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Elizabeth Emery and Larua Morowitz, *Consuming the Past: The Medieval Revival in fin-de-siècle France*. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2003. xii + 295 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-7546-0319-9.

Review by Matt K. Matsuda, Rutgers University.

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This is a work focused on historiographical and cultural appropriation with significant investigative reach, purposefully pursuing “revival studies” beyond examinations of retro-fashion and commercial nostalgia. The centerpiece of *Consuming the Past* is medieval revivalism in late nineteenth-century France. That successive French generations across the nineteenth century underwent fascinations and attractions for Spain, North Africa, China, and Japan, as well as revivals of France’s “own” history, is well documented in copious art historical and literary studies. Emery and Morowitz now place that literature in its appropriate socio-political contexts. By drawing on a wealth of source materials, from paintings, decorations, texts, and ephemera to the acted “medievalisms” of airs, carnivals, and pilgrimages, the authors have created a dense and thoughtful argument around a general assertion that fin-de-siècle medievalism was not mere fashion or fancy, but deeply invested in French cultural politics and, indeed, political culture.

This is, in a way, a needless point to insist upon, a grander and more interesting argument actually unfolds case-by-case across the full range of the discussions. Though the authors do not always articulate it broadly or theoretically, the work is less about the debated richness of purported “fancy” than the construction of a historiography concerned with the very mechanisms of a “modern” culture advancing its own projects of self-fashioning and identification in distinction and in collusion with its own past, real and created.

*Consuming the Past* is a well-produced object unto itself. It has rich, clear illustrations and engravings ranging over medieval and revival artworks and documentation, and the voices of the two authors, either by affinity or editing, work well with each other in measured descriptions and analytical narratives. The great strength of the work is the self-stated complexity with which the authors address their task. What first appears to be iconographic or literary analysis turns into a social history of culture framed by the Franco-Prussian War and struggles between Church and State up until 1905. The choice of the former date is fairly classic because it marks the moment of reassessment during which histories of uncertainty were created following military defeat and the social schism and bloodbath of the Paris Commune—a process that lasted until the end of the century. The authors suggest medievalism as a kind of idealized image, a counter narrative “bound by social cohesiveness” that “comforted a period rent by bursts of anarchist violence, worker demonstrations and battles between Church and State” (p. 4). The latter framing date of 1905 plays on this narrative, for it places as a historiographical marker a moment (the official separation) that captures both political and spiritual, secular and religious temperaments seeking to find accommodation for widely diverging views of the nature of community: “the literature, science, art and religion of the Middle Ages...seemed to weave a durable social fabric based on uncompromising and uncorrupted faith” (p. 4).

Community, in fact, is one of the great themes of this work. The strategies of this book, in uniting multiple historical narratives, can be engaging for research scholars, or for teachers who have dealt with students with apparently widely divided interests in medieval history and modern politics. The authors attempt a sort of dual history—the situated present of the end of the century and the medieval imaginary

contained within it. Some of the theoretical framework draws from memory scholarship and that field's critical conceits: the subjects of memory are not those of meaning or significance, but the sum of their survivals, relentlessly commemorated and revived into patrimony.

More of the book, though, seems to draw on contextual explanations that situate the actual cases studies: the logic of medieval revival tied to nineteenth-century cultural politics—specifically targeted appeals to nostalgia, to spirituality, to dynamic and revolutionary deeds of ancestors. The authors parse out well—and this is a significant contribution—that there is no singular “French” view of medievalism, but rather a wide field of conflicting and convergent images and appropriations. For Catholic Conservatives, this meant a search for a pure spirituality of ritual and practice. For Republicans, medievalism was a glorious exaltation of democratic communities and hard work. For artists in multiple media, such pasts embodied an imagining of creative energies freed from the corruptions of a market. For aristocrats, the medieval world was an affirmation of refined and sublime tastes in an age of mass production.

These multiple, often overlapping, perspectives are articulated through thematic appropriations of the medieval focused around key figures, works, and movements. Chapter one sketches out nationalist paradigms across the political spectrum. Succeeding discussions focus on *Primitifs* and *Neo-Primitifs*, the institutionalization of medieval themes from museums to private home furnishing, and the exaltation and restoration projects around Gothic cathedrals. Examinations of works by Maurice Denis, Léon Bloy, and the redoubtable Joris Karl Huysmans carve out an analytic for a determinedly ascetic aesthetic: “for nineteenth-century artists, the medieval painter-monk lived under seemingly ideal creative conditions: convinced of his faith, free from economic worries, detached from the public by the walls of the cloister and dedicated to a community that sustained him and from which he drew sustenance”(p. 4). These were the ideal visions, variously inflected that were crafted to suit the multiple imperatives of stability and transformation for both revolutionary and reactionary generations.

The last three chapters focus on particular crafts and ritual practices, from stained glass and tapestry aesthetics to pilgrimages and festivals. Taken together, these chapters trace out a number of intersecting historiographical arcs, moving from political ideology and state institutions and expositions to the piety and feasts of “the popular Middle Ages.” The “marketing” of pilgrimages fills chapter six, neatly drawing together religious revival in the context of mid-century social and political upheavals, crowned by the catastrophic (for France) Franco-Prussian war, and the clergy's seizure of the moment to extol rituals of repentance and atonement for the sins of the nation.

It is in this mid-to-late nineteenth century that arise “a proliferation of Marial sightings” in French towns such as La Salette (1846), Lourdes (1858), and Pontmain (1871). The authors make good use of such popular and pious sources, such as the Catholic newspaper *Le Pèlerin*, with its travel-magazine qualities, and reportages from sites by canonical critics like Emile Zola. Focused on the touristic aspects of “lithographs of Bernadette in a red skirt,” the authors might be encouraged to examine with more specificity—as it is a rich academic literature in itself—some of the psychodynamics of the visions they describe, young women's roles in bearing them, and competing projects of faith, expression, and mental science which developed with significant interests in the pilgrimages and their faithful. Such detail would not be a sideline, but another instance in the readings of the tug-of-war between modern and “traditional” impulses (p. 162).

Such questions could be expanded upon throughout the book, as relatively little comparative resonance is given to similar thematic explorations in the works of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, William Morris, or John Ruskin's widely influential works. Such possible parallels are recognized by the authors early on (p. 7), but not pursued. The specific Frenchness of the discussions is therefore less well defined

in national terms than they might be. Some (brief) comparative distinctions regarding, say, English troubles with industrialism and parliamentary representation in earlier decades, could cast in relief the ways in which French anxieties played out about degeneration and Germanic threats differently in the cultural milieu of the late nineteenth century.

One place where the authors apply the uniqueness argument well is in returning the discussions to Paris, the famed “capital of the nineteenth century.” The final chapter underscores the question of “Modern and Medieval,” and ably illustrates the manner in which a contemporary urban landscape is deeply invested in its own antecedents. Though reshaped by Haussmann’s “modern” capitalist cityscape, the streets of Paris retained and recreated the allure of the old city through festivals and popular spectacles.

Parisians of the fin-de-siècle period were fascinated by street life, an attraction that had its roots in the narrative of guidebooks and in the eighteenth-century mania to study and document ‘folk culture.’ Public spectacles of all sorts—jugglers, acrobats, charlatans, fairs, festivals, *fêtes foraines*, *foires*, wax museums, panoramas and masked balls—testified to the turn-of-the-century fascination with new and accessible forms of entertainment (p. 200).

The “newness” of these spectacles, though, was complicated. As the authors suggest, seeking out traces of the medieval in “modern” life was not an antiquarian project. Rather, it “provided a center for the secular nationalism that grew out of this period and through World War I” (p. 218). Here is where the book’s key argument becomes most compelling—it is not decors and nostalgia that motivate medievalism, but tensions of national community and folkloric identification. By selecting out the last generation of the nineteenth century, the authors telescope a tumultuous history into a cultural chronicle of what will, finally, become a struggle to construct the national Republic of the French state.

So envisioned, all of the fragments form a mosaic framed by a resolutely expanding historical consciousness, and references to studies like Stéphane Gerson’s *The Pride of Place* on French regional historical societies and activities are well considered. [1] As Emery and Morowitz put it, “Unlike earlier revivals of interest in the Middle Ages, in which the medieval trappings—costumes, proper names, and legends—sufficed to draw spectators, by the turn of the century the public held a much deeper understanding of the Middle Ages and its relationship to the modern French state.” As such, “[t]he public no longer wanted only ‘fairy tales’ about the French past; it was now educated enough to request the ‘truth’ about the period, historical narratives based on existing documents from the Middle Ages” (p. 203). Here, the panoply of folkloric examples and the narratives of national configuration are drawn together. This is an especially interesting contention that could be easily overdrawn, for what it shows more clearly than anything else is not that medievalism became more “authentic”—a term the authors spend much time appropriately clarifying—but that a new sort of fiction, the nationalist community, increasingly bound by common education and state institutions, would supplant the folkloric model, while preserving the romance of French medievalism.

The work closes with an intelligent afterword, noting that while revivals and nostalgias of all sorts continue in French culture, medievalism has not played a grand role in recent decades. Perhaps these times have simply been too preoccupied by other subjects, crowded as they have been with imperial nostalgia and post-colonial debates tied to Asia and North Africa, or with the grandstanding political modernity of the French Revolutionary bicentennial. In this, the authors recapitulate one of the most salient themes for such a study: what is the appeal, the attraction, the desire for medieval materialism? This is a critical question for studies of revivals, commemorations, and national festivals, if they are to move beyond reductionist arguments about hegemonic bourgeois tastes or descriptions of official museum exhibitions. The question is less how a cultural revival becomes imposed on society than how it arises as an appealing response to circumstances.

Across the Channel, English medievalism, whether in Arthurian, Tolkienian, or Pythonesque variations, seems to have maintained its revival popularity, and so one wonders what is specific about the French case as a genre, a language, and a set of discourses. Perhaps it lacks the romantic attractions of the spiritual, heroic, and pious bounded by vigorous camaraderie and sincerity. If so, that may explain why this book as a national study serves to remind that French attractions and appeals are elsewhere. Perhaps the authors are suggesting that French medievalism was most roundly embraced in the period which itself became the memorial icon of French civilization: the late nineteenth century. An argument could be made that a tale of bourgeois, notable, Catholic, avant-garde and Republican struggle over the French medieval past was only another revival to become yet another fragment in the construction of the truly mythic popular France: that of Paris of the fin-de-siècle.

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#### NOTES

[1] Stéphane Gerson, *The Pride of Place: Local Memories and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003).

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