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"Medieval Shakespeare?": Introduction

Christina Wald*

Augsburg University, Augsburg, Germany

Medieval Shakespeare, the title of this volume, is far from self-explanatory. Shakespeare usually is considered the epitome of the Renaissance or of early modernity in England – two terms with rather contradictory implications. While "Renaissance" understands the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a refashioning of the distant past, "early modern" marks them as the beginning of something new. In both cases, the Middle Ages serve as a contrast: either as the time gap between classic Antiquity and its reanimation by Renaissance humanists or as the premodern past with little or no continuity to our present. This volume aims to question such a partition. Even though (literary) history depends on divisions which help to structure and to understand the past (as Fredric Jameson emphasised, "We cannot not periodize" [29]), it is worthwhile to challenge these boundaries, especially if they have such eminent consequences as the one between the Middle Ages and modernity, which often functions "less as a historical marker than a massive value judgement" (De Grazia 453). Rather than insisting on the insurmountable differences between the ages, then, it is much more productive to shed light on how the Middle Ages and the Renaissance are a product of each other (McMullan and Matthews 3); as Brian Cummings and James Simpson have pointed out, "the humanists of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries conceptualized their own place in history not so much by inventing the modern as by inventing the 'medieval'" (4). Even though Shakespeare, as far as we can judge from his oeuvre, did not have a clear sense of the "Middle Ages" or of other periods of the past such as "Antiquity" (see Morse), his plays, in particular his histories, were part and parcel of the early modern vision of the time span that came to be considered the Middle Ages. The plays shaped the understanding of the medieval not only for Shakespeare's contemporaries, but also for audiences and readers in subsequent centuries.

At the same time, of course, notions of the Middle Ages and early modernity are a product of our approaches and projections today. As Valentin Groebner has recently shown in his book with the programmatic title *Das Mittelalter hört nicht auf* (*The Middle Ages Don't Stop*), each time constructed its own version of the Middle Ages. Carolyn Dinshaw's equally programmatic *Getting Medieval* shows with what she calls "a queer historical impulse" (1) how contemporary texts and films have (mis)appropriated medieval tropes, in particular with regard to questions of community and sexuality. On a similar trajectory, the collection *Shakespeare and*

*Email: christina.wald@phil.uni-augsburg.de

the Middle Ages by Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray explores how Shakespeare's invention of the Middle Ages is re-imagined in popular films today that present their own versions of the medieval, often in a pastiche of different ages. The collection partakes in another recent strand of reassessing the medieval, namely "medievalism", an interest in the reception of medieval culture in later centuries (see Utz).

In current academic research, the reconsideration of the Middle Ages has led to a more diachronic approach from both medievalists and early modern scholars; sometimes, the new interest in the continuities across the centuries includes a version of the medieval as the actual onset of modernity, thus interpreting the "premodern" as the anticipation of modernity or its prelude rather than its dark other. And yet, we need to question not only our notion of the "premodern", but also our understanding of the "modern" itself. Ever since Max Weber's groundbreaking work, the "modernity" of Shakespeare's time and oeuvre has been understood as a rise of rationality and scepticism fuelled by the Reformation – as a process of fundamental "disenchantment". However, as critics have come to emphasise, we can hardly trace a linear progress of increasing disenchantment (and its corollaries, desacralisation and secularisation). Instead, we should acknowledge cycles of dis- and re- enchantment. The Middle Ages witnessed trends of scepticism alongside strong belief, so that "[t]he idea of an enchanted middle ages is gradually evaporating," as Alexandra Walsham has put it recently (504). Likewise, Protestantism created its own rituals and even a magic while at the same time criticising Catholic superstition; in fact, the very denigration of Catholicism as a form of witchcraft proved the unrelenting Protestant belief in magic (see Walsham 508). In Shakespeare's plays, such contradictory moves can be seen, too, even if the re-enchantment often concerns theatrical magic rather than religious beliefs.

This issue participates in the current academic reinterpretation of Shakespeare and the Middle Ages by showing how Shakespeare used medieval material, both historical and literary, how he redeployed medieval ritual, and how he dealt with the linguistic, generic and musical heritage of the past. The volume links up with recent criticism that has highlighted the continuation and creative modification of medieval issues on Shakespeare's stage. Thus, Helen Cooper opens her study *Shakespeare and the Medieval World* with the provocative statement, "The world in which Shakespeare lived was a medieval one" (1), and goes on to demonstrate the importance of the medieval for Shakespeare's environment and his work. In a similar manner, *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, edited by Curtis Perry and John Watkins, traces not only the Shakespearean invention of the Middle Ages, but also argues for a "medieval invention of Shakespeare" (3). In a similarly paradoxical move, Deanne Williams and Seth Lerer in their contribution to this volume invert the usual interest of what Shakespeare did to Chaucer and instead ask what Chaucer did to Shakespeare – that is, how the reading of Chaucer's tales inspired Shakespeare's own thinking and writing. Focusing on *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, Lerer and Williams argue that Chaucer for Shakespeare was not a representative of the dark in-between ages that had to be overcome, but instead a mediator to the ancient world. Chaucer's stories for Shakespeare hence offer a plural, unstable temporality, in which different epochs are merged rather than separated from each other, and Shakespeare in his own plays adds to this plurality by blending concerns which we would today, with hindsight, categorise as "classic", "medieval" and "early modern".

The very fact that Shakespeare could write history plays, that is, plays which depict events that clearly belong to the past, has been taken as an indicator of their early modernity. Arguably, the Middle Ages had a different sense of temporality: time was perceived as enduring synchronicity, no historical consciousness was developed. This sense of synchronicity, for instance, came to the fore in medieval romances and their interlacing of stories which all appear to happen at the same time. And yet, Shakespeare's history plays clearly interpret the depicted historic events in the light of the present and often work with anachronisms, as the contributions of Lucy Munro and Brian Cummings demonstrate. Hence, not only their subject matter, but also their aesthetic choices could be labelled as, at least partly, medieval. Munro's article shows that a religiously motivated understanding of the "middle age" as the time span between the original and the Reformed church, during which Christianity was sullied by papism, cannot as clearly be separated from the Reformed present as authors like Foxe claimed. With reference to the morality play, Munro demonstrates that the theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries drew on archaic language and outmoded theatrical forms for their depiction of medieval history, but that their linguistic, theatrical and historic pastiche resulted in an experience of temporal instability for play-goers rather than a safe distancing of the medieval past.

Both Brian Cummings and Alison Findlay reassess the intricate role that ritual played in early modern England, and in particular on the Shakespearean stage. Focusing on the dead march, Cummings elucidates how the Elizabethan stage forged a pseudo-medieval ritual which was then taken up in actual funerals offstage; this complex interaction between ritual and theatrical mimesis shows not only how historic boundaries are crossed, but also that the widespread assumption that the theatre "empties out" religious ritual needs to be rethought. Cummings shares Munro's interest in the temporal patchwork of Shakespeare's history plays, in particular in the moments of "Reformation prolepsis" concerning funeral rituals, which undercut theatrical medievalism, for instance in *Richard III*. The invention of the dead march at the same time demonstrates an investment in ritual in post-Reformation culture that should not, Cummings argues, be explained as Catholic survivalism and nostalgic medievalism, and hence as a remnant of the past. Instead, we need to acknowledge that in English Protestant culture, including the theatre, new forms of ritual and a new investment in the sacred emerged; Findlay makes a similar point for wedding rites in Protestant England. Therefore, Cummings proposes, "'medieval Shakespeare' may be one way of giving greater depth and subtlety to an understanding of religion in Shakespeare" and in Reformation England.

Concentrating on *Much Ado about Nothing* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, Findlay's article looks at wedding rituals, which involve a temporal synchronicity of their own: in Findlay's words, they are "constructed prospectively as nostalgia for the life to come" by drawing on a long ceremonial tradition, thus merging past, present and future. Even for wedding parties today, the "day to remember" is frequently modelled on (however forged) notions of the medieval, for instance by promising the bride a marriage like "a medieval princess in a stunning castle." Findlay explores how medieval notions of the wedding rite, as recorded in the eleventh-century Sarum Rite, kept influencing Shakespeare's contemporaries. She argues that the maimed service in *Much Ado* is particularly interesting for the investigation of the sacramental changes in early modern England for several reasons: it calls attention

to the differences between the Catholic and the Reformed ceremonies – for instance, the difference between "being married" and "marrying". What is more, Claudio's rejection of Hero as impure can be seen as invalidation of the powerful medieval ideal of marriage as divine mystery, that is, as the incarnation of the union between Christ and the Church. Findlay proposes that the invalidation of this fundamental ideal, which tacitly kept underpinning the marriage rites, has traumatic consequences not only for the bride, but also for the witnesses on and off stage. The second ceremony at the end of the play can hardly recuperate this traumatic impact, as Findlay argues with respect both to the play text and its rich history of performance on the stage and the screen.

Temporality is of crucial importance for music, too, and it is musicality that the final contribution of this volume turns to. Examining *The Merchant of Venice*, Claudia Olk elucidates the complex manner in which Shakespeare draws on medieval musicology, which was itself indebted to ancient theory. Music has multiple functions in Shakespeare's play: it serves as a major agent of transformation and it is used to support the play's dramaturgy both by the actual playing of music and by the employment of musical patterns for the language and the structure of the play, which is based on musical models of harmony and disharmony, of symmetry and of counterpoint. Moreover, Olk argues that Shakespeare draws on music's twofold importance as both a material (that is, audible) and an immaterial (the inaudible, mathematically perfect harmony of the spheres) phenomenon for his thematic exploration of the dialectics of the material and the immaterial in *The Merchant*.

From a variety of perspectives, the contributions to this special issue hence demonstrate how vital the medieval is for understanding the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries – while they at the same time show that we can hardly speak of "*the* medieval", but need to be careful to differentiate between the spheres and discourses (religious, literary, theatrical, juridical, musical) under consideration as much as the exact time and the place we refer to. What is more, we need to keep in mind that for Shakespeare and many of his contemporaries who had no clear vision of the Middle Ages or might never have heard the term, the scope of this volume would have been not just far from self-explanatory, but absolutely mystifying.

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