

# THE MIDDLE AGES IN THE MODERN WORLD

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## Introduction

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'Medieval' furnishes the modern West with one of the most significant metaphors through which it structures its self-image, its culture, its identity, its history and its relationship with the rest of the globe. As much as it is a historical period, 'the Middle Ages' has become one of the most enduring myths of modernity, a largely imaginary narrative used to impose order on the world. It generates rich artistic expression and underpins political and ideological beliefs across the spectrum with wide-ranging consequences. This reliance of the concept 'modern' on the concept 'medieval' explains why no other period designation operates as quite so productive a category as medievalism does. While 'Tudorism', for example, inspires historical fiction, film and other forms of costume drama, its cultural traction is primarily limited to these forms, and then only within Britain or other Anglophone cultures; it does not make a claim to universalism in its explanatory power in the same way that medievalism does. Likewise 'Victorianism' is not a controlling metaphor even of British culture, despite Margaret Thatcher having politicised it for a time with her dubious phrase 'Victorian family values'. In this respect, as a supposedly temporal term, 'the Middle Ages' is unique in the variety and depth of work it continues to perform in Western cultures. Medievalism is one of the dominant modes by which the relationship between the past and present is negotiated in the public imagination, and that means that it profoundly shapes our desires and fears for the future. It is therefore appropriate that sustained scholarly attention be paid to the way this trope manifests itself, not just in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but currently and over the course of the last century.

The meaning of this 'myth of the Middle Ages', its operation and function in contemporary culture and society, is an issue for the Humanities distinct from the problem of ascertaining what actually happened in the centuries between the end of antiquity and the beginning of the Early Modern period; scholarship concerned with the myth of the Middle Ages is an emerging sub-field of several academic disciplines usually known as medievalism, while the second area constitutes the broad discipline of medieval studies. Research concerned with the historical Middle Ages has a longer pedigree and, until recently, a more dignified reputation than medievalism.