

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 15 (January 2015), No. 12

Alicia C. Montoya, *Medievalist Enlightenment: From Charles Perrault to Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Series in Medievalism Volume II. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013. viii + 248 pp. Bibliography and index. \$85.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-84384-342-9.

Review by Anne E. Duggan, Wayne State University.

I would like to begin by saying that there are a lot of interesting ideas in *Medievalist Enlightenment from Charles Perrault to Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, the second volume in D. S. Brewer's new Series in Medievalism. I am sympathetic to its overall objective to examine and foreground: 1) the uses of the medieval in the early modern period; 2) continuities with the Middle Ages in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; and 3) medievalism as a form of modernity. Indeed, there is much to be said about the early modern's relation to the medieval. To my mind, however, issues related to methodology and terminology detract from Alicia Montoya's ability to carry out this study effectively.

The book is divided into three sections: "Conceptualizing the Medieval"; "Reimagining the Medieval", focusing on representations of the medieval in opera and literature; and "Studying the Medieval", examining the emergence of medieval studies in the eighteenth century. In her introduction, Montoya lays out the scope and objectives of her study. She intends to show how "modernity arose in part out of literary medievalism" (p. 4), relying on genres such as the fairy tale and opera that drew "heavily not on classical sources, as would be expected during the closing decades of French classicism, but on medieval or medievalist ones" (p. 4). I will return to the problems, especially with respect to French opera, with classifying these genres as specifically "medievalist." Montoya defines medievalism as "both the study and the creative use of the Middle Ages," which could be "celebratory or nostalgic" and could support "Gallican or patriotic scholarship" (p. 6). She insists on the need to take into account "the culturally and historically determined interests of those engaged in studying or imaginatively recreating [the Middle Ages]" (p. 7), and introduces some of the recurrent themes of the book, such as the centrality of love in early modern recuperations of the medieval, the importance of collective or cultural memory, as well as "non-linear, non-analytic forms of understanding, and subjective rather than objective approaches" to the past (p. 7).

Although the objectives laid out in the introduction are compelling, the execution presents several problems. First, and especially in the case of French opera but also with respect to the novel, Montoya tends to overgeneralize about these genres' medievalist tendencies based on too few examples to make her case. Second, the ways in which Montoya discusses the nature of medievalism in a particular genre, such as the fairy tale, or with respect to a particular author, such as Madame de Sévigné or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, can sometimes reduce the complexity of the genre's or the author's relation to the medieval. Third, the study does not adequately take into account how things medieval get channeled through Renaissance humanism and also through the literary and cultural practices of the first half of the seventeenth century. Finally, the concept of medievalism is sometimes used in ways that efface distinctions between medieval and Renaissance periods. Montoya does contend that "early Enlightenment readers tended to elide the medieval period and what we know today as the Renaissance" (p. 82). Specific instances when this happens are not elucidated, and sometimes Montoya appears to make this elision herself by referring, for instance, to the work of the early Renaissance poet Petrarch as

a “medieval source” (p. 169) for *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, without providing any qualification. Overall, the concept of “medievalist” is simply asked to do too much. Montoya would have been able to produce a more compelling study with a streamlined project that took on fewer genres but that went into more depth, which would have allowed her to better make her case. Indeed, her final two chapters are more focused and as such prove more effective in analyzing the workings of medievalism in the Enlightenment.

In the first two chapters composing Part 1, Montoya focuses on medievalism in the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns (chapter one) and Jean Chapelain and Rousseau’s conception of the medieval (chapter two). Arguing that in the late seventeenth century “a linear, diachronic” notion of history coexisted with “a cyclical, heterochronic one” (p. 19), Montoya maintains that the quarrel concluded with the diachronic understanding of history winning out. The chapter begins with an introduction to the conception of the medieval in nineteenth-century Romanticism as “anguished nostalgia” (p. 20). It then moves back to the historiographical work of sixteenth-century scholars Etienne Pasquier and Claude Fauchet, who looked at history “not as the fulfillment of divine providence but as the rise of human civilization” (p. 22), representing a first move away from a cyclical conception of history. Montoya asserts that these earlier historiographic models lost favor under Louis XIV but returned with Charles Perrault’s modernist challenge to the Ancients, who had a more cyclical or even negative view of historical progression. She argues that for Perrault, the medieval was problematic because it appeared to go against his concept of historical incrementalism, at the same that, for Montoya, Perrault’s tales are “one of the most important examples of full-fledged literary medievalism during this decade” (p. 34).

It is statements like these that point to some of the problematic aspects of this study. Montoya talks about Perrault’s complex relation to the medieval when it comes to his notions of progress, but declarations like the one above simplify what is going on in his fairy tales. For instance, scholars such as Jack Zipes and Patricia Hannon have recognized the rags-to-riches structure of his fairy tales that is suggestive of a proto-bourgeois socio-political order, which goes against the feudalism of medieval society. At the same time, one might argue that Perrault uses a medievalist position to put modern women in their “medieval place” (at least in the way he conceives of it). Later Montoya refers to “Perrault’s strongly medievalizing ‘Bluebeard’” (p. 152), which could be a fair reading, but the comment needs clarification: how, specifically, does Perrault “medievalize” the tale? Moreover, the notion that Perrault and other fairy-tale writers drew their subject matter predominantly from “medieval” stories or from oral folklore has been put into question by scholars like Zipes, Lewis Seifert, Charlotte Trinquet, and others, who have recognized the very important influence of the Italian tale collections of Giovanni Francesco Straparola (*Pleasant Nights*, 1550-53) and Giambattista Basile (*The Tale of Tales*, 1634, 1636) on works by Perrault and the *conteuses*.<sup>[1]</sup> Now, one could argue that the medievalism found in works by Perrault, Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier, Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy, and others is filtered through the works of these early modern Italian writers, but that needs to be said, not assumed. This is another example of the overstatements the study makes, here due to insufficient information about the history of the fairy-tale genre.

The second chapter of Part 1 focuses primarily on the historical work of Jean Chapelain, concluding with Rousseau. Montoya is interested in Chapelain’s objective of constituting a “*national* literary historiography” (p. 51), which would be gleaned from medieval romances in particular that, for Chapelain, document better than annals or chronicles the “mentality” of medieval peoples. From here Montoya moves to writers, including Chapelain, Jean-François Sarasin, and Pierre Daniel Huet, who associated gallantry and medieval romance, both of which supported open social relations between men and women. This association between *galanterie*, *honnêteté*, and medievalism weaves its way through the book, and again could use some development. I agree that medieval courtliness survives in early modern social practices. However, by the end of the seventeenth century, medieval courtliness had been mediated through Renaissance cultural practices, evident in works like Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), and through the novels, collections of model conversations, works on

*honnêteté*, and *salonnière* social practices of figures like Madeleine de Scudéry, Nicolas Faret, and Antoine Gombaud, Chevalier de Méré, among others. Works by Castiglione, Scudéry, Faret, and Méré share a focus on how to function within the early modern *court* society, fusing elements from medieval chivalry and Renaissance humanism to create new models of subjectivity for new socio-cultural contexts. (It is notable that in her discussions of *galanterie* and *honnêteté*, Montoya does not mention these authors or the important studies on the subject by critics such as Donna Stanton or Lewis Seifert.)[2] Here the work of Norbert Elias could have been most useful: the transformation of feudal society into a curial one led to what Elias calls “aristocratic romanticism,” a longing for a feudal past, a concept that might have helped Montoya make the connection between early modern nostalgia for the medieval and the romanticism of Rousseau.[3] Integrating the studies of Elias, Stanton, and Seifert would have helped in providing some background to the evolution of *galanterie* without taking away from—yet complicating—the medievalist inflections of the concept in the works of Chapelain, Sarasin, and Huet.

For Montoya, Rousseau, like Chapelain, did not perceive modernity as “the result of historical progress, but rather, as moral and political degeneration” (p. 68). In speaking about Rousseau, Montoya suggests that the philosopher “was also fundamentally Ancient in his outlook, for he took from the Ancients their ideals of republican simplicity and disinterested virtue” (p. 64). Again, such arguments need to be complicated. Rousseau’s Antiquity was not that of Boileau (also discussed in the study), nor was his medievalism, treated in a later chapter, the same as that represented in the works of Madame de Sévigné.[4] Often the book uses “Ancient” and “medievalist” as umbrella concepts for many different types of texts and ideological positions without adequately qualifying the distinctions between each writer’s position with respect to either Antiquity or the Middle Ages.

Part II of Montoya’s study concentrates on literary and operatic representations and conceptions of the medieval. Chapter 3 focuses on the genre of the novel, which for Montoya “was often synonymous with ‘medieval’” (p. 71). This is true to some extent and depends upon definitions of what, precisely, is medieval about a particular novel. For instance, Honoré d’Urfé’s *L’Astrée* (1606-27), which influenced novelists and fairy-tale writers throughout the century, draws on the tradition of the Greco-Roman pastoral and the medieval romance. The subjects of Scudéry’s very popular novels, which she called *histoires* or histories, were based on the historical work of the Ancients Herodotus and Livy, but Scudéry was also influenced by d’Urfé. Later, in her chapter on Medieval as Performance, Montoya mentions Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy’s “medieval romantic novel *L’Histoire d’Hypolite, comte de Douglas*” (p. 116). However, d’Aulnoy’s novel is situated at the Tudor court of Henry VII and Henry VIII, which is in synch with what was going on generally in the 1670s-1690s with respect to the genre of the *nouvelle*: Madame de Villedieu and Madame de Lafayette, among others, set their stories in the same period at the Valois court.

Is Montoya, then, suggesting that what scholars tend to consider Renaissance courts are in fact medieval, or medievalist? If so, this needs clarification. Erica Harth, whose work is seminal in this area, takes a very different position. She states: “The action of the official *nouvelle* was usually set in recent times, typically the sixteenth century. Such a setting had the advantage of being more realistic, because closer to home, than the ancient decor of most *romans*. In using characters whose descendants were very much alive and could even be called on as witnesses or informants for the events described in the novel, the official *nouvelle* just barely skirted dealing with contemporary figures” (p. 208).[5] Now, I do not think that Harth’s analysis suggests that we cannot talk about medievalist elements in the late seventeenth-century novel. However, it does suggest that we need to be very careful about how we approach medievalism in the period, and in the case of Montoya, perhaps more time needed to be spent on defining her terms and clarifying her arguments.[6]

Chapter four looks at the medieval as performance, with a focus on opera and fairy tales, as well as Sévigné’s performance of the medieval through her correspondence. The chapter opens by framing opera and fairy tale in terms of medieval culture’s “love of ceremony and pageantry” (p. 109), then

moves on to the importance of play. I am not so sure ceremony and play are specifically *medieval* qualities. In fact, if the prominence of theater is any indication of the centrality of performance within a particular culture or period, then seventeenth-century France is the century of performance *par excellence*—unless all seventeenth-century performance falls under “medievalism,” an argument that would be difficult to make. Montoya characterizes the French opera of Philippe Quinault and Jean-Baptiste Quinault as a medievalist genre. She states: “it was opera that first emerged as a new, medievalist literary genre, making use of its appeal to sensory and physical experience” (p. 117). However, the majority of their operas—eight out of eleven—are based on Greco-Roman mythology.

Here lies an important methodological problem: one cannot make such a claim based on three operas. Montoya further argues that Quinault and Lully borrowed marvelous elements from medieval romance, but it needs to be emphasized: only in their last three operas. Their earlier operas drew from the marvelous of Antiquity, not the Middle Ages. Emphasizing the sensory aspect of opera, Montoya also discusses the role of horror in opera in getting the spectators actively involved “through their bodily reactions to the performance” (p. 118). But this is also true for classical tragedy, whose purpose in part was to elicit catharsis in the spectator. And we must not forget that Quinault and Lully called their operas *tragédies lyriques*. In fact, in his seminal book on seventeenth-century French opera, *Touched by the Graces* (Birmingham: Summa, 2001), Buford Norman argues that “Quinault and Lully’s operas aspired first of all to be *tragédies*” (p. 91). Indeed, they sought to rival Racine, “for the *tragédie lyrique* could be said to be more like ancient tragedy than Racine’s own works were since, like Greek tragedy, it included a chorus, music, and dance” (p. 101). Might we then argue that their later tragedies, based on Ludovico Arioso and Torquato Tasso’s Renaissance rewritings of chivalric romances, represent a fusion of classicism and medievalism? Later in the chapter Montoya suggests that opera continued to regularly take up “subjects drawn from chivalric fiction” (p. 123), but which operas? Like the operas of Quinault and Lully, those of Jean-Philippe Rameau, for instance, are based on Greco-Roman themes more than medieval ones.[7] Often the medievalist qualities of the texts and genres under discussion are overdetermined, which takes away from the potential value of some of the underlining arguments.

The section on the fairy tale begins by asserting that Perrault and L’Héritier, opposed the fairy tale to “the earlier generation of medievalist authors as La Fontaine’s *Fables*, representing an older form of *galanterie*” (p. 128). Again, we need some clarification here. Although Perrault admired the work of the fabulist, La Fontaine was one of Perrault’s rivals in the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. La Fontaine notably framed his collection of fables in Ancient terms, lauding Aesop as “the wisest of the Ancients.” Indeed, Perrault’s use of the fairy tale marks a modernist opposition to the ancient genre of the fable.[8]

Montoya’s argument for the fairy tale being a specifically medievalist genre, while not incorrect, simplifies the situation. Again it is a question of methodology: her arguments about the genre are based on three fairy-tale authors and only two or three texts from each author; there is no justification for this limited corpus, which would be especially important to make in the case of the very prolific d’Aulnoy. Yes, L’Héritier connects the genre of the fairy tale with the troubadours, an important move, but in general the relation between the fairy tale and the medieval is far more complex. For instance, in her “To Modern Fairies,” Henriette-Julie de Murat refers to “ancient [or medieval] fairies” as “little more than fools next to you [modern fairies]. Their activities were base and childish, amusing only to Servants and Nurses . . . They were almost always old, ugly, poorly dressed, and poorly housed . . . Mesdames, you have taken a different road: You concern yourselves with only great things, the least of which are giving spirit to those who have none, beauty to the ugly, eloquence to the ignorant” (p. 129).[9] Murat thus draws from medievalism only to emphasize the superiority of modern fairies over their medieval predecessors.

With respect to the use of frame narratives in the fairy tale, Montoya again simplifies and overextends what is meant by “medieval” or the remote past. She argues that the frame of fairy-tale collections is “the

oral equivalent of the primal scene of medievalism [the discovery of a medieval manuscript] . . . [and] also served to emphasize the tales' link to a remote historical past" (p. 131). But the example she provides is from a volume of d'Aulnoy's tales in which Madame D (a fictional Madame d'Aulnoy) reads fairy tales to her friends at Saint Cloud, which was the palace of the very much alive Princesse Palatine, to whom d'Aulnoy dedicated her four volumes of tales. This scene, in fact, emphasizes the link to a very recent past, that of the storytelling context of d'Aulnoy's entourage. D'Aulnoy's frame narratives for her other volumes include a "modern" Spanish novella (with medievalist undertones) and *Le Nouveau Gentilhomme bourgeois*, a frame that fuses Cervantes's *Don Quixote* with Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, a move that takes ironic distance, as in the case of Cervantes, from the medieval chivalric tradition. The section on fairy tales would have benefitted from a focus on the dynamics between the medieval and the modern as it plays out differently in works by different authors. However, Montoya reads the texts she examines through a rather reductive medievalist lens, which distorts what is actually going on, and takes away from what is potentially interesting about her study.

Chapter five also concerns literary history, and takes Ovid's *Heroides* and the letters of Abélard and Héloïse as a framework within which to read Sévigné's correspondence to her daughter, and Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*; both authors are referred to as "the period's most original medievalists" (p. 150). The overall framework for this section is interesting. Montoya first lays out a progression she identifies in the correspondence between Abélard and Héloïse: their letters evolve from excessive, transgressive passion (*eros*), leading to depravity, finally concluding with redemption and the characters embracing the love of Christ (*agape*). Montoya identifies a similar evolution of desire in Sévigné's correspondence with her daughter and in the love relation between Julie and Saint-Preux in Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*. I think some parts of the chapter could be strengthened, most notably the ways in which, in the work of Sévigné, passionate love gets reframed and adapted to qualify mother-daughter relations. Nevertheless, the chapter does lay out in interesting ways some of the differences in the uses of this medieval text between Sévigné, who ends up turning to Jansenism, and Rousseau, who creates a motherly and modern Héloïse.

The final chapter of the book on the history of medieval scholarship, like the previous chapter, is more focused. The lines between, for instance, the medievalist, "subjective" historical work of the comte de Caylus, and the more "objective" modern approach to history represented by Jean-Baptiste La Curne de Sainte-Palaye are clearly and convincingly drawn. Montoya lays out the class alliances that underpin the different positions of Caylus, Sainte-Palaye, and Montesquieu in relation to studying the medieval past. The chapter returns to questions of nostalgia for a better past (Caylus), the corruption of a barbaric past (Sainte-Palaye) and the search for origins of the French nation (Montesquieu), and effectively maps out the emerging field of medieval studies in the eighteenth century.

A recurring problem in the book is what, exactly, is "medieval" or "medievalist," and for whom? How do we delimit the concept? How can we effectively use the concept to foreground both continuities and discontinuities with the Middle Ages in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century without being reductive? From a different perspective, how can we deploy the concept in ways that do not flatten the differences between medieval and early modern practices, and among early modern medievalist texts and authors? Although some distinctions are maintained in the book—between cyclical and linear time; between embodied and disembodied knowledge; even between medievalist and modernist tensions, for instance, in Perrault—this is not done enough. D'Urfé's golden age is not that of Perrault or Rousseau, and L'Héritier's conception of the medievalist nature of the 1690s fairy tale contrasts with Murat's understanding of the genre. The study sometimes seems to jump from troubadour courtly love and feudal chivalry to early modern notions of love and *galanterie* as they are reshaped by the authors studied with at best cursory consideration of how Renaissance and early seventeenth-century literature and culture mediated these concepts for later writers. In foregrounding similarities, it is important not to forget the distinctions, which sometimes get lost in this study. It can be a difficult balancing act, and it is always safer to fall on the side of nuance than of overstatement. With more nuance, complexity, and

sometimes knowledge (in areas such as the fairy tale and opera), this could have been a very interesting study on the medievalist Enlightenment.

## NOTES

[1] See Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (1983; New York: Routledge, 2006); Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality and Gender in France 1690-1715: Nostalgic Utopias* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Trinquet, *Le conte de fées français (1690-1700): Traditions italiennes et origines aristocratiques* (Tübingen: Biblio 17, 2012). See also Hannon's *Fabulous Identities: Women's Fairy Tales in Seventeenth-Century France* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998). It is notable that none of these works figure in the study's bibliography.

[2] See Stanton's *Aristocrat as Art: A Study of the Honnête Homme and the Dandy in Seventeenth and Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); and Seifert's *Manning the Margins: Masculinity and Writing in Seventeenth-Century France* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

[3] See chapter eight "On the Sociogenesis of Aristocratic Romanticism" in Elias, *The Court Society* (1933; Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

[4] Although Montoya looks at the ways in which Sévigné and Rousseau differ in their use of the story of Abélard and Héloïse from the perspective of religion and motherhood, it is limited and does not take into account the very important class differences that inflect their notions of the past. Similarly, Rousseau's Antiquity is a Republican one, quite different from Boileau's aristocratic view of the society of the Ancients.

[5] Erica Harth, *Ideology and Culture in Seventeenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983).

[6] Later Montoya remarks upon the extent to which the reading public purchased medieval romances, some of which were adapted in the sixteenth century, which needs to be distinguished from the notion that the novel itself is a "medievalist" genre.

[7] Among Rameau's *pastorales héroïques*, *tragédies en musique*, *opéra-ballets*, and *comédies lyriques*, twelve out of nineteen works are based on Greco-Roman mythology or pastoral, and besides two fairy pastoral works, only one *comédie lyrique* is explicitly medieval.

[8] While La Fontaine also drew from Boccaccio (is Boccaccio a medieval or Renaissance writer?), and an argument could be made for his "medievalism," the connection is not self-evident.

[9] Murat, "Perrault's Preface to Griselda and Murat's 'To Modern Fairies,'" trans. Holly Tucker and Melanie R. Siemans, *Marvels & Tales* 19.1 (2005): 125-30.

Anne E. Duggan  
Wayne State University  
[a.duggan@wayne.edu](mailto:a.duggan@wayne.edu)

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of

publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172