

Medievalism

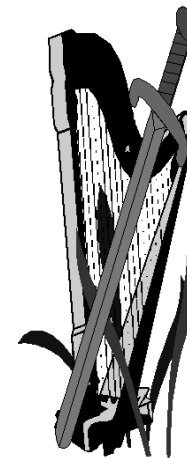
The Year's Work for 1999



XIV

The Year's Work in Medievalism

Edited by Gwendolyn Morgan



XIV

BOZEMAN, MONTANA

1999

The Year's Work in Medievalism
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Humanities.

The Year's Work in Medievalism is based upon but not restricted to the 1999 Proceedings of the annual International Conference on Medievalism organized by the Director of Conferences of *Studies in Medievalism*. *The Year's Work* also publishes bibliographies, book reviews, and announcements of conferences and other events.

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First published 2000 by *Studies in Medievalism*

The Year's Work in Medievalism is an imprint of *Studies in Medievalism*. Address: Gwendolyn Morgan, Editor, *Studies in Medievalism*, Department of English, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana 59717.

Published in the USA by *Studies in Medievalism* with partial funding by Montana State University and the Montana Committee for the

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INTRODUCTION

by Gwendolyn Morgan

The present volume marks a departure from previous issues in this series in that it emphasizes *living* medievalism, that is, bringing medievalism out of the academic closet and observing it at work in everyday life. And, indeed, the Fourteenth International Conference on Medievalism, held in Bozeman, Montana in September, 1999, reflected this trend. In addition to the more usual studies of medieval influences in the various arts and humanities, attendees participated in discussion of recreations of the Middle Ages in Disney films and the college classroom, in new age mysticism and ecology. Expanded versions of several such studies are found herein.

The tone for this volume, and for the conference as a whole, was set by Ronald Hutton's remarkable examination of "The New Druids," a conglomeration of groups attempting to practice a spiritual system of the ancient Celts which many people may know by name but of which few really have the faintest understanding. Indeed, as Dr. Hutton points out, even so-called scientific and academic beliefs about the druids are founded on little more than a few highly biased and confused classical Roman accounts; and such beliefs can be (and are) shattered at a moment's notice. The fiascos surrounding the discovery of the Lindow man and a female head in the same swamp, the first believed to be a druidic ritual victim exemplifying the infamous "triple death" and the latter emblematic of ancient "head cults," are wonderful examples of medievalism at work in supposedly objective thought. By the mid-1990s, the female head was proven to be that of a 1960s' victim, and the Lindow man equally possibly a mugging victim of recent date, all evidence for the triple death having "evaporated" in a 1998 examination of Lindow man by a professional pathologist. Even more, the revival (or imaginative re-creation) of druidry, wicca, and other

ancient practices within various new age mysticisms indicates medievalism strongly at work in the popular imagination. Nor is paganism the only focus for medievalism, either in academia or popular culture: consider the “medieval” philosophies which Greg Stone finds operating in our return to a conception of nature as an intricate wholeness -- the “new” ecocriticism -- and James Keller’s tracing of medieval cosmology through Spenser and into modern film.

The phenomenon of living out our perceptions of the Middle Ages, as Keller’s essay points out, is not particularly new. Indeed, Kathryn Wildgen’s examination of gothicism as foundational (especially in Jungian thought) to modern humanity’s conception of self and Elizabeth Emery’s acute account of conscious nineteenth-century French re-creations of the pilgrimage offer evidence that we have, since the end of the period, tended to pay our psychic debts in medieval currency. Such as particularly evident to me last month, when I was fortunate enough to attend the re-enactment of the York mystery play cycle in the city’s Minster: by the end of the evening, a large proportion of the audience had been moved to tears and exited the minster in awed silence. It seems that is not only the neo-pagans who return to the Middle Ages for spiritual revitalization. Moreover, despite the series’ title of the “York Millennial Mystery Plays,” the millennium seemingly has little to do with it: Emery has since furthered her exploration of medievalism in nineteenth-century French culture with investigations, presented at the Studies in Medievalism sessions at Kalamazoo and Leeds, of student re-creations of the Feast of Fools and French mystery plays during that era. Meanwhile, in concert with the burgeoning interest in popular culture of all periods, new examinations of standard medieval texts, iconography, philosophy, and folklore themselves, such as those of Tammy Anderson and Tiffany Rašović, Michael Callaghan, Richard Lambert, and Richard Utz, continue to reveal our evolving understanding of the Middle Ages.

Medievalism, then, has not only become an accepted focus for academic study but revealed as a functional, evolving part of popular *and* academic thought. As such, it demands increasing attention, not only to understand the Middle Ages and their legacy, but as a key to understanding ourselves. We are no longer, as Umberto Eco put it, “dreaming the Middle Ages;” we are living them...or at least our conception of them. As we look forward to the 2000 through 2002 conferences in Holland, Michigan; in Buffalo, New York; and in Cedar Falls, Iowa, we can expect to see medievalism as an approach employed in an increasing number of fields. But we should be aware, as Dr. Hutton’s essay suggests, that our very studies of the phenomenon may themselves be examples of it.