



Shakespearean Medievalism and the Limits of Periodization in *Cymbeline*

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Abstract

The Renaissance developed the concept of a ‘middle age’ between the classical period and their own culture, while ‘medievalism’ is associated with the aesthetic nostalgia of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Although the idea of Shakespearean medievalism applies a Victorian category anachronistically to Shakespeare, it provides an opportunity to consider the coherence and significance of Shakespeare’s relationship to the Middle Ages, as well as the purpose and agenda behind his adaptations of medieval material. After the periodization debates of the 1990s, which sought to undermine many of the traditional disciplinary distinctions between the Middle Ages and Renaissance, scholars are now turning their attention to how the Renaissance invented the idea of the Middle Ages. This has produced a wide range of new perspectives on Shakespeare’s representation of the Middle Ages that includes the possibility that Shakespeare did not conceptualize history according to fixed periods, such as Medieval and Renaissance. This article argues that Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale* is a key source for Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, and that *Cymbeline*’s use of the *Franklin’s Tale* provides a key example of Shakespearean medievalism that resists the traditional borders and boundaries of periodization.

The subject of Shakespearean medievalism raises a number of questions related to periodization. When were the Middle Ages? How did Shakespeare understand them? How is our own conception of the Middle Ages different from Shakespeare’s? And what is the difference between the Middle Ages and medievalism? The Middle Ages is a Renaissance concept, but medievalism is a Victorian notion. Nineteenth-century historian Jakob Burckhardt coined the term ‘medieval’ to describe the culture that existed before the civilization of the Italian Renaissance, and ‘medievalism’ was first associated with the idealized and nostalgic aestheticism of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. These terms develop out of the Renaissance idea of a ‘middle age’, which the Protestant Reformer, John Foxe used, in his *Actes and Monuments*, to describe the Pre-Reformation Church and England’s Catholic past. Before Foxe, Petrarch and other Italian humanists called the period that fell in between the ancients and the moderns a *medium aevum*, or *media tempestas* (Edelman; Gordon; Mommsen; Robinson).

However, the Latin *medium aevum* and the English ‘middle age’ should not be understood as equivalent concepts, with Foxe merely translating a humanist term. Whereas Foxe defines the ‘middle age’ as what precedes the Reformation, for humanists, the *medium aevum* is a period of in-betweenness that separates the ancient past from the present. The idea of Shakespearean medievalism applies a Victorian category and value judgment anachronistically to Shakespeare. But it also offers an opportunity to consider the coherence and significance of Shakespeare’s relationship to a period that was, in his time, being conceptualized as a ‘middle age’, and to evaluate the purpose and agenda behind his many adaptations of medieval material. Throughout this essay, I shall use the term ‘Middle Ages’, and the adjective ‘medieval’, to place texts or histories within the historical period

of pre-Reformation England. I use the term 'medievalism', and occasionally 'medievalisms', to denote the retrospective representation of this period, with 'medievalisms' highlighting the competing and often contradictory nature of these representations. The term 'medievalist' refers to the professional scholarly category that emerged in the late Victorian period (Cantor; Frantzen).

According to Brian Stock,

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 this sense 'the Middle Ages' thus constitutes one of the most prevalent cultural myths of the modern world. (69)

In the 1990s, critiques of this concept of periodization highlighted the retrospective and constructed nature of this 'cultural myth', in which the Middle Ages serve as a static 'dark age', a *selva oscura* that separates the two glittering citadels of classical and Renaissance, or an alien Other from which modernity escapes (Aers; Patterson 1987). Medievalists lamented the implications of this ideology for their colleagues in literature departments, in which medieval studies was perceived as entrenched in dusty philology (Cerquiglini; Frantzen), celebrating a hierarchical and authoritarian culture. They complained that Renaissance scholars claimed for their own period certain sophisticated qualities – from individualism or 'the birth of the modern subject', to irony, to the return of the classics – that could be found quite easily in the writings of the Middle Ages.

The continuation of periodization debates into the 21st century (Simpson 2007b) has reflected a progressive move to resist totalizing notions of history, and to reject fixed boundaries of period and discipline. Many scholars have embraced the more inclusive notion of an 'early modern' that brings together the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Highlighting the continuities forged through the processes of reception and adaptation, scholarship now frequently moves across fields, traversing the old disciplinary boundaries or else dispensing with them altogether (examples include, but are not confined to Lerer; Simpson 2004; Strohm; Summit 2000; Wallace 2004; Williams). This has placed medievalists and Renaissance specialists in dialogue, as scholars examine Renaissance authors' literary debts to the Middle Ages (Davis 2003; Greenblatt 2001; King 2000; Van Es), as well as the continuities between pre- and post-Reformation forms of thought and religious practice (Cummings; Duffy 1994, 2007; Shell; Walsham). Current interest in the rise of antiquarianism and print culture attest to the value and significance of medieval books in the Renaissance, while increasing attention to the history of the book has changed the dichotomous nature of the medieval/Renaissance divide (Crick and Walsham; Gillespie; Parry; Vine). As medieval studies has been energized by dialogues with critical theory, scholars have begun to uncover critical theory's debts to the Middle Ages (Davis 2008; Davis and Altschul, 2009; Holsinger; Labbie). Chapters on medievalism and medieval texts in Kent Cartwright's recent *A Companion to Tudor Literature* (2010), and those that extend into the 16th century in David Wallace's *Cambridge History of Medieval Literature* (1999), confirm the extent to which coming to terms with the Middle Ages has become an important part of conceptualizing the Renaissance, and *vice versa*.

While periodization debates interrogated the historical and disciplinary distinctions between the Middle Ages and Renaissance, current scholarship is now returning to the idea that the Renaissance invented the Middle Ages. The result to a certain extent confirms Fredric Jameson's oft-cited remark, 'we cannot not periodize' (Jameson 29). A sense of division between the two periods is being restored, as historians as well as literary scholars are paying increasing attention to the cultural watershed that was the English

Reformation (Duffy 2009; Simpson 2007a). The title of a recent collection, *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History* (2010), edited by Brian Cummings and James Simpson, highlights this reaffirmation of the traditional markers of literary and historical period. However, along with this reaffirmation comes a commitment to placing the periods in dialogue. The volume's introduction announces its 'dynamically diachronic approach' to these fields and the terms that describe them, arguing,

to continue to exist politely on either side of the divide is to ignore the way that the works we study, and the way in which we study them, are implicated in the complex history of that terminology and its making. (4)

This rationale is consistent with the aims of a new wave of essay collections, mostly emerging out of conferences that brought medieval and Renaissance scholars together, that reject totalizing, universal, and monolithic notions of the Middle Ages by offering a wide range of alternative approaches, voices, and perspectives. Edited by Gordon McMullan and David Matthews, *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England* (2007) shows how medieval authors, works, and histories threaten and disrupt the Renaissance texts that would seek to contain them. The editors convey this idea through the trope of haunting:

On the one hand the medieval past is, like Chaucer, safe 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. (2)

A combination of Hamlet's Ghost and the Freudian Return of the Repressed, the Middle Ages, and, in particular, the Reformist destruction and suppression of the medieval church, haunt the Renaissance. Another recent collection, *Renaissance Medievalisms* (2009), edited by Konrad Eisenbichler, uses the plural form 'medievalisms' to express its multi-disciplinary approach that includes art history and geography, the history of science and philosophy, and Italian, French, and Latin texts, as well as English. Whereas *Reading the Medieval*, with its focus on English texts, conceptualizes historical difference as death, haunting, and even resurrection, the more comparative *Renaissance Medievalisms* reflects continental notions of the Renaissance as rebirth: in this context, the Middle Ages serve as a kind of midwife or doula. Emphasizing the continuities between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, this volume highlights the ways in which the Renaissance defined itself through its relationship to the medieval: Eisenbichler even proposes that we think of the Renaissance as a 'post-medieval' era (21).

Two edited volumes that appeared in 2009, with the same title, *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, confirm Shakespeare's crucial role in defining the Renaissance concept of the medieval. In the introduction to their *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, Curtis Perry and John Watkins contend that Shakespeare got medieval history all wrong: 'if you want to know something about what actually happened during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Shakespeare is not the best place to start' (1). Nevertheless, as they go on to point out, 'he also made it matter' (2). Crediting Shakespeare with the invention of popular conceptions about medieval England, however historically inaccurate, the editors emphasize that Shakespeare's vision of the Middle Ages, and the approaches that may be taken to understand it, are anything but concrete and univocal. The essays in this volume range from the topic of periodization itself, revealing how Shakespeare dramatizes moments of transition between medieval and Renaissance ideologies or forms of thought; to Shakespeare's use of historical and literary sources, arguing for indebtedness as well as transformation; to Shakespeare's connections with his predecessors in medieval English

theater. For Shakespeare, medieval theater was not the stuff of distant cultural memory, but a living cultural form, his own artistic medium, parts of which were condemned and suppressed during his lifetime. This wide range of perspectives illustrates the editors' concern with rethinking the sense of Shakespeare's complicity with periodization: 'Part of the objective of this book is to decouple and so reconfigure these linked stories of transformation so that individual aspects of continuity and discontinuity may be considered afresh' (11).

Subtitled *Essays on the Performance and Adaptation of the Plays with Medieval Sources or Settings*, Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray's *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages* places similar emphasis on multiplicity. Highlighting the historical context in which a theatrical, televised, or cinematic performance takes place, the essays in this volume demonstrate that there is no one Middle Ages, but instead an endless plurality of medievalisms, all case-specific and produced by the shifting variables of author, context, and history. An anecdote that appears in Sid Ray's chapter, 'Finding Gruoch: The Hidden Genealogy of Lady Macbeth', perfectly illustrates the collection's vision of multiple temporalities and historical contingency. In his 1970 film of *Macbeth*, Roman Polanski justified Francesca Annis's nudity in Lady Macbeth's mad scene by pointing out that medieval Scots did not wear the standard issue long, flowing white nightgown. Setting a longstanding stage tradition associated with this Shakespearean character and scene against Polanski's directorial interest in the faithful recovery and representation of the medieval past (a tradition which, as Richard Schoch explains, has its roots in the Victorian stage), Polanski's decision was also informed by his film's status as a Playboy production, with Hugh Hefner as Associate Producer. Thus, although Shakespearean medievalism reaches back into the past, it is always pulled by a reader, actor or director into the ever-changing light of the present.

However, conceptualizing Shakespeare's use of medieval texts and histories in terms of competing and contradictory notions of the Middle Ages, notions that can then be further qualified by considering the historical circumstances and specific intention of any particular production, produces a dizzying panoply of multiple perspectives. It forces us to question if Shakespeare imagined the Middle Ages at all, and thus to reconsider if there really is such a thing as Shakespearean medievalism. A 2010 special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* named 'After Periodization' (Summit and Wallace) puts this problem another way: 'what happens when we suspend the supposedly universal sway of European temporal markers' (448) in order to develop 'a range of alternative temporalities'?

Sarah Beckwith and James Simpson offer a way around this question in the title of their recent special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*: 'Premodern Shakespeare' (2010). Whereas *Renaissance Medievalisms* imagines the Renaissance as 'post medieval', this volume raises the possibility of including Shakespeare within the category of premodern usually assigned to the Middle Ages. This provides an answer to the problem of multiple, proliferating visions of the Middle Ages, and allows Shakespeare to function productively within an ongoing critique of modernity that aligns him less with the birth of the so-called 'modern subject' than with an alternative premodern space that existed before the depredations of capitalism, the individual, and the Protestant church. Many of the essays collected in this issue situate Shakespeare in the context of the aftermath of the Reformation, reinforcing a sense of Shakespearean nostalgia for a medieval and Catholic past, and dissatisfaction with his Protestant present. Others subvert traditional structures by imagining how Shakespeare looks from the perspective of late medieval texts (rather than *vice versa*), and one essay revisits and defends the construction of a pre-Shakespearean past in the work of theater historian E. K. Chambers. The idea of a

'Premodern Shakespeare' thus finds a place within the context of recent attempts to recover Shakespeare's Catholic roots and affiliations (Beauregard; Greenblatt 2004; Wilson), while also offering a novel strategy for situating Shakespeare beyond the medieval/Renaissance dichotomy.

Entitled 'Living in the Past: Thebes, Periodization, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*', Alex Davis's contribution to this special issue of *JMEMS* addresses the problem of locating a coherent Shakespearean medievalism by suggesting that Shakespeare appears, in fact, entirely unaware of these categories of historical difference. Rejecting the idea that Shakespeare 'invents' the Middle Ages and enshrines longstanding practices of periodization, and interrogating, as well, the idea that the Renaissance saw a birth of historical self-consciousness, Davis examines Shakespeare's use of Chaucer in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* in order to make an important distinction between the Middle Ages and medievalism: 'Shakespeare frequently writes about the Middle Ages. What he does not on the whole do is write about it in a "medievalist" way' (175). Davis draws upon Lee Patterson's argument, in *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, that the Theban narratives that provide the source material for Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* as well as for *The Two Noble Kinsmen* highlight the problems of separating out past and present, and offer, instead, 'a replicating history that preempts a linear or developmental progress' (Patterson 1991: 77, quoted in Davis, 182). Davis characterizes the quality of Shakespeare's use of medieval texts as an extension of what he calls Chaucer's 'Thebanness':

desperate, claustrophobic, almost endlessly self-referential ... a literary tradition that produces forms of self-awareness that are grounded in a sense of the omnipresence of the past, but coupled with a relative lack of imaginative investment in a logic of historical difference. (185–7)

Keenly aware of its literary and historical debts, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is not, for Davis, self-consciously medieval, although it remains, nevertheless, deeply invested in the power of the past.

Davis's point about Shakespeare's disinclination towards foregrounding the medieval in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* illustrates the challenge of ascribing the concept of medievalism, which brings with it a heightened, even exoticized, self-consciousness about historical difference, to Shakespeare's engagements with the Middle Ages. It reminds us, as well, of the extent to which the humanist concept of a *medium aevum* was grounded in an understanding of the classical past, and that the project of periodization is not limited to the medieval/Renaissance divide. Of course, scholars of English literature are understandably attached to the historical watershed that was the 1534 Act of Supremacy. As a result, however, we tend to conceptualize the Middle Ages in terms of the formation of the Church of England and the Tudor dynasty, following the Reformation notion of a 'middle age'. A number of the contributions to these recent essay collections highlight the relationship between the two points of historical transition: from classical to medieval, and from medieval to Renaissance. Gordon McMullan's chapter, 'The colonisation of early Britain on the Jacobean stage', in *Reading the Medieval*, explains how Rome's colonial expansion into Britain served as a precedent and pretext for English imperialism in the 17th century. McMullan reads *Cymbeline* and other Jacobean plays that deal with Roman Britain as exploring 'the negotiations of British identity under colonial rule' (119), and identifying, through this historical moment, certain contemporary anxieties about national identity raised by the prospect of empire. In the *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, edited by Driver and Ray, Julia Briggs expresses surprise at the suppression of the medieval in most productions of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Troilus and Cressida*, and suggests that this reflects the extent to

which Shakespeare reduces the chivalric aspects of his sources, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Knight's Tale*, in order to dramatize the emotional and psychological experiences of masculine rivalry and feminine attachment. Finally, in 'What Counted as an 'Antiquity' in the Renaissance?' in *Renaissance Medievalisms*, art historians Nagel and S. Wood (2010) show how Renaissance authors ascribed the term 'antique' to works of art and architecture that we now classify as medieval.

Nagel and Wood's recently published book, *Anachronic Renaissance*, argues for the 'temporal instability' (13) of the work of art. Re-casting the modern preoccupation with periodization by examining Renaissance conceptualizations of time, Nagel and Wood show how works of art may be placed in relation to each other in ways other than linear chronology: 'the ability of the work of art to hold incompatible models in suspension without deciding is the key to art's anachronic quality, its ability really to "fetch" a past, create a past, perhaps even fetch the future' (18). This key insight into what Nagel and Wood call the 'plural temporality of the work of art' (7) has very useful implications for the question of Shakespearean medievalism, which uses the medieval past in a manner that is multivalent instead of binaristic, and creative instead of curatorial.

Indeed, Shakespeare typically chooses medieval literary sources that invoke the classical past: *Pericles*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and even *A Midsummer Night's Dream* draw upon Chaucer or Gower's retellings of classical tales. Although, as so many have observed, the language of Gower the Chorus in *Pericles* artfully mimics Middle English, Shakespeare does not identify it as medieval but as 'auncient' (I. Chorus, 2). Moreover, Shakespeare does not write an Arthur play or a Robin Hood play; his medieval literary sources, therefore, do not tell medieval tales. Even history plays that are set in the Middle Ages, such as *King John* or the *Henriad*, translate historical material into the terms of contemporary Tudor politics.¹ The fact that a number of Shakespeare's apocryphal plays concern the Middle Ages, such as *The Birth of Merlin*, along with plays with histories of disputed authorship, such as *Edward III*, reflects critical concerns or intuitions about the absence of an overt Shakespearean medievalism.

While Shakespeare uses medieval literary sources to invoke the past, it is not with an explicit program of periodization that uses the Middle Ages as in some way exemplary – idealized or demonized – or as a kind of placeholder. Whereas Shakespeare's contemporaries such as Robert Greene, in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, or Beaumont and Fletcher, in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, promote medieval histories, literatures, and genres as medieval *as such*, for largely comic purposes, Shakespeare's use of medieval material produces, to borrow from Nagel and Wood, a 'space for fiction' that blends together elements of classical, medieval, and Renaissance, and resists their formation into disparate parts. It is possible that Shakespeare wished to minimize the cultural effects of the Reformation, at least for his own audiences and readers, or that he associated overt medievalism with the repressive structures of the Reformation. He may have wished to recuperate a Catholic and Continental-identified Middle Ages by highlighting its affiliations with the classical culture revered by humanists, or he may have simply found it more productive to leave his periodic boundaries open-ended. In any case, as Shakespeare consistently blurs the boundaries between ancient and medieval, as well as between past and present, he uses medieval texts and histories to dramatize a past that is not fully codified, blocked out, or defined either from the classical period or from the present, but finds a place, instead, on a continuum that imaginatively links various pasts with the present.

In what follows, I examine Shakespeare's use of Chaucer in *Cymbeline* (1609) as an illuminating case study of Shakespeare's use of medieval sources, illustrating my claim that

Shakespearean medievalism is fundamentally anachronistic, resisting the paradigms of periodization, and bringing together elements of the classical and medieval past, and Shakespeare's present. As Ruth Morse observes, 'The place where we might expect to find a middle ages in Shakespeare is in the legendary Britain of Kings Cymbeline and Lear. But we do not' (258). Instead, *Cymbeline* creates a fictive world with one foot in Roman Britain and another in contemporary continental court culture, even as it draws many details of its plot from Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*. Set, like *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Pericles*, in a legendary ancient past, the *Franklin's Tale* contains characters such as knights, maids and magicians, that identify it as a medieval romance: in this case, a *Breton lai*, which is a short poem involving love and magic, often set a nostalgically imagined legendary past. Whereas *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Pericles* call attention to the medieval authors of their sources, Chaucer and Gower, by using them as Chorus, *Cymbeline* does not take similar pains to advertise its relationship to Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*. As a result, the numerous connections between *Cymbeline* and the *Franklin's Tale* have been overlooked in studies of Shakespeare's use of Chaucer (Donaldson; Krier; Miskimin; Thompson 1975, 1978). Instead, following the lead of G. Wilson Knight, criticism on the play has focused upon the play's investment in Roman history (Bergeron, Parker), the writing of British history (Curran; Floyd-Wilson; King; Mikalachki), and contemporary Stuart politics (Jones; Marcus).

However, both the *Franklin's Tale* and *Cymbeline* depict what Chaucer calls 'olde gentil Britouns' (V. 709): in *Cymbeline*, the Celtic inhabitants of pre-Roman Britain, and in the *Franklin's Tale*, the Celtic inhabitants of the closely connected coastal space that links what is now France, England, and Wales.² *Cymbeline* and the *Franklin's Tale* also share a character, Arveragus/Arviragus. Chaucer's Arveragus is the faithful husband of Dorigen, while Shakespeare's Arviragus is one of Cymbeline's lost sons.³ Both the *Franklin's Tale* and *Cymbeline* depict a happily married couple unhappily separated, and a jealous suitor who attempts to win the favors of a married woman. The wife's loyalty, in each case, comes under suspicion. In the *Franklin's Tale*, Dorigen's fidelity to Arveragus is tested when Aurelius attempts to seduce her, constituting the Franklin's contribution to an ongoing debate throughout the *Canterbury Tales* concerning 'maistrye' in marriage. In *Cymbeline*, the secret marriage between Imogen and Posthumus leads to Imogen's imprisonment and Posthumus's banishment, as well as, ultimately, to Posthumus's boasting about the constancy of his wife to Iachimo. The name of Shakespeare's Imogen, moreover, has an affinity with Dorigen, and both represent an ideal of devotion to their spouses.⁴

Each work emphasizes, as well, the married couple's different social status: Shakespeare's Posthumus is described as 'poor but worthy' (I. i. 7), just as Chaucer's noble Dorigen loves Arveragus for his 'worthynesse' (V. 738). Imogen's escape from court dressed in 'A riding-suit, no costlier than would fit/A franklin's housewife' (III. ii. 76-7) invokes Chaucer's Franklin at the moment when Imogen moves from captivity to freedom. Recalling the traditional social status of the Franklin as a 'freeman', Imogen's riding-suit both consolidates the play's connections to the *Franklin's Tale*, and underscores her willingness to reduce her social status for the love of Posthumus (later on she appears disguised as a page, Fidele). We might expect a riding-suit worn by the Franklin's wife to be consistent with the love of creature comforts Chaucer describes in his portrait of the Franklin, while Chaucer's account of the Franklin as 'an housholdere' (I. 341) offers a vision of prosperous middle-class domesticity that would appeal to the trapped princess.

Shakespeare even takes up Chaucer's association of the French city of Orléans with sexual betrayal. In the *Franklin's Tale*, Aurelius expresses his interest in Dorigen to his brother, who studied law at Orléans, and who suggests that he travel there to learn

magic. In *Cymbeline*, a French friend of the tricky Iachimo reminds Posthumus, 'we have known together in Orleance' (I. iv. 35). His recollection of their disagreement about their mistress's virtue, 'each of us fell in praise of our country mistresses; this gentleman at that time vouching ... his to be more fair, virtuous, wise, chaste, constant, qualified and less attemptable than any the rarest of our ladies in France' (56–63), initiates the process by which Iachimo questions Imogen's virtue.

The conclusions of both *Cymbeline* and the *Franklin's Tale* place emphasis upon the word 'free'. In the *Franklin's Tale*, after Arveragus, Dorigen, Aurelius, and the Clerk of Orléans have released each other of their respective promises to each other, the Franklin asks his listeners to judge, 'Which was the mooste fre, as thinketh yow?' (V. 1622). The Franklin leaves his story open to free discussion, a conventional motif in the medieval romance genre of the *Breton lai*. The word 'free', here, connotes a generosity of spirit that is consistent with the aura of plenty and good cheer that infuses Chaucer's description of the Franklin. *Cymbeline's* concluding pageant of forgiveness ends with the King's absolution and acceptance of Posthumus: 'We'll learn our *freeness* of a son-in-law:/Pardon's the word to all' (V. v. 421–2). 'Freeness', here teamed with 'pardon', conveys the idea that forgiveness frees everyone, a theme Shakespeare also develops in *The Tempest*.

The many details that Shakespeare takes from the *Franklin's Tale* reflect both *Cymbeline's* investment in Chaucer's tale, and its engagement with the central theme of marital fidelity. The comfortable world of Chaucer's Franklin, in which all needs are amply met, provides the opportunity to explore subtler issues in human relationships, examining how words can transform feelings, and how things are not always as they appear. In the *Franklin's Tale*, when Aurelius tries to woo Dorigen in Arveragus's absence, Dorigen promises herself, rashly, to Aurelius, if he can make the coastal rocks that make her fear for Arveragus's life disappear. The rocks that terrify Dorigen, and that Aurelius makes disappear by magic, symbolize the physical and sexual dangers of the lovers' prolonged separation, suggesting that distance can be as devastating to a couple as jagged rocks are to a ship. But Aurelius's magic is just a trick of the eye: he makes it look as though the rocks have disappeared, but they really haven't gone anywhere (this is another way of conceptualizing one's relationship to a far-away lover). In *Cymbeline*, Iachimo's attempt to woo Imogen in Posthumus's absence also hinges upon the deceptive qualities of vision. In *Cymbeline*, Iachimo sneaks into Imogen's bedroom and steals a glance at her birthmark. A physicalized and eroticized version of the rocks in the *Franklin's Tale*, Imogen's birthmark gives Iachimo evidence to support his false claim that he has slept with Imogen, leading Posthumus to renounce her.⁵

Of course, *Cymbeline* makes various changes to its Chaucerian source. Arveragus, the devoted husband of Dorigen, becomes, in *Cymbeline*, Imogen's devoted brother.⁶ In the *Franklin's Tale*, Aurelius seems genuinely to love Dorigen; in *Cymbeline*, Iachimo only pretends to love Imogen in order to prove his misogynist point about the faithlessness of women. Chaucer's Dorigen is not forced to contend with a forbidding father and a jealous stepmother, while Shakespeare's Imogen, by contrast, does not have to accept her husband's willing abandonment. Most importantly, Shakespeare turns the quiet, modest, unspoken certainty of Chaucer's Arveragus and Dorigen into the confidence, even bravado, of Posthumus and Imogen. Chaucer's Franklin displays the faithfulness of Dorigen and Arveragus and the depth of their commitment by an absence of dialogue on the subject. Arveragus leaves his wife 'to seke in armes worshipe and honour' (811): this is what he is expected, even compelled, to do as a knight. Their departure produces no overwrought dialogue, no promises made or vows exchanged. In *Cymbeline*, by contrast, the banished Posthumus describes himself rashly as 'the loyal'st husband that did e'er plight

troth' (I. i. 96), and he uses similar hyperbole to boast to the skeptical Iachimo about his absolute faith in Imogen's fidelity: 'My mistress exceeds in goodness the hugeness of your unworthy thinking' (I. iv. 142–6). He bets his diamond ring on it. Like Posthumus, Imogen is so confident in her own position, as both loving and beloved, that she entirely overstates her welcome to Iachimo: 'You are as welcome, worthy sir, as I/Have words to bid you, and shall find it so/In all that I can do' (I. vi. 29–31). She offers to safeguard for him the gifts he has bought, joking that she shall 'pawn' her 'honor for their safety' (I. vi. 194), little knowing that she is about to do just that.

The overstatements of Imogen and Posthumus in *Cymbeline* actually expand upon a key moment in the *Franklin's Tale*, when Dorigen says too much to her admirer Aurelius:

'Aurelie,' quod she, 'by heighe God above,
 Yet wolde I graunte yow to been youre love,
 Syn I yow se so pitously complayne.
 Looke what day that endelong Britayne
 Ye remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,
 That they ne lette ship ne boot to goon –
 I seye, whan ye han maad the coost so clene
 Of rokkes that ther nys no stoon ysene,
 Thanne wol I love yow best of any man;
 Have heer my trouthe, in al that evere I kan.'
 (989–98)

Dorigen is speaking 'in pley' (988): she is entering the same space of dangerous overstatement that Posthumus and Imogen enter with their rash speech. She is not actually saying that she intends to love Aurelius once he removes the rocks; rather, she is declining Aurelius's advances in a polite and courtly way that uses the rocks to convey her commitment to her husband. She sketches out this impossible scenario to express the idea that her love is as solid as a rock. Nevertheless, in doing so she expresses a fairly detailed idea of adultery with Aurelius: 'What deyntee sholde a man han in his lyf,/For to go love another mannes wyf,/That hath hir body whan so that hym liketh?' (1003–5). In a few lines, Dorigen proceeds from the 'derke fantasye' (844) of her husband's body, broken by the rocks, to the idea of being with Aurelius. Her efforts to describe her love for her husband thus lead her, unintentionally, into the territory of adultery.

In *Cymbeline*, Posthumus, Imogen, and Iachimo are all betrayed by language. After Posthumus raises the idea of infidelity by overstating Imogen's fidelity, Iachimo draws a cynical parallel between a diamond's luster and Imogen's purity: 'but I have not seen the most precious diamond that is, nor you the lady' (I. iv. 75–6). He then proceeds to spell it out: 'If I bring you no sufficient testimony that I have enjoy'd the dearest bodily part of your mistress, my ten thousand ducats are yours, so is your diamond too' (148–51). As Posthumus eerily recapitulates the idea, 'if you make your voyage upon her ... if she remain unsexed' (158–61), the ensuing dialogue accrues, in the mind's eye, multiple pictures of Imogen's betrayal. Their words, following the rhetorical trope of *enargeia*, draw lusty pictures in the mind's eye. We are all imagining it now; we can see it; the words make it almost as if it has actually happened. These sexual images mirror the fantastic images that the magical Clerk of Orleans shows to Aurelius in the *Franklin's Tale*, offering an erotic gloss on Aurelius's adulterous plans:

Forestes, parkes ful of wilde deer,
 Ther saugh he hertes with hir hornes hye,
 The gretteste that evere were seyne with ye.

... And after this he dide hym swich plesaunce
 That he hym shewed his lady on a daunce,
 On which himself he daunced, as hym thoughte'.
 (1190–201)

Depicting the erotic metaphors of hunting and the chase, love's wounds and love's rewards, the magician's little spectacle comes, like all dreams that are too good to be true, to an abrupt conclusion, 'Al oure revel was ago' (1204). Shakespeare appropriates this line for Prospero in *The Tempest*: 'our revels now are ended' (IV. i. 161).

Cymbeline does not dramatize the disappearing rocks of the *Franklin's Tale*. Instead, when Iachimo attempts to woo Imogen, it transforms them into rhetoric:

What, are men mad? Hath nature given them eyes
 To see this vaulted arch and the rich crop
 Of sea and land, which can distinguish 'twixt
 The fiery orbs above, and the twinn'd stones
 Upon the number'd beach, and can we not
 Partition make with spectacles so precious
 'Twixt fair and foul?'
 (I. vi. 32–8)

Iachimo's reference to 'spectacles' expresses faith in the ability – with a little help – to 'see' the difference between stars and stones, the good and the bad. But in *Cymbeline*, Iachimo is not as he appears, like the disappearing rocks of the *Franklin's Tale*. He does not even want Imogen. He wishes to persuade Imogen of Posthumus's infidelity only to win a wager, making Aurelius's adulterous love seem almost pure by comparison. For Iachimo, the 'twinn'd stones' are metaphors for the multiplicity of interchangeable, inadequate women who, he implies, are turning Posthumus's affections away from Imogen. Yet Iachimo's deceptive use of language in this passage makes the stones even more insubstantial and deceptive than Aurelius's disappearing rocks. *Cymbeline* takes up this theme of rocks at the end of the play, when Imogen is reunited with Posthumus, and asks, 'why did you throw your wedded lady from you? Think that you are upon a rock, and now throw me again' (V. v. 261–3). Most scholars find this passage enigmatic, but it makes sense in the context of the *Franklin's Tale*. Here, Imogen is returning Posthumus to the Franklin's rocks, re-imagining the dangerous place in the *Franklin's Tale* where love is tested, and eventually restored.

Cymbeline thus takes from the *Franklin's Tale* both a concern with capacity of language as well as vision to deceive, and a conclusion that emphasizes generous and gentle forgiveness. As the Franklin puts it, 'For in this world, certein, there no wight is,/That he ne dooth or seith sometyme amys' (V. 779–80). In a world in which words do not always work as we want them to, and things do not always appear as they are, the most powerful magic, as each text reveals, is neither a visual trick nor a rhetorical ploy, but forgiveness. As Chaucer and Shakespeare each sketch out a vertiginous romance world, an ancient Briton version of Augustine's *regio disimilitudinis*, or land of unlikeliness, they take us to a place where words, as well as appearances, are deceptive. The problem, to return to Iachimo's speech, is not with the 'rocks' themselves (or with the seductive 'twinned stones') but with the words we use, and the 'spectacles' that we try on, to make sense of them.

We may apply this conclusion to the question of Shakespearean medievalism. Our attempts to make, as Iachimo suggests, a definitive 'partition', or to 'distinguish' between, as he says, 'fiery orbs' and 'twinn'd stones', or the 'vaulted arch' and the 'sea and land', or the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, are as fallible and contingent, as subject to

error, overstatement, and misinterpretation, as Aurelius's disappearing rocks. Yet, just as the rocks in the *Franklin's Tale* appear to disappear and yet are ultimately reinstated, like the absent Arviragus, so, too, can dismantling the idea of Shakespearean medievalism ultimately lead us to a stronger sense of Shakespeare's relationship to the Middle Ages. Rather than offering a storybook vision of the Middle Ages that contains knights and monks and damsels, Shakespeare, in *Cymbeline*, presents a world with fluid connections to both the classical past and the contemporary, courtly present, and a play which is more importantly concerned with the human anxieties about love and trust, loss and reunion, that it finds in its medieval source.

In this sense, then, it takes a medieval text to teach us not to believe in medievalism. On the one hand, I have argued here for the importance of a medieval text, Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*, to Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, and demonstrated the play's investment, at many levels, in this Chaucerian source. Yet on the other, I have made this argument in order to contest the idea of a firm and fixed program of Shakespearean medievalism. While *Cymbeline's* relationship to the *Franklin's Tale* confirms the ongoing importance of medieval narratives to Shakespeare, especially at this late stage in his career, it also confirms how, Shakespeare's interest in medieval tales that, themselves, recall a shadowy, legendary classical past – from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* – may be distinguished from Roman plays such as *Julius Caesar* which, for all their anachronistic details, are invested in narrating a specific historical event or character. In this respect, Shakespeare's medievalism in *Cymbeline* is indebted to the anachronic historical vision of his own medieval source in the *Franklin's Tale*, which fuses ancient contexts with medieval, or courtly, characters in an atmosphere of overarching nostalgia. Illustrating neither Foxe's notion of a suspicious history, nor the humanist notion of a middle ground, Shakespearean medievalism does not conceptualize the medieval as fully past, nor does it distinguish it fully from either the classical period or the present. Instead, Shakespeare presents a continuous and relational vision of the past which resists the markers and ideologies of periodization at a time when they were, themselves, being formulated, and prioritizes, instead, his dramatist's interest in human emotions, relationships and conflicts: experiences that transcend the boundaries of temporality, and that confirm that there is much more to a medieval text than the fact that it was written in the Middle Ages. In this respect, for Shakespeare, the past is not another country.

Short Biography

Deanne Williams studies medieval and Renaissance literature, and her research focuses upon the relationships between the two. Her book, *The French Fetish From Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 2004) won the Roland H. Bainton Prize for Best Book in Literature from the Sixteenth Century Society and Conference. She is the author of articles that appear in *Shakespeare Survey*, *English Literary History*, *Leeds Studies in English*, and the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, as well as a variety of edited collections, including the recent Blackwell *Companion to Tudor Literature* (2010). She is also co-editor, with Ananya Jahanara Kabir, of *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures* (Cambridge, 2005). Current research concerns the evolution of medieval and early modern concepts of girlhood. She has received fellowships from Clare Hall, Cambridge, The Folger Shakespeare Library, the Huntington Library, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and holds degrees from the University of Toronto (BA), Oxford University (MPhil), and Stanford University (PhD). Williams teaches at York University in Toronto, Canada.

Notes

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¹ John Watkins's essay in *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, Ed. Perry and Watkins, argues that *King John* illustrates the transition from dynastic feudalism to the contemporary nation-state. Two recent discussions of *Richard II* illustrate the immediate contemporaneity of Shakespeare's history plays (Orgel; Hammer).

² The *Franklin's Tale* is interestingly ambiguous on the geography and ethnic identity of its ancient 'Britouns'. On the one hand, he uses character names, such as Arveragus, that come from Geoffrey of Monmouth's 12th-century *Historia Regum Britanniae*, while his reference to the 'firste Briton tonge' (711) highlights his own project of English authorship. On the other, the tale's generic affiliation with the 'Breton lai' looks across the channel to medieval Brittany, where the tale is set. The word 'Britoun' signifies the close cultural connection between the coastal spaces of Brittany and Wales, which is where much of the action of *Cymbeline* takes place.

³ According to Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, which was an important source for Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577) and Camden's *Britannia* (1586), Arviragus and his brother, Guiderius, are sons of the king, Cunobelinus. King (2010) refers to these details in Shakespeare as 'loosely Chaucerian' (168).

⁴ 'Innogen', which comes from the Celtic word for 'maiden', is the name used for the character by the editors of the Oxford and Norton Shakespeare. However, she appears in the first folio and in most editions as Imogen.

⁵ This birthmark is the first in a series of moments, throughout the play, in which things are not as they appear: for example, Imogen believes Posthumus dead because she sees Cloten's body dressed in his cloak, and Imogen later appears to be dead when she is just drugged.

⁶ Arviragus does respond to Fidele more powerfully than Guiderius, and it is not without an incestuous frisson, like Pericles's response to Marina just before he learns she is his daughter: 'I know not why I love this youth, and I have heard you say, /Love's reason's without reason' (IV. ii. 20–2). He also shares his nobility of spirit with his Chaucerian namesake, when he willingly embraces Posthumus: 'As you did mean indeed to be our brother; /Joy'd are we that you are' (V. v. 422–3).

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