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A Review of popular literature during Medieval period

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Abstract

Medieval literature is a broad subject, encompassing essentially all written works available in Europe and beyond during the middle Ages. that is, the one thousand years from the fall of the Western Roman Empire ca. AD 500 to the beginning of the Renaissance in the 14th, 15th or 16th century, depending on country. The literature of this time was composed of religious writings as well as secular works. Just as in modern literature, it is a complex and rich field of study, from the utterly sacred to the exuberantly profane, touching all points in-between. Works of literature are often grouped by place of origin, language, and genre.

Key words: Medieval, language, depending etc.

Introduction

The fall of the Roman Empire marked the beginning of the Medieval or middle Ages. Also known as Dark Ages, due to the prevailing conditions during this period, barbarian invasion and Muslim conquests marked this era. Wars, famine, plagues and decline in culture and learning. The use of vellum, parchment, and wooden tables covered in green or black wax to fashion books which are more durable than scrolls became widespread. Hence, the greatest numbers of books published during this era were bound with plain wooden boards, or with simple tooled leather for more expensive volumes. Medieval, "belonging to the Middle Ages," is used here to refer to the literature of Europe and the eastern Mediterranean from as early as the establishment of the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire about AD 300 for medieval Greek, from the period following upon the fall of Rome in 476 for medieval Latin, and from about the time of Charlemagne and the Carolingian Renaissance he fostered in France (c. 800) to the end of the 15th century for most written vernacular literatures.

The popular books during this period include but not limited to:

1. King Arthur – Geoffrey of Monmouth
2. Canterbury Tales – Geoffrey Chaucer
3. History of British People – Venerable Bede

4. Divine Comedy – Alighieri Dante
5. Beowulf – Anglo-Saxon tradition
6. Norse Mythology – Norse Tradition
7. City of God – St. Augustine of Hippo

Christianity and the church

The establishment of Christianity throughout the territories that had formed the Roman Empire meant that Europe was exposed to and tutored in the systematic approach to life, literature, and religion developed by the early Church Fathers. In the West, the fusion of Christian and classical philosophy formed the basis of the medieval habit of interpreting life symbolically. Through St. Augustine, Platonic and Christian thought were reconciled: the permanent and uniform order of the Greek universe was given Christian form; nature became sacramental, a symbolic revelation of spiritual truth. Classical literature was invested with this same symbolism; exegetical, or interpretative, methods first applied to the Scriptures were extended as a general principle to classical and secular writings. The allegorical or symbolic approach that found in Virgil a pre-Christian prophet and in the Aeneid a narrative of the soul's journey through life to paradise (Rome) belonged to the same tradition as Dante's allegorical conception of himself and his journey in The Divine Comedy.

The church not only established the purpose of literature but preserved it. St. Benedict's monastery at Monte Cassino in Italy was established in 529, and other monastic centres of scholarship followed, particularly after the 6th- and 7th-century Irish missions to the Rhine and Great Britain and the Gothic missions up the Danube. These monasteries were able to preserve the only classical literature available in the West through times when Europe was being raided by Goths, Vandals, Franks, and, later, Norsemen in succession. The classical Latin authors so preserved and the Latin works that continued to be written predominated over vernacular works throughout most of the period. St. Augustine's City of God, the Venerable Bede's Ecclesiastical History, the Danish chronicle of Saxo Grammaticus, for example, were all written in Latin, as were most major works in the fields of philosophy, theology, history, and science.

Vernacular works and drama

The main literary values of the period are found in vernacular works. The pre-Christian literature of Europe belonged to an oral tradition that was reflected in the Poetic Edda and the sagas, or heroic epics, of Iceland, the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf, and the German Song of Hildebrand. These belonged to a common Germanic alliterative tradition, but all were first recorded by Christian scribes at dates later than the historical events they relate, and the pagan elements they contain were fused with Christian thought and feeling. The mythology of Icelandic literature was echoed in every Germanic language and clearly stemmed from a common European source. Only the Scandinavian texts, however, give a coherent account of the stories and personalities involved. Numerous ballads in different countries also reflect an earlier native tradition of oral recitation. Among the best known of the many genres that arose in medieval vernacular literatures were the romance and the courtly love lyric, both of which combined elements from popular oral traditions with those of more scholarly or refined literature and both derived largely from France. The romance used classical or Arthurian sources in a poetic narrative that replaced the heroic epics of feudal society, such as The Song of Roland, with a chivalrous tale of knightly valour. In the romance, complex themes of love, loyalty, and personal integrity were united with a quest for spiritual truth, an amalgam that was represented in every major western European literature of the time. The love lyric has had a similarly heterogeneous background. The precise origins of courtly love are disputed, as is the influence of a popular love poetry tradition; it is clear, however, that the idealized lady and languishing suitor of the poets of southern and northern France were imitated or reinterpreted throughout Europe—in the Sicilian school of Italy, the minnesingers (love poets) of Germany, and in a Latin verse collection, Carmina Burana.

Medieval drama began in the religious ceremonies that took place in church on important dates in the Christian calendar. The dramatic quality of the religious service lent itself to elaboration that perhaps first took the form of gestures and mime and later developed into dramatic interpolations on events or figures in the religious service. This elaboration increased until drama became a secular affair performed on stages or carts in town streets or open spaces. The players were guild craftsmen or professional actors and were hired by towns to perform at local or religious festivals. Three types of play developed: the mystery, the miracle, and the morality. The titles and themes of medieval drama remained religious but their pieces' titles can belie their humorous or farcical and sometimes bawdy nature. One of the best known morality plays was translated from Dutch to be known in English as Everyman. A large majority of medieval

literature was anonymous and not easily dated. Some of the greatest figures—Dante, Chaucer, Petrarch, and Boccaccio—came late in the period, and their work convincingly demonstrates the transitional nature of the best of medieval literature, for, in being master commentators of the medieval scene, they simultaneously announced the great themes and forms of Renaissance literature.

The Renaissance

The name Renaissance ("Rebirth") is given to the historical period in Europe that succeeded the middle Ages. The awakening of a new spirit of intellectual and artistic inquiry, which was the dominant feature of this political, religious, and philosophical phenomenon, was essentially a revival of the spirit of ancient Greece and Rome; in literature this meant a new interest in and analysis of the great classical writers. Scholars searched for and translated "lost" ancient texts, whose dissemination was much helped by developments in printing in Europe from about 1450.

Art and literature in the Renaissance reached a level unattained in any previous period. The age was marked by three principal characteristics: first, the new interest in learning, mirrored by the classical scholars known as humanists and instrumental in providing suitable classical models for the new writers; second, the new form of Christianity, initiated by the Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther, which drew men's attention to the individual and his inner experiences and stimulated a response in Catholic countries summarized by the term Counter-Reformation; third, the voyages of the great explorers that culminated in Christopher Columbus' discovery of America in 1492 and that had far-reaching consequences on the countries that developed overseas empires, as well as on the imaginations and consciences of the most gifted writers of the day.

To these may be added many other factors, such as the developments in science and astronomy and the political condition of Italy in the late 15th century. The new freedom and spirit of inquiry in the Italian city-states had been a factor in encouraging the great precursors of the Renaissance in Italy, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. The flowering of the Renaissance in France appeared both in the poetry of the poets making up the group known as the Pleiade and in the reflective essays of Michel de Montaigne, while Spain at this time produced its greatest novelist, Miguel de Cervantes. Another figure who stood out above his contemporaries was the

Portuguese epic poet Luis Camoes, while drama flourished in both Spain and Portugal, being represented at its best by Lope de Vega and Gil Vicente. In England, too, drama dominated the age, a blend of Renaissance learning and native tradition lending extraordinary vitality to works of Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, John Webster, and others, while Shakespeare, England's greatest dramatic and poetic talent, massively spanned the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th.

In the 16th century the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus typified the development of humanism, which embodied the spirit of critical inquiry, regard for classical learning, intolerance of superstition, and high respect for men as God's most intricate creation. An aspect of the influence of the Protestant Reformation on literature was the number of great translations of the Bible, including an early one by Erasmus, into vernacular languages during this period, setting new standards for prose writing. The impetus of the Renaissance carried well into the 17th century, when John Milton reflected the spirit of Christian humanism.

Languages

Since Latin was the language of the Roman Catholic Church, which dominated Western and Central Europe, and since the Church was virtually the only source of education, Latin was a common language for medieval writings, even in some parts of Europe that were never Romanized. However, in Eastern Europe, the influence of the Eastern Roman Empire and the Eastern Orthodox Church made Greek and Old Church Slavonic the dominant written languages. The common people continued to use their respective vernaculars. A few examples, such as the Old English Beowulf, the Middle High German Nibelungenlied, the Medieval Greek Digenis Acritas, the Old East Slavic Tale of Igor's Campaign, and the Old French Chanson de Roland, are well known to this day. Although the extant versions of these epics are generally considered the works of individual (but anonymous) poets, there is no doubt that they are based on their peoples' older oral traditions. Celtic traditions have survived in the lais of Marie de France, the Mabinogion and the Arthurian cycles. Another host of vernacular literature has survived in the Old Norse literature and more specifically in the saga literature of Iceland.

Anonymity

A notable amount of medieval literature is anonymous. This is not only due to the lack of documents from a period, but also due to an interpretation of the author's role that differs considerably from the romantic interpretation of the term in use today. Medieval authors often deeply respected the classical writers and the Church Fathers and tended to re-tell and embellish stories they had heard or read rather than invent new stories. And even when they did, they often claimed to be handing down something from an auctor instead. From this point of view, the names of the individual authors seemed much less important, and therefore many important works were never attributed to any specific person.

Types of writing

Religious

Theological works were the dominant form of literature typically found in libraries during the middle Ages. Catholic clerics were the intellectual center of society in the middle Ages, and it is their literature that was produced in the greatest quantity.

Countless hymns survive from this time period. The liturgy itself was not in fixed form, and numerous competing missals set out individual conceptions of the order of the mass. Religious scholars such as Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, and Pierre Abelard wrote lengthy theological and philosophical treatises, often attempting to reconcile the teachings of the Greek and Roman pagan authors with the doctrines of the Church. Hagiographies, or "lives of the saints", were also frequently written, as an encouragement to the devout and a warning to others.

The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine reached such popularity that, in its time, it was reportedly read more often than the Bible. Francis of Assisi was a prolific poet, and his Franciscan followers frequently wrote poetry themselves as an expression of their piety. Dies Irae and Stabat Mater are two of the most powerful Latin poems on religious subjects. Goliardic poetry was an art form used by some clerics to express dissent. The only widespread religious writing that was not produced by clerics were the mystery plays: growing out of simple tableaux re-enactments of a single Biblical scene, each mystery play became its village's expression of the key events in the Bible. The text of these plays was often controlled by local guilds, and mystery plays would be performed regularly on set feast-days, often lasting all day long and into the night.

During the middle Ages, the Jewish population of Europe also produced a number of outstanding writers. Maimonides, born in Cordoba, Spain, and Rashi, born in Troyes, France, are two of the best-known and most influential of these Jewish authors.

Secular

Secular literature in this period was not produced in equal quantity as religious literature. The earliest tales are based on oral traditions: the British Y Gododdin and Preiddeu Annwfn, along with the Germanic Beowulf and Nibelungenlied. They relate to myths or certain 6th-century events, but the surviving manuscripts date from centuries later—Y Gododdin from the late 13th century, Preiddu Annwfn from the early 14th century, Beowulf from c. 1000, and the Nibelungenlied from the 13th century. The makers and performers were bards and scops, elite professionals attached to royal or noble courts to praise the heroes of legendary history.

Prose tales first emerged in Britain: the intricate Mabinogion quartet about princely families, notably anti-war in theme, and the romantic adventure Colwich and Olwen. These works were compiled from earlier oral tradition c. 1100.

At about the same time a new poetry of "courtly love" became fashionable in Europe. Traveling singers—troubadours and trouvères—made a living from their love songs in French, Spanish, Galician-Portuguese, Catalan, Provençal, and Greek. Germanic culture had its Minnesänger tradition. The songs of courtly love often express unrequited longing for an ideal woman, but there are also aubades (dawn farewells by lovers) and humorous ditties.

Following the earliest epic poems, prose tales, and romances, more long poems were crafted—the chansons de geste of the late 11th and early 12th centuries. These extolled conquests, as in The Song of Roland and Digenis Acritas. The rather different chivalric romance tradition concerns adventures about marvels, love, and chivalry. They tell of the Matter of Britain and the Matter of Rome.

Travel literature was highly popular in the Middle Ages, as fantastic accounts of far-off lands entertained a society that supported sea voyages and trading along coasts and rivers, as well as pilgrimages to such destinations as Jerusalem; Canterbury and Glastonbury in England; St. David's in Wales; and Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales became popular at the end of the 14th century.

The most prominent authors of Jewish secular poetry in the middle Ages were Solomon ibn Gabirol and Yehuda Halevi, both of whom were also renowned religious poets.

Women's literature

While it is true that women in the medieval period were never accorded full equality with men, some women were able to use their skill with the written word to gain renown. Religious writing was the easiest avenue—women who would later be canonized as saints frequently published their reflections, revelations, and prayers. Much of what is known about women in the middle Ages is known from the works of nuns such as Clare of Assisi, Bridget of Sweden, and Catherine of Siena.

Frequently, however, the religious perspectives of women were held to be unorthodox by those in power, and the mystical visions of such authors as Julian of Norwich, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Hildegard of Bingen provide insight into a part of the medieval experience less comfortable for the institutions that ruled Europe at the time. Women wrote influential texts in the secular realm as well—reflections on courtly love and society by Marie de France and Christine de Pizan continue to be studied for their glimpses of medieval society.

For modern historical reflection, D.H. Green's (2007) historical work entitled, Women Readers of the middle Ages explores literacy and literature in terms of women in medieval society.

Allegory

While medieval literature makes use of many literary devices, allegory is so prominent in this period as to deserve special mention. Much of medieval literature relied on allegory to convey the morals the author had in mind while writing—representations of abstract qualities, events, and institutions are thick in much of the literature of this time. Probably the earliest and most influential allegory is the Psychomachia (Battle of Souls) by Aurelius Clemens Prudentius. Other important examples include the Romance of the Rose, Everyman, Piers Plowman, Roman de Fauvel, and The Divine Comedy.

Conclusion

Even more obviously than ‘literature’ or ‘Europe,’ the terms ‘medieval’ and ‘Middle Ages’ are necessarily post-medieval formulations. There are many reasons for scholarly unease with the

category 'medieval:' theoretical debates about per iodization and about the increasing application of 'medieval' to non-European cultures, and specific anxieties both about the meaningfulness of the medieval period and about the popular image of the Middle Ages stand out. Without putting those concerns aside, indeed on the contrary, while inviting contributions which interrogate the category 'medieval,' Interfaces sets out to include within its remit a wide chronological range, from c. 500 to c. 1500. At one end, such a range deliberately blurs the line between Late Antiquity and the middle Ages, which is in any case unproductive for Byzantine Studies. At the other end, the late middle Ages and the early Renaissance can be easily crossed in the West, and the early centuries of the Ottomans included in the East.

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