services) and ultimately to the king's excommunication. In the face of a threatened Crusade, King John capitulated, using his submission to the pope to build support in another dispute with the English barons. But for Bale, who highlights the first part of the story, King John is a hero for resisting the pope. He grafts medieval history onto the larger, biblical narrative, popular with Protestant polemicists, of the war between Christ and Antichrist. The play remains fundamentally allegorical, with figures such as England, portrayed as a vulnerable widow, and Sedition, in the Pope's employ, who represents the new, papally supported, Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton. While Bale is looking back to medieval history, his attitude to his medieval material is not that of the antiquarian. The play's events do not take place as history, but instead within the timeless spiritual and religious unfolding facilitated by allegory. This is why it is unproblematic for Bale to use the medieval history of a Catholic monarch in a Catholic age as a paradigm for Protestant reform. Filtering history through biblical typology, which functions outside of time, Bale constructs King John as a type of Henry VIII, his actions anticipating Henry's ultimate salvation of the English church.

Curiously, the playwright who prioritizes allegory over history was one of England's first antiquarians. Bale authored the first literary history of Britain: *Illustrium majoris Britanniae scriptorum, hoc est, Angliae, Cambriae, ac Scotiae Summarium* (1548). One of the most valuable and extensive documents concerning medieval English writers, it was published during Bale's exile in Germany following the execution of Cromwell, and reprinted in a revised and expanded version in 1557, during the reign of Mary I. Bale's work continues an antiquarian project started by his friend, John Leland: Namely, his *De uiris illustribus*, later published as *Commentarii de scriptoribus Britannicis* (1709). A poet and antiquary, Leland was commissioned by Henry VIII in 1533 to search the libraries of English monasteries, and compile lists of books by British authors. This eventually became an initiative to preserve the books that were being dispersed as the monasteries were dissolved, which were ultimately deposited in the Royal collection.

Bale's career illustrates the close, even symbiotic, relationship between the Reformation, with its forward-thinking, past-despising apocalypticism, and the Tudor passion for antiquarianism. In the same way that we may connect Bale and Leland's preservation of England's medieval literary history to the destruction of its medieval Church, we may link the birth of English historical drama to the demise of the Corpus Christi plays. As *King Johan* illustrates, national history is consolation for the end of biblical history. Yet long after Bale, the eschatological and allegorical frameworks of

the medieval stage continued to shape English drama. Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (late 1580s/early 1590s) preserves the Morality play structure of a neutral hero, Faustus, who falls under the sway of a diabolical figure, and receives counsel from competing good and bad angels. The play's investment in medieval morality structures fosters its meditation on the seismic shift created by the Reformation.

The morality play reached its heyday, with *Magnificence* and *Everyman*, in the years immediately preceding the Reformation. *Doctor Faustus* is inspired by a figure who dates from this transitional time: The semi-historical, semi-legendary Georgius Helmstetter, who adopted the name of Dr Faustus. A student enrolled at the University of Heidelberg in 1483, he would have been a contemporary of Erasmus and More. Figures associated with Heidelberg, such as Johannes Trithemius and Conrad Mutianus Rufus, comment on Helmstetter's adopted name, Faustus, on his involvement in divination and other occult arts, and on his braggadocio. However, as his reputation evolved to include sodomy and necromancy, the historical elements of Doctor Faustus's story began to merge with an old legend, dating from the bible's Simon Magus, of a scholar who makes a pact with a devil. Marlowe's primary source is the English Faust-book (1592, although Marlowe probably used an earlier edition, now lost), which collects the stories and legends associated with this figure.

Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* stages a confrontation between the old forms and the new religion, using an old medieval dramatic form, with its structures of sin and redemption, while locating its figure in Wittenberg, the city associated with Luther, and the birthplace of the Reformation (Marcus 1989). As David Riggs has shown, the Reformers' rigorous questioning of church doctrine opens up the possibility, not only of believing differently, but also of believing nothing at all, a crime for which Marlowe was accused in the famous Baines Note (Riggs 2004). In this respect, *Doctor Faustus* dramatizes the Faustian bargain made by the Reformation itself.

He also embodies the Reformers' temporal division between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Faustus is educated in the medieval traditions of scholastic disputation: "The fruitful plot of scholarism graced / That shortly he was graced with doctor's name, / Excelling all, whose sweet delight disputes / In heavenly matters of theology" (Chorus, 17–20). But he leaves it all for the seductions of courtly display, using his magic, which he thinks will bring "a world of profit and delight, / Of power, of honour, of omnipotence" (52–3) to entertain and to refresh an Emperor, a Duke, and his Duchess. Through its hero the play charts the movement from the medieval monastic and scholarly contexts that produced the morality play to the new secular stage, patronized by the court, and seeking to emulate its tastes.

The famous climax of *Doctor Faustus*, the apparition of Helen of Troy, juxtaposes a classical vision with Faustus's acknowledgement of the certitude of damnation. As it allegorizes the Renaissance revival of classical humanism, the play reinforces the theological and institutional structures which produced the morality play. Yet as it allegorizes the movement from medieval scholasticism to the sixteenth-century trinity of humanism, reform, and the court, *Doctor Faustus* refuses to confirm whether it is

advocating the old structures, or using them, with irony, to tell the story of a new man.

Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (late 1580s) looks back not to medieval structures, but to medieval history. Neither overtly concerned with questions of eschatology, nor invested in allegory, it occupies a space within the efflorescence, in the late 1580s and early 1590s, of historical drama specifically concerned with medieval England. Marlowe's *Edward II*, for example, literalizes fears of foreign penetration as it charts its protagonist's downfall. Shakespeare's first tetralogy places England's loss of French territories in the fifteenth century within a structure of sin and damnation that recalls the Corpus Christi plays, while his second tetralogy, written in the late 1590s, maps England's return to control onto a larger biblical pattern of redemption. Medieval history allows dramatists to articulate contemporary national anxieties concerning invasion and cultural taint raised not only by England's ongoing involvement in the religious wars but also the long-unsettled question of Queen Elizabeth's marriage and succession.

Some critics have seen *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* as a somewhat derivative sequel to Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, others as a source. Either way, it is the first comic dramatic engagement with England's medieval past. It uses the medieval past differently as well, addressing not only issues of nationalism but also current conceptions of the past. Dramatizing the romantic attachment of Edward, Prince of Wales, to a country damsel, Margaret, the play situates itself within England's thirteenth-century history and the reign of the Plantagenet king, Henry III. The play's Friar Bacon is a highly fictionalized version of Roger Bacon (1214–92), the immensely learned Oxford scholar whose advocacy of classical philosophy made him unpopular with papal powers. The play makes startlingly little use of Roger Bacon's intellectual reputation (although Friar Bacon's "glass prospective" does invoke Bacon's contributions to the field of optics). Instead, Greene's major source is the sixteenth-century prose narrative, *The Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon* (c. 1555), which depicts Bacon as a magician, a lesser, comic version of Doctor Faustus. It is in his role as a flighty buffoon, rather than as medieval polymath, Doctor Mirabilis, that Friar Bacon constructs his magical brazen head, a plan which falls apart when the head explodes due to the negligence of Friar Bacon's bumbling student, Miles.

The play's characterization of Friar Bacon as foolish, wrong-headed, and credulous caricatures evolving English Protestant conceptions of the Middle Ages and of its Catholic church (cf. Sidney's "mistie time"). Friar Bacon's grandiose ambition, to build a brass wall around England, is similarly suspect: The play undermines it at a symbolic level when Edward casts off his English girlfriend in order to make his strategic marriage with Elinor of Castile. However, the play's treatment of Friar Bacon is at odds with Greene's exposure, during his time at Oxford and Cambridge, to the learned medieval culture that the historical Bacon represents. The popular myth of Bacon, which promoted a simple Reformist misrepresentation of the medieval, must itself have seemed foolish and wrong-headed. The play requires us to look beyond

what it offers at face value in order to locate its critique of an Elizabethan attitude toward the medieval that is as trivial as Friar Bacon himself. When Friar Bacon's brazen head splutters, "Time is, time was, time is past," it explodes the notion that the Middle Ages can be contained by simple Reformist orthodoxy. Whenever we think we really know what the past is, it explodes in our faces.

I began this chapter with the image of the Janus face, which looks backwards as well as forwards, and end with the image of an exploding head. When Tudor medievalism looks backwards, it seeks to reproduce, recover, or emulate the quality of a medieval text. When it looks forwards, it uses or adapts medieval material with the intention of making it new. The Janus face of Tudor medievalism thus gazes in two directions at once, sometimes highlighting distance and difference from the medieval past, and other times emphasizing continuity. As the Roman god Janus presides over the liminal spaces of gates, doorways, and other portals, as well as over New Year's celebrations, the Janus-face of Tudor medievalism watches over an equally transitional time in England's history. This chapter has shown how the Middle Ages are the active begetter and enabler of Tudor literary culture, illustrating the continuities that exist between the periods of Medieval and Renaissance. Yet the concluding image of the exploding head requires us to acknowledge that the harder we try to codify and define the medieval, the more easily it slips away.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Cf. Dryden's *Preface*: "As he is the father of English poetry, so I hold him in the same degree of veneration as the Grecians held Homer, or the Romans Virgil."
- 2 Spenser often uses aquatic metaphors for Chaucer, whom he calls the "well of English undefiled" (*Faerie Queene*, IV.ii.32). In *The Shepheardes Calendar*, Colin Clout wishes that "on me some little drops would flowe, / Of that the spring was in his learned hedde." (*June*, ll. 93-4).
- 3 Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesie* offers a rare dissenting voice: "Chawcer undoubtedly did excellently in his Troilus and Creseid: of whome trulie I knowe not whether to mervaille more, either that hee in that mistie time could see so clearly, or that wee in this cleare age, goe so stumblingly after him. Yet had hee great wants, fit to be forgiven in so reverent an Antiquitie." Note that Sidney retains Chaucer's identification with antiquity.
- 4 *Dit* literally means "spoken," as opposed to sung, denoting a romance that places heavy emphasis on allegory, and on the emotional experience of romantic love.
- 5 Banyster's personal collection of manuscripts, now in the Royal collection at the British Library, also contains the kind of religious material, such as Lydgate's *Life of our Lady* and *St. Patrick's Purgatory*, associated with Sir Gower manuscripts.

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