Introduction: Medieval and medievalist practice

The old chair

We begin with the critical reception of a chair, an ordinary object that escaped notice for over six hundred years. Only in 1989, at the height of what are somewhat portentously called the theory wars, did a noted critic of medieval literature, Derek Pearsall, turn his attention to this medieval chair, and with it an old problem: the relationship between literary and historical method, and the hermeneutic complexity of reading medieval texts. He isolated a compelling moment in the narrative of the Rising of 1381 – a fragment of text from the *Anonimalle Chronicle* in which a bill prepared by King Richard's clerks was read to the Commons: 'And he caused it to be read to them, the man who read it standing up on an old chair above the others so that all could hear.'[1] In Pearsall's analysis, 'this has the air of something seen, not invented: the arbitrariness of the old chair carries authenticity'.[2] Pearsall characterises his encounter with this representation of the medieval past as if it were in some sense already informed by our customary familiarity with that past. Being a careful critic, however, he admits that the old chair might well be more ideological invention than authentic detail.[3] It was possible that the chronicler was signalling a new era of feudal relations by having the king's representative improvise a new speaking position by climbing up on the 'old' past.

Calling attention to the customary, but arbitrary, distinction between 'historical' and 'literary' ways of reading and studying the past, Pearsall shows how this distinction is both shaky at the level of method, and even more unstable when it comes to assessing the truth of historical sources. Chroniclers such as Froissart, for instance, may have freely invented whole episodes. Pearsall is nevertheless unwilling to surrender completely to the hermeneutics of suspicion. As he writes, 'in the midst of these fantasies of "theory-impregnated" image-making it is necessary to recall that

all of these chroniclers are describing an actual event and that at the heart of all of their accounts must be some stubborn, irreducible core of actuality'.[4] His assertion about the actuality of the past and our ability to recuperate it, whether we use the 'modes of understanding' customary to either historical or literary study, is twinned with his insistence that both modes need to recognise 'the shaping power of interpretative models'.[5]

Pearsall was addressing what Cary Wolfe would later describe as the 'modes and protocols by which … [historical] materials are disciplined' and 'given form'.[6] Pearsall's residual claim about the authenticity of the old chair speaks not just to the epistemological relations between literary and historical method. It is also relevant to more recent discussions as to the ways historical texts and objects can both express their own time, and also express what Paul Strohm calls 'multiple and contradictory temporalities'. Strohm urges 'a refined appreciation of the unruly multiplicity of ways in which history can manifest itself within a text'.[7] We think that invitation might be extended to consider the unruly variety of relationships between the medieval past and post-medieval versions of that past.

As a curious, affective hook for modern readers, the old chair feeds the desire shared by the historical and medievalist imagination to feel, touch and see the medieval past in all its dramatic immediacy, whether that impulse is creative or more scholarly. This episode certainly appeals to the archivist's excitement about seeing an authentic source in an authentic context: the moment when one medieval document (the king's bill) appears embedded in another (the chronicle); and when that same document is also being handled by a medieval body in front of other medieval bodies. But such detail also helps us imagine and 'see' the medieval: and this is the work of the medievalist imaginary.

This chair is a powerful token of the past because it is old in an 'unruly multiplicity' of ways. The chair was old when it was medieval, but it is now also old because it was medieval. If it was already old in 1381 it also invites inevitable comparison with the oldness of chairs in 2018. A chair now might be 'old' because it is aged and shabby, and out of fashion; but it might also be a treasured heirloom with strong family or personal associations. It might be a desirable object of heritage value, a rare antique survival or an item of retro fashion. Or it might be 'old' in even more contradictory ways. It might be a cunning product of medievalism, such as the 'Sussex' and 'Rossetti' rush-seated chairs produced by William Morris in the 1860s. These medieval-style chairs were among the

most affordable and most popular items in his company's catalogue. They were sold for as little as 10 or 15 shillings, making it relatively easy for consumers to share in the flourishing global business of medievalism in household design, an early example of the modern heritage economy.[8] These chairs have now become valued museum pieces, yet chairs in this style are also mass-produced for contemporary consumers desiring a taste – and the touch – of the 'old'. This is a form of desire we think has many affinities with the chronicler's pleasure in the old chair.

Old chairs are like old books, old textiles, old songs, old buildings and old stories in that they carry strong affective loads for anyone interested in the medieval past, whether that interest is scholarly or amateur, and whether it is driven by historically oriented scholarship or the desire to possess, or to make, something medieval. Pearsall never mentions medievalism, of course. He uses this chair as a point of focus to think about the relationship between literary and historical method; we invoke it to reconfigure the relationship between medieval and medievalist studies, to suggest that despite many appearances to the contrary, both formations often share a similar desire to 'touch' and 'feel' the past in some way. Moreover, we argue, and hope to show, that the practices and desires of medievalism can help us see more clearly some of the customary distinctions and practices of medieval studies, and how much both formations share in common, especially in the traditions and practices of English literary studies. Here, for example, Pearsall's 'historical' and 'literary' approaches each owe something to what might be called a recuperative method normally associated with 'medieval studies', and a recreative method normally associated with 'medievalism'.

Through the desire to help modern students picture, feel and see the Middle Ages, medieval studies has always been served up with a healthy dollop of medievalism (even if its practitioners haven't always recognised this to be so). Both disciplines deal with a period called the Middle Ages (even if it's not completely clear when that was), and both are activated by a desire to connect in some way with this period. For many decades, the difference between the two disciplines has seemed to be this: while medievalism embraced playful, desirous, imaginative and creative practices, medieval studies (or at least its historicist strand) sometimes believed that our desire to recover the past, and the medieval meaning of medieval things, could be satisfied without reference to the post-medieval imagination. Yet, in the recent review essay on historicism and historicity

we have already quoted, Paul Strohm has sensibly echoed what a number of medievalists have been saying for some time now: however we might 'try and try' to recuperate the past, we will never be able to 'get it right'.[9] There will always be what Patricia Ingham has labelled a 'non-convergence' between the truth of the historical event and the knowledge that we produce about the event.[10] But far from indulging in a kind of melancholic hermeneutics, Ingham, Strohm and, notably, Aranye Fradenburg have suggested that we should embrace this state of affairs. As Strohm puts it, the knowledge that 'there's no finality in our interpretations, that we never nail it once and for all … is freeing, in its way',[11] for it enables our desire for the past to continue rather than terminate in some dead end of satisfaction. In practical terms this makes perfect sense, for it enables us to take pleasure in and vitalise the study of the Middle Ages at a moment when both pleasure and vitality are sorely needed. But framing our love and desire for the past in such a negative way seems problematic. As Ingham has suggested, even as we acknowledge the impossibility of producing an account of the past that is objectively true, we always seem to need to act 'as if' an objectively truthful account might be possible.[12]

One could certainly explain this 'as if' by calling it an 'enabling fiction', or by perhaps turning to an ideology of cynicism, a kind of ironic response of an enlightened false consciousness.[13] To put Peter Sloterdijk's idea of 'cynical reason' in medievalist terms, we know very well that the past can never truly be recuperated in all its historical specificity, yet medieval scholarship continues to act as if we are able to recover that past; and is often quick to criticise when medievalist projections appear to get it wrong. The past in this formulation is fantasmatic, projected but seemingly not, in a traditional historical sense, coincidental with the actual past.

So is this projection, that which occasions our desire even before we have attempted to satisfy it, simply false, or, less harshly, merely fictional? Ingham characterises it instead as 'misrecognition' – an impossible fantasy of possession – and Fradenburg suggests it as a 'prop' for desire.[14] We don't desire the object of desire. What we really desire, or rather what desire desires, is 'to keep on desiring'.[15] This move to an abstraction of desire certainly seems tenable in a descriptive sense. And, as Strohm points out, it might be seen as a good thing because it guarantees the continuation of medieval studies, along with all its ongoing institutional, disciplinary and pedagogic practices, and its well-established social identities. But as a call to arms, it seems a bit less persuasive. Even if medievalists

are unconsciously motivated by the endless deferral of desire, this is hardly a reason to encourage others or a convincing argument to enlist support for our work. In any case, the move to abstraction seems to elide the very historical particularities that make the work of medievalists like Fradenburg, Ingham and Strohm so compelling.

We advocate instead a more local – and personal – treatment of historicity, suggesting that if desire is motivated by a fantasmatic projection (the object of desire), then in the case of medievalism that projection perversely appears to be available to the desiring subject even before the subject attempts to discover it: this is the vision of medievalism that holds the medieval past always already available for cultural and imaginative recuperation. Such a vision precedes and informs the medieval even before we begin to pursue it in scholarly or creative ways.

Not everyone will agree with this vision of medievalism and the ontological priority we claim for it. To suggest that medievalism might be the pretext to the medieval is to invert the traditional view that the medieval is the starting-point of both the modern and the medievalist. It was, of course, Umberto Eco who first suggested a taxonomy of plural medievalisms, in his tremendously influential distinction between ten competing or variant representations of the Middle Ages: 'every time one speaks of a dream of the Middle Ages, one should first ask which Middle Ages one is dreaming of'.[16] Eco combines his hortation with an injunction that one must choose from his list of 'ten little Middle Ages'. To ignore his list is to fail to do our 'moral and cultural duty'. He expands on what this means when he says that 'to say openly which of the above ten types we are referring to means to say who we are and what we dream of'.[17] While Eco's taxonomy is, presumably, somewhat ironic, it has often been taken as a warning not to conceal who we are and what our (finitely numbered) dreams are for ourselves as well as other people. Behind Eco's playful injunction is a healthy suspicion of the use of the medieval – a belief that the ideological history of the medieval (what he calls at one point the new Aryanism) necessitates an openness that is fulfilled only if we know precisely, even before we speak of the Middle Ages, what we mean by the term.

And in many ways he was prescient about the dangers inherent in the uses of the Middle Ages. Medieval myths, narratives, images and heraldic insignia are regularly co-opted by white supremacist groups wanting to promote the medieval past as a period of

racial homogeneity or 'purity'. In the United States, the medieval has been invoked to legitimate the horrific deeds of the Ku Klux Klan. More recently, the so-called Alt-right has adopted symbols derived from the Holy Roman Empire and rhetoric supposedly borrowed from the First Crusade to advance their agenda of white supremacy. These more recent uses of the medieval have even led the normally apolitical Medieval Academy of America to condemn officially the abhorrent uses of the medieval as baseless fantasy: 'As scholars of the medieval world we are disturbed by the use of a nostalgic but inaccurate myth of the Middle Ages by racist movements in the United States. By using imagined medieval symbols, or names drawn from medieval terminology, they create a fantasy of a pure, white Europe that bears no relationship to reality. This fantasy not only hurts people in the present, it also distorts the past.'[18] There is no question that this use of the medieval is horrific. And there is also no question that white supremacists have no idea just how incredibly diverse the Middle Ages was. But for us it is puzzling that the Academy would base its condemnation on the fact that this view of the Middle Ages 'bears no relationship to reality'. The real problem with white supremacy is not that it didn't exist (even if it didn't), but that it is ethically wrong. Plenty of things actually did occur in the Middle Ages that we would, presumably, disavow.

So why would the Academy fall back on the distinction between fantasy and reality in order to legitimate what has been seen as an ethical truism? We might get a hint if we look back at Eco's list of Middle Ages, where hidden within his taxonomy is a privileged actor. Number eight on Eco's list of 'ten little Middle Ages' is 'the Middle Ages of *philological reconstruction* … which help us … to criticise all the other Middle Ages that one time or another arouse our enthusiasm'.[19] Eco is far from engaging in a simplistic distinction between a stable Middle Ages and different variable and partial elements of medieval culture that are emphasised by different groups of game-players, fiction-writers, film-makers and so on. But he certainly acknowledges the force of medieval studies as a critique of other examples of medievalism.

In what might be called 'professional academic circles' it has recently become fashionable to abjure such critique, in favour of a more tolerant understanding of creative and amateur medievalism. The academic landscape of the relationship between these fields is currently in process of radical change.[20] There are many versions of medievalism studies that are not grounded in

medieval studies as a primary discipline. Conversely, in recent years, medieval scholars have become far less anxious in print and formal academic discourse about the historical accuracy of creative medievalist fictions and films.[21] Nevertheless, the dominant discourse about medievalism is still an epistemological one: how do different groups process the truth about the Middle Ages? After all, the pleasurable impulse of the pedagogic and academic drive to correct mistakes never goes away, whether this is structured by the disciplinary regimes of the academy or driven by the hard-won expertise of the amateur medievalist, fiction-writer and film-maker for whom historical accuracy can be equally compelling.[22] Hilary Mantel, for example, has recently been critical of 'women writers who want to write about women in the past, but can't resist retrospectively empowering them. Which is false.'[23]

At the same time, the continued popularity of Eco's oneiric formulation ('Dreaming the Middle Ages') suggests that the many subsequent variations on 'making', 're-making', 'inventing' and 're-inventing' the Middle Ages have their basis in fantasy work. These re-makings gesture towards a doubled sense that the Middle Ages belong both to the past, as a phenomenon to be interpreted and studied; but also, in a more active sense, to the present, as a phenomenon that is always in process of being re-made. The subtitle of Tison Pugh and Angela Weisl's recent account of the field, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*, is a typical formulation.[24] The sense that the Middle Ages can be *made*, over and over again, has certainly been an enabling dynamic for modern fantasists who can see themselves as part of a long-standing historical tradition of medievalism that goes back at least as far as the nineteenth century. This tradition is enabling, rather than forbidding; it encourages repetition and rehearsal, rather than interpretative closure, or anything resembling 'the last word' on the medieval past. In this, too, medievalism resembles academic medieval studies. As with all academic fields, to declare its work might be complete would be tantamount to institutional and disciplinary suicide. And, in fact, more recent iterations of the connection between 'medievalism' and medieval studies suggest that the latter depends on the former to perpetuate itself: as David Matthews writes, 'what tends to happen over time is that medieval studies passes into medievalism; as it ceaselessly updates itself, medieval studies expels what it no longer wishes to recognize as part of itself'.[25] It becomes harder and harder, for example, not to

see the critical and ideological reception of Chaucer's works as an important document in the history of medievalism.

More radically, others have noted that this medievalist cycle need not be seen only in terms of abjection, but might actually reveal that 'over time, the stated professionalism of medieval studies tends to reveal itself as a subset of medievalism studies'.[26] In temporal terms, then, attempts to recuperate the medieval 'now' will at some future time be seen as less reflective of the Middle Ages and more reflective of the age in which the recuperation took place. Eco's Middle Ages of 'philological reconstruction' can then find its place *in time* within a list of medievalisms. It is a commonly held view that attempts to recuperate the Middle Ages tell us more about those doing the recuperating than the recuperated object. But is this right? It suggests a kind of endlessly regressive vision of literary and historical studies, if all views of our attempts to see, hear and feel the Middle Ages become merely mirrors of the moment when we attempted to reach out and 'touch the past'.[27]

Of course, there are different versions of medievalist practice. In 2005, one of us made the case for at least three forms of medievalism: traditional, modernist and postmodernist. Traditional medievalism is characterised by a 'sensibility [that] assumes that the meaning of this (medieval) object is palpably present to us, both then and now, through an unbroken lineage of embodied or ritualistic connection'. Here, continuity with the past is privileged. By contrast, modernist medievalism typically takes the form of reconstruction. 'Even if they romanticise the content of a "medieval past", modernists, or neo-traditionalists, in comparison to traditionalists, tend to be already modern in form, appealing to historiography, empiricism (much of medieval studies), and antiquarianism (Spenser).' By contrast, postmodernist medievalism manifests as 'an ironical reference or … romanticising pastiche, often condemned as ahistorical or simply "wrong" by old-fashioned historicists'.[28] But the most radical expression of such disconnect of medievalism from the period from which it takes its name has to be what many commentators describe as neomedievalism. Here we mean not so much the political neomedievalism that is described by Bruce Holsinger as 'an argumentative mode' in political theory, where it refers to contemporary projections of a Middle Ages of 'fragmented jurisdictions, amorphous violence, and pre-national sovereignty'.[29] Rather, we refer here to a kind of para- or meta-medievalism that borrows, uses and deploys other medievalisms rather than claiming any direct connection to the Middle Ages.

Neomedievalism tends to be associated even more strongly than medievalism with mass and popular culture, and digital media, and this is a further potential source of division and disconnection from the tactile 'real' world of the medieval archive (a book, a manuscript, a building, an old chair). Further, neomedievalist works, in the words of Harry Brown, 'foster the commodification and mass consumption of the past rather than the earnest attempt to recover and understand it'.[30] Neomedievalist scholars argue that, since the proper object of study for neomedievalism is other medievalisms, neomedievalism constitutes a field separate from traditional studies in medievalism. So, for instance, Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale*, with its deliberate anachronisms (medieval courtiers rocking to the music of Queen, the invocation of the Nike swoosh on William Thatcher's armour), 'spurns nostalgia in preference for a "new and improved alternate universe"'.[31]

One could certainly reject nostalgic longing for the past in the study of works like *A Knight's Tale*, but, as we have shown elsewhere, it's well to remember that such works are often not only the product of a desire to connect with the past, but a belief that such connection is possible.[32] Critics might debate what this is and how it works, but it is important to acknowledge, at least, the pervasive nature of medievalism.[33]

As might be apparent, the impulses governing the different forms of scholarship and activity in this field vary widely. Andrew Cole, Bruce Holsinger, D. Vance Smith and others are deeply interested in how the Middle Ages informs the theoretical and philosophical foundations of modernity and postmodernity.[34] Neomedievalists tend to be interested in a kind of technological presentism. Many practitioners of modern medievalism are often more descriptive – focusing on how particular instantiations of romantic, modern and contemporary medievalism function as representations or ideological arguments within a particular period; while some scholars simply insist on the importance of tradition and continuity with the medieval past. With so many different agendas, ways of working and even different critical objects it seems impossible to think of a singular 'medievalism'. But we think that all these forms share a kind of family resemblance – in their uneasy and sometimes discontented dialectic between past and present – that is more significant than the ways in which they vary.

For us, much of the uneasiness produced by medievalism results from uncertainty about the relationship between the past and the present. Paradoxically, this uncertainty is the result of the very

claim that medievalism makes on the past (that is, whether or how it is connected with that past). Further, within various examples of medievalism there is often a meta-moment in which the particular instance of medievalism reveals its own anxiety about such claims. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these moments often reference affect – drawing attention to the circumstances surrounding the reception of the work itself. The mention of the old chair is one such moment. It conjured something memorable for the medieval chronicler; and for us too, it pleats the temporal gap between what 'old' might look and feel like in the fourteenth and the twenty-first century.

'What now?' Medievalism and the uncanny

The possibilities of affective relationships with the past and their connections to knowledge and historical understanding were famously explored by Carolyn Dinshaw in her treatment of the idea of 'getting medieval' (from Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*).[35] But it is easy to forget the embedded narrative context of Marcellus's suggestion that he was going to 'git medieval on your ass'.[36] It comes in response to a question from his erstwhile saviour, Butch: 'what now?' After Marcellus's response that he is going to 'git medieval' on 'hillbilly boy's ass', after he is raped in an S/M 'dungeon', Butch responds, 'I meant what now between me and you?' Marcellus's response, 'Oh, that what now. I tell you what now between me and you. There is no me and you.'[37] The scene clearly makes manifest the homoerotic implications between Butch and Marcellus and focuses on the break between them as a break-up. But it also invokes the 'what now' inherent in the 'between'. This invocation of temporality as a space 'in the middle' works on two levels. It suggests the impossibility of separating the 'now' from the in between, but it also suggests that for there to be a between there needs to be the 'you and me' that, as Marcellus suggests, still exists between him and 'hillbilly boy'. It is in this space that Marcellus is able to 'get medieval'. Here, as Dinshaw shows, the implications of 'getting medieval' are indeed troubling.

Dinshaw tells us 'the medieval … is the space of the rejects – really the abjects – of the world'.[38] 'Getting medieval' is 'go[ing] to work on homes here with a pair of pliers and a blowtorch', comparable to the provisions of torture prescribed in the thirteenth-century *Li livres jostice et de plet*. This similitude between the now and the then is rich material for us, as this likeness of medievalism

and the medieval invites us to consider the relationship between them. At times they appear very similar, but is it truly possible to collapse the two formations? Even Dinshaw, we think, voices some hesitation here, claiming that the twentieth-century torture that is described as 'getting medieval' is 'rather like' thirteenth-century torture.[39] She gives expression to one of the central tenets of what Sigmund Freud describes as 'das Unheimlich' or the uncanny. Freud characterises the uncanny as 'nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed'.[40] The experience of the uncanny hinges on a kind of intellectual hesitation (*Unsicherheit*) when the subject returns to the familiar that has been repressed, and experiences the profound ambivalence that links the *Heimlich* to the *Unheimlich*. In such moments, other oppositions begin to break down as well. As Elisabeth Bronfen puts it, 'whether something is real or imagined, unique, original or a repetition, a copy, can not be decided'.[41] For Dinshaw this 'dungeon' is peculiarly 'now' and yet '*rather* like' the past (our emphasis). Her hesitation here has much to do with the way that this setting participates in a gothic sensibility. The trappings of the medieval (dungeons, chains, torture devices) are here, but this is not meant to be a medieval setting. One dominant version of gothic, as one of us has put it elsewhere, is 'a non-historical sensibility, a mode of consciousness preoccupied with the repressed'.[42] The medieval here exists under the sign of all that is irrational and primitive. As modern subjects it is absolutely crucial to distinguish ourselves from the medieval and yet there often arises an uncanny and uncomfortable recognition that we are not so different after all.[43]

Medievalists have long understood the power of the uncanny to describe aspects of the medieval period.[44] The *Unheimlich* is often used as a convenient shorthand to signify the profound alterity of the Middle Ages even as the medievalist makes it clear that this alterity somehow makes us feel at home. Yet, in his analysis of the Middle English household imaginary, D. Vance Smith puts his finger on why this concept is so powerful when he says that the experience of the uncanny is 'that which threaten[s] to undo the self'.[45] The ability of the self to define itself, indeed to exist, always relies on the ability of the other to oppose the self and say what it is not. But in the case of the uncanny one cannot decide whether the other is actually strange or familiar. The strange familiarity of the Middle Ages is particularly problematic because it destabilises our sense of time and the changes it might or might not have wrought.

The problem is our understanding of what we call the 'now'. To the subject in the now it seems perfectly self-evident what the present is: it is here and not there, and it is the now and not then. The past is behind us and the future lies ahead of us. In some ways, our reading of time has already informed us as subjects. But the experience of the uncanny should remind us that the now as a fulcrum for thinking about time is a lot less stable than we suppose. Henri Bergson suggests that the now is never stable, but is always in a state of becoming. Gilles Deleuze interrogates conventional temporal grammar, claiming that the 'past, present and future were not at all three parts of a single temporality, but that they rather formed two readings of time each of which is complete and excludes the other'.[46] In one reading, the present absorbs the past and the future into an eternal now or series of nows. In this reading the 'past and the future indicate only the relative difference between two presents'.[47] In the other reading, 'the present is nothing'. All that exists is the past and future into which the present is divided.[48] Bruno Latour goes further, uncoupling the traditional associations of linear temporality with teleology and progression, and destabilising the very concept of modernity on which the medieval depends.[49]

Yet despite the sophistication with which philosophers and critics have theorised time, modern or even classical notions of time prove remarkably durable.[50] As Dinshaw has suggested in her most recent book, 'the present moment is more temporally heterogeneous than academically disciplined, historically minded scholars tend to let on'.[51] So why does this conservative view of time persist? Part of the reason, as we will see, is institutional. Many medievalists are invested in a theory of time that requires what Dinshaw has characterised as professional time. Certain protocols define the professionals' approach to time. These protocols and the practices that surround them buttress institutional and professional identity. Dinshaw argues for the disruption of this identity and the theory of time in which it is implicated by looking outside the 'profession' to 'amateurs' who have a lot to tell us about the queer possibilities of time.

We would not disagree, but we are also aware that neither highly theoretical interventions nor a call to take non-professional thought seriously will be enough to move large groups of medievalists to change the way that they approach time and the past, While there are many medievalists who are not content with traditional approaches to history, there are many more who are disturbed to

see the boundaries between medieval and its -ism, between past and present, becoming unstable (even if they do not express this view in public), just as there are many medievalists who are deeply concerned with historical accuracy in the way they portray, for example, the speech and customs of the Middle Ages.[52]

Sophisticated readers of medieval and medievalist texts may well admit that on an intellectual level time is a lot more complicated than it seems, but there's still something about more classical approaches to time that feels right. The past seems … past, not easily touchable without subtle mediation. At the same time, many of these texts hold out hope that we can re-experience this past. Both feelings are in some sense fictional. We might be able to hold a medieval manuscript in our hands, but it is still only a fragment and a trace of the past. When we read about the creation of a machine that can travel through time, we experience the *frisson* of believing that it might be possible while also recognising its impossibility. This book is concerned with the dialectic between these two fictions. Our approach will often be affective and intuitive – largely based on how our feeling of time is elicited by medieval and medievalist texts. It is, in fact, part of our thesis that a number of these texts meditate on time precisely to implicate their readers in a theory or theories of time.[53] St Augustine was well aware that thinking about time could do strange things to a person: 'What then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain time to an inquirer, I do not know.'[54] Many of the fictions and practices of medievalism participate in the same paradox.

If medievalism is a kind of relationship to time, it can only be recollected in the doing of it. Medievalism is an action, or a practice, rather than a firm epistemological or ontological category and thus cannot be defined in opposition to, or the abjection of, what one might consider the 'really' medieval. In recent years, scholars such as John Ganim, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, David Wallace and, of course, Carolyn Dinshaw have all made the case for understanding on a theoretical level what medievalism is in order to have an appreciation of the medieval, and it has been one of the founding principles of the journal *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* (2010–) 'to develop a more present-minded medieval studies and a more historically-minded cultural studies'.[55] We too have made theoretical claims about the mutual imbrication of medieval studies and medievalism. Yet what links these different kinds of medievalism to the medieval remains contested. We need

to cast our net wider. We need to capture not only epistemological and epistemic questions of periodisation, knowledge of the past and changing attitudes to the medieval. We also need to work with a lively sense of the changing disciplinary and institutional contexts of medieval studies, the various practices of medievalism inside and beyond the academy, and indeed the current state of the humanities. And we also need to capture the affective history of our disciplines: the love, the abjection and the discontent that variously frame our approaches to the medieval past, and to each other.

Feeling our way to the Middle Ages

Part of the issue, of course, is that it's difficult to know what we are connecting to. The Middle Ages suggests a transitional space rather than any coherent and well-defined period. It is tempting to call up the familiar claim – so attractive to a victim mentality – that the 'middleness' of the Middle Ages is simply a product of Renaissance humanism – an attempt to abject all of that which separates us from the wonders of the classical period. This runs the risk of buying into a host of categorical imperatives that abject and/or nostalgically recollect the medieval period. Collectively these imperatives reify divisions that are often more pragmatic than epistemological and gesture towards a view of history that is insistently whiggish, always and already leaving the past behind for a better future.[56] In ethical terms, this notion of progress privileges formations such as the modern state and secularised politics, leading us back into an abjection of all things medieval.[57] Medievalists of all stripes certainly know very well the dangers of indulging in the fantasy of a coherent period defined by being a 'middle', yet we continue to speak of the Middle Ages as if it actually existed, even though many would resist saying when and where it began and ended. Are we then, as Octavio Mannoni might suggest, simply indulging in a fetishistic disavowal that ultimately screens 'the way things really are'?[58] On one level we would say yes. Periodisation enables us to talk pragmatically about slices of history, but it also disables our capacity to see the connections between these different slices.

Does this mean that we should attempt to break through the ideological mist and show how the Middle Ages is really continuous with the periods that come before and after? We argue that this would be to misunderstand the nature of ideologically based periodisation. If the medieval is an ideological construction, then questions about when the Middle Ages ends, or whether it has ever

ended, will enable us only 'to confirm our so-called "unconscious prejudices" with additional rationalizations'.[59]

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that at the head of all the various ideologies that we will discuss in this volume lies the very idea of the boundary – the creation of time as space. To speak of the medieval, or of medievalism, even of neomedievalism, is to acknowledge this boundary. Thus, the discontent, or the unease, with which we approach the boundary of the Middle Ages is actually a symptom of the creation of the Middle Ages that is the perpetual practice of medievalism. To comprehend what we mean by the Middle Ages, we must understand the root of the unease with which we approach these boundaries, as they are erected, breached, ignored and erased. In a sense this is perfectly obvious to all those practitioners who have been examining things 'at the margins', and 'in the middle', but from another point of view the issue of boundaries has always seemed to be a problem, a constant nagging issue that seemingly detracts from our ability to visit the past, or to feel our way into medieval sensibilities.

In our first chapter we will consider the ways that the intertwined concepts of temporality and spatiality have produced the dominant compound idea of the Middle Ages as a place in time, apart from modernity and as if prior to medievalism. But temporal difference is also an affective issue, and throughout this book we will stress the various feelings and temperaments that affect the way we approach the Middle Ages.

Affective histories of the past are becoming increasingly common. The history of emotions is a burgeoning field of inquiry, and the field of medieval studies is no exception.[60] This is a field that encourages self-reflection, though it seems that the traditional impersonal rigour associated with medieval studies has inhibited most scholars from foregrounding their own emotional responses to the past. Such forays into the expression of personal feeling have not always met with approval, as we will show in chapter 4. But we argue that both medieval and medievalism studies are driven by powerful affective forces in their mutual relationships with each other and with the past they study. In particular, the chapters that follow work through the three emotions we name in our sub-title: love, abjection and discontent.

We have begun by invoking some of the different forms of love and desire for the past, and this will be a constant theme throughout: the way various writers, scholars and practitioners express their love and desire for the Middle Ages, its objects and

its texts, and how those desires also shape the various practices of medievalism. But if we are often drawn to the *medium aevum*, it is just as common to abject and dismiss it, to rehearse a personal or cultural movement away from the medieval past. This push–pull dynamic of feeling has had a profound shaping force on medievalism, especially in the early modern period, but has also had a lasting effect on medieval studies and the vexed relationship between the two, leading to the third feeling on which we focus: discontent.

Discontent in medievalism can take many forms: discontent with one's own time or discontent with the limited ability to 'touch' another time; or indeed, with the indeterminacy between the literal and metaphorical aspects of such touching. These forms of discontents are often linked, and this is one of our guiding questions: what links the discontent of historical recovery with the discontent of imaginative recreation? And as we will show, there remains a large amount of disciplinary and institutional discontent on all sides of medieval and medievalist practice.

Our first chapter opens with a problem in medievalist texts that has hampered their attempts to connect with the past: that is, their tendency to be at once complicit in their abjection as merely medievalist, or secondary, texts and yet to insist on their magical ability to recuperate the past by actively investigating a past that remains unchanged and unknowing. This ambivalence at first seems to be limited to texts such as the clearly 'medievalist' *A Dream of John Ball* in which the protagonist can dreamily conjure up the past. It is most visible in the 'portal medievalism' we identify in works such as *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* that enable modern subjects to enter a fantasy of a 'medievalist' world. But in fact, these texts only enact and perhaps are generated by the medievalist phenomena that already exist in medieval texts themselves. *Sir Orfeo*, for instance, portrays its hero as entering into the magical land of faery in what might be seen as a very conventional iteration of the Otherworld narrative. At the same time, as a rewriting of the Orpheus story it references and is enfolded in a series of temporalities that marks it out as an action: a conscious medievalising of the medievals. The disciplinary relationship between the medieval and medievalist is put under pressure here by practices already at work within medieval literature and its textual and critical traditions.

In chapter 2 we turn to the question of the medieval 'real' and the manner in which the rejection of objective magic (initially voiced by Renaissance humanists) has tended to skew our

understandings of medieval relics, influentially coding medieval 'belief' as simplistic and naive. We make the case that the feelings and beliefs brought on by these objects need to be taken seriously not only as a kind of post-medieval reception history of the object, but as a way in which the object attempts to communicate the past to us. As we think of medievalism as a form of practice, or action, rather than an ontological category, this leads us to the interpretation of material culture. Specifically, we look at how the properties of objects inevitably seem to bind us 'magically' to the past. This invocation of magic is generally met with a rationalistic recounting of the delusions brought on by such demented assertions. We take issue with these concerns about the 'inventions' (especially medieval) that accompany medieval objects such as relics, and conclude by making the case for an 'objective' history that is attentive to mood and affect.

Chapter 3 addresses the fear and abjection engendered by humanist approaches to history in the early modern period by diagnosing the fear generated by our attempts to recuperate the past as deriving not only from a fear of error but from a fear of death, as it was for the medievals. This death itself engenders fear because of its alien, unknowable nature, as becomes clear in the ritualistic invocation, 'timor mortis conturbat me' (the fear of death disturbs me). At the same time, the confusion that we feel in the face of death leads us to understand that this connects us with the past. Our attempts to control death via medievalist recreation, then, have the flavour of Freud's *fort-da* – a game that is as ancient as the Middle Ages itself as we encounter it in sources as various as Margery Kempe and William Dunbar.

In chapter 4, we examine the mechanism of affect as a potentially liberating way to 'touch' the Middle Ages. Specifically, we examine the ways in which affect in the post-medieval world engages and enables an understanding of the past. This chapter focuses primarily on the 'love' of Horace Walpole, the 'enthusiasm' of F. J. Furnivall and contemporary 'desirings' for the past. We make the case that this subjective understanding of the past need not be dismissed as inauthentic necromantic desire, or merely a narcissistic projection. Instead, it should be understood as a medium, that which makes possible our journey into the past: something, moreover, that was understood in the Middle Ages as a means by which the past could transmit itself to us.

In chapter 5 we offer some final speculations about the uncertain future of medieval and medievalism studies. We suggest that

the general discontent this book diagnoses might well be seen as exemplary for many forms of historicist study within the humanities. Further, we suggest that attending to the connection between medieval and medievalist ideas about the university might well inform a postmodern response to the crisis in the humanities and the rapid corporatisation of higher education.

Notes

1 Pearsall, 'Interpretive models', p. 67.
2 Pearsall, 'Interpretive models', p. 67.
3 Specifically, he suggests that it might 'carry some impression of impropriety and indignity which enhances the image of the reversal of order' ('Interpretive models', p. 67).
4 Pearsall, 'Interpretive models', p. 67.
5 Pearsall, 'Interpretive models', p. 69.
6 Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, p. 106, quoted in Strohm, 'Historicity without historicism?', p. 382.
7 Strohm, 'Historicity without historicism?', pp. 381–2.
8 Burdick, *William Morris*, pp. 69–71.
9 Strohm, 'Historicity without historicism?', p. 387.
10 Ingham, 'Amorous dispossessions', p. 15.
11 Strohm, 'Historicity without historicism?', p. 387.
12 Ingham is responding to a claim made by Fradenburg in *Sacrifice Your Love*, pp. 44–5.
13 See, for instance, the work of Peter Sloterdijk as represented in Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 319.
14 Ingham, 'Amorous dispossessions', p. 20; Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, p. 5.
15 Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, p. 5.
16 Eco, 'Dreaming of the Middle Ages', p. 68.
17 Eco, 'Dreaming of the Middle Ages', p. 72.
18 www.themedievalacademyblog.org/medievalists-respond-to-charlottesville/, accessed 8 November 2017.
19 Eco, 'Dreaming of the Middle Ages', p. 71. This is also something that David Matthews seems to recognise, in *Medievalism*, p. 17. For further discussion, see the debate between Bruce Holsinger and Stephanie Trigg in *postmedieval*, 1:3 (2010).
20 The work of Carolyn Dinshaw in *How Soon Is Now?* is crucial here. We discuss this book in chapter 1. But for another perspective, see also Cramer, *Medieval Fantasy as Performance*. Cramer writes as both academic observer and participant in the Society for Creative Anachronism.
21 See for example, the overview of recent changing views of anachronism in Rouse, 'Rethinking anachronism'. A similar point is made by the editors of this volume in their introduction, p. 2.

22 See for example, the work of Bildhauer, *Filming the Middle Ages* and Forni, *Chaucer's Afterlife*.
23 Furness, 'Hilary Mantel'.
24 Pugh and Weisl, *Medievalisms*. The book is 'a study of how the Middle Ages is continually reborn in subsequent centuries and of the persistent tropes that create this magical past' (p. 6).
25 Matthews, 'Chaucer's American accent', p. 759.
26 Emery and Utz (eds), *Medievalism*, p. 7.
27 The phrase is used memorably by Carolyn Dinshaw in *Getting Medieval*, passim.
28 Trigg, 'Once and future medievalism'.
29 Holsinger, 'Neomedievalism and international relations', p. 165. For further disambiguation of this term, see Lukes, 'Comparative neomedievalisms'.
30 Brown, 'Baphomet incorporated', p. 1.
31 Marshall, 'Neomedievalism', p. 24, quoting Robinson and Clements, 'Living with neomedievalism', p. 66.
32 See especially Helgeland's series of assertions that though he threw away much of his research into the Middle Ages in favour of artistic invention, the film was still 'medieval', in Prendergast and Trigg, 'The negative erotics of medievalism'.
33 In a recent issue of *postmedieval* devoted to the medievalism of nostalgia, Renée Trilling and Carolyn Dinshaw engage in a bit of give and take about the possibilities of nostalgia. Trilling takes a somewhat psychoanalytical view in arguing that nostalgic desire for the past and our disciplinary coding of the past as other set up a dialectic which refuses to choose between whether the 'medieval is truly past or always present' ('Medievalism and its discontents', p. 223). Dinshaw is more hopeful about nostalgia, calling for a 'critical nostalgia' in which the boundary between past and present is not nearly so well drawn as we might expect ('Nostalgia on my mind', p. 238). Though Trilling and Dinshaw disagree about the promise of nostalgia, and its relationship to temporality and temporal sequencing, they fundamentally agree about the centrality of nostalgia to medievalism.
34 Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition*; Cole and Smith (eds), *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages*.
35 Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*.
36 Tarantino (dir.), *Pulp Fiction*.
37 Tarantino (dir.), *Pulp Fiction*.
38 Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, p. 186.
39 That Dinshaw is aware that modern implements of torture and indeed the context itself is 'only' analogous becomes apparent a few pages later when she points out that 'the punishment for sodomy was castration for the first offense, death by fire for repeat offenders – rather like pliers and a blow torch' (*Getting Medieval*, p. 185).

40 Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 148.
41 Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, p. 113.
42 Trigg, 'Introduction', p. xix.
43 Our understanding of the medieval period via the gothic, as Chris Baldick has asserted, rests primarily on those eighteenth-century literary texts 'concerned with the brutality, cruelty, and superstition of the Middle Ages' (*The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, p. xii).
44 A quick look at some recent uses of the idea of the *Unheimlich* by medievalists might include Cohen, *Of Giants*, pp. 25, 145; Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, p. 70; Prendergast, *Chaucer's Dead Body*, pp. 71–84.
45 Smith, *Arts of Possession*, p. 44.
46 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 72.
47 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 73.
48 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 73.
49 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 47.
50 As Dinshaw points out, Michel Serres characterises linear, measurably constant time as 'classical time' (*How Soon Is Now?*, p. 8).
51 Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?*, p. xiv.
52 See, for example, the essays by fiction writers Robyn Cadwallader, Gillian Polack and Eric Jager in the special issue of *postmedieval* on historical fiction, *postmedieval* 7:2 (2016).
53 Theoreticians of time have routinely used fictions to lead their audiences to think through time. The most obvious example is Friedrich Nietzsche's meditation on the eternal return in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, but contemporary philosophers such as Bernard Stiegler have seen fiction (or in his case myth) as more than illustrative – as instantiations of historical understandings of temporality that resonate in the here and now (*Technics and Time*). Henri Bergson, in fact, constructed his work *Matière et mémoire* as a fiction, saying that when we read his work we have to pretend (*feindre*) that we have no preconceptions of the real, the ideal, matter and spirit in order to experience the idea of time in which he wishes to immerse us (p. 11). The idea was to replace so-called pure and objective approaches to temporality that purportedly stood outside of time with experiential understandings of time within time. See Alipaz, 'Merleau-Ponty's Bergson', pp. 66–83. And for a more autobiographical discussion of the 'time' of the medieval scholar working with a disability, see Godden, 'Getting medieval in real time', pp. 267–77.
54 Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 230.
55 This aim appears with minor variations on the frontispiece of the journal, as the mission statement of the BABEL working group that edits the journal.
56 Compare Patterson in *Negotiating the Past*.
57 Davis, 'The sense of an epoch', pp. 39–69.

58   Mannoni, 'I know well', pp. 68–92.
59   Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 48. For a recent assertion
     about how 'we have always been medieval', see Cole and Smith
     (eds), 'Introduction: outside modernity', *The Legitimacy of the Middle
     Ages*, p. 24.
60   Key texts for the history of medieval emotions include Rosenwein,
     Anger's Past, *Emotional Communities* and *Generations of Feeling*;
     McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval
     Compassion*; Nagy and Bouquet, *Sensible Moyen Age*; and Downes and
     McNamara, 'The history of emotions and Middle English literature'.
     For medievalism, see Utz, *Medievalism: A Manifesto*, pp. 3–4.