

ABSTRACT

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My study addresses to the emergence of the Middle Ages as a historical period of its own in eighteenth century England. It is based on the writings of Thomas Warton (1726–1790), an Oxford-based learned antiquarian. Warton's chef d'oeuvre, *The History of English Poetry* (1774–1781), was not a modern history of literature, but a history of vernacular literate culture between the years 1000 and 1500. The writings of Warton and the scholars in his circle contributed considerably in defining the Middle Ages as the distinct period in the world history.

In reading the learned texts I have used the concept historiographical operation by Michel de Certeau. According to him, it consists of three parts. (a) Social area of different networks, where the scope of historical study is negotiated. (b) Practice concerns the manner historian chooses his sources and organizes them according to the laws of historical study. (c) Finally, writing concretizes the process and creates an illusion of finality. de Certeau's analysis is thus not based completely on the idea of historical narrative for it contextualises the influences on historical writing more widely.

Thomas Warton and the scholars in his circle used fictitious texts as their main sources in defining the Middle Ages. Warton was well aware especially on medieval chronicles and romances. He paid special attention to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History regum britanniae*, which combined the English and classical mythology in its presentation of the history of the English kings. Geoffrey's chronicle helped Warton in finding out the influence of medieval tales. Specifically, the tales concerning the adventures of King Arthur and his knights had been well-known. In general, medieval romances formed a counter-narrative to the emphasis of the importance of classical tradition.

Warton's approach to the Middle Ages was based partly on the enlightened historical writing à la David Hume and William Robertson. The debt is obvious in the two long essays that precede the *History*. The essays present the central themes of Warton's *History*: the decrease of imagination and the increase of civilised behaviour and knowledge. Warton did not argue that the themes were part of the same narrative, but it is obvious he thought they were. Warton inevitably saw that the social progress and refinement did not belong together with poetry. The confrontation between social and artistic values left its mark to Warton's scholarship. He searched the creative imagination in the ancient Greek, Oriental and Scandinavian literature.

The History of the English Poetry did not pose a question only on the relationship of literature and society as Warton thought medieval romances and chronicles contained valuable information on medieval society as well. Warton's views on feudalism, courtly life and on medieval manners were based on these mostly fictitious texts. Warton did not consider them as literary constructions and he believed in the information they gave. Yet, he was not always as naïve, as he presented the eighteenth century ideals and values into the medieval world. Thus the medieval literature and the eighteenth century ideals had both a pervasive effect on the emerging popular representations of the Middle Ages.

Keywords: medievalism; Warton, Thomas; Geoffrey of Monmouth; King Arthur; romances; historical writing