INTRODUCTION:
QUESTIONING EARLY MODERN MEDIEVALISMS

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When we encounter the medieval in early modern culture, what do we see? Do we find a more or less deliberate use of and reflection upon the Middle Ages along the lines of what, over the past decades, we have come to call ‘medievalism’? Do we find a re-creation of past times nostalgically praised as a native antiquity or, instead, denounced as the embodiment of ignorance for a renaissance to distinguish itself from? Or do we find a continuation of processes and practices that we today are used to identifying as medieval, but that may or may not have been perceived as such during the early modern period? What uses of the medieval and whose medievalism do we see in our early modern studies?

The concept of medievalism has, during the past few decades, given rise to a new subfield within literary and cultural studies. Leslie Workman, whose creation in 1979 of the journal Studies in Medievalism played a central role in the institutionalization of the field, was also one of the first to attempt to define the concept. On the most basic level, medievalism, he maintained, is ‘the study of the Middle Ages on the one hand, and the use of the Middle Ages in everything from fantasy to social reform on the other’.¹ Medievalism might accordingly be said to be restricted to the explicit negotiation with a shared construct called ‘the Middle Ages’. Crucially, such study and use of the Middle Ages also defines what the Middle Ages actually are: ‘medieval historiography, the study of the successive recreations of the Middle Ages by different generations, is the Middle Ages. And this of course is medievalism’.² Workman’s explanation thus emphasizes the field’s generative characteristic: by seeking to re-create, studies and artistic productions actually create the Middle Ages in the process.

² Ibid.
Other, later uses of the term medievalism focus more specifically on the historiography of scholarship dealing with the Middle Ages, and the ways in which this historiography may invite present-day scholars to re-evaluate accepted interpretations of specific medieval texts or traditions. Thus, the studies produced by the ‘New Medievalists’ of the 1990s typically dealt with the careers of the first nineteenth- and early twentieth-century academics who studied the Middle Ages and their literature. While the medievalism that originated around Workman in the 1970s paid particular attention to texts and traditions originating in the English-speaking world, the New Medievalism of the 1990s focused more frequently on continental Europe and France. And whereas the first school generated – and indeed continues to generate – case studies with a largely empirical focus, the latter sought also to relate the historiography of medieval studies to present-day theoretical debates. Yet despite these differences, both schools share a number of basic traits. Both share a concern with textuality and an interest in literary texts that surely help to explain why medievalism succeeded in gaining institutional respectability in the 1980s and 1990s, decades also marked by the combined influence of cultural studies and the new historicism. Both schools also share as their starting-point the idea that the Middle Ages – or the medieval, as we would prefer to term them here – are themselves a historical construct, and need always to be understood with reference to the culturally and historically determined interests of those engaged in studying them.

‘Old’ and ‘new’ medievalists, finally, share also a similar chronological framework, and it is this that the present volume would like to question. Indeed, a quick glance at some representative publications shows that medievalist studies are overwhelmingly focused on the modern period. The landmark volume produced by the New Medievalists in 1996, *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper*, contains seventeen essays, of which eleven focus exclusively on the nineteenth or twentieth century. This, of course, is because the authors estimate that serious academic study of the Middle Ages started only in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Germanic philology took root. Recent volumes of *Studies in Medievalism* display a similar slant.3 Leslie Work-

3 For instance, of the seven case studies published in the *Studies in Medievalism* 2009 volume, one deals with the period before 1800, while in the 2008 volume, two of the ten articles deal with the early modern period.