The Crimean War was a catalyst for women’s use of medievalism, as it generated an idiom for using medieval motifs pervasively in support of war. This affected the usefulness of the discourse to women who wanted to protest both about the sufferings of war, and the gender constrictions that were thrown into relief during wartime. Women writers often negotiated this mood, as is seen in Barrett Browning’s innovative use of the ballad form, and how, “she employs the starker power structures of medieval society to foreground the status of women as objects in a male economy of social exchange, and to unmask the subtler preservation of gender inequities in contemporary Victorian ideology” (Stone 1995, 108–109).

Writing a decade after Landon, Elizabeth Barrett uses a medieval setting for many of the ballads in Poems (1844) as her predecessor had done, to facilitate a wider exploration of these positions. When considering Barrett Browning’s medievalism, some critics suggest that the poet’s view corresponds with that expressed by the heroine in the much-quoted poetic manifesto from Book V of Aurora Leigh: “I do distrust the poet who discerns/ No character or glory in his times,/ And trundles back his soul five hundred years,/ Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court.” (PWEBB 422, lines 189–192). Such verdicts fail to assess the power of Barrett Browning’s use of medieval
chivalric images to demonstrate the hypocritical and unjust gender confines of contemporary life, the expectations and demands of “feminine” behavior.

In her rare and thorough analysis of Barrett’s translation of Chaucer’s *Annelida and Arcite*, the poet’s contribution to the 1841 volume *The Poems of Geoffrey Chaucer, Modernized*, Karen Hodder argues convincingly that Barrett’s work “was not just brushed by the fringes of Romantic and Victorian medievalism, but that she was a serious medievalist, that is a scholar who applied her knowledge seriously; and that her familiarity with primary medieval texts, like that of Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Morris, was not temporary or superficial, but developed and woven into the fibre of her art” (107). Indeed, Hodder counters “the notion that medievalism was merely a sort of immaturity which Elizabeth Barrett grew out of” (110), and overturns it by demonstrating the way in which she uses medieval feminine stereotypes throughout her epic, most obviously in the figure of Marian Erle, who “is a composite of Virgin Mary, Magdalen, and especially, a feminist’s ‘powerful’ Griselda” (110). Barrett does not align herself with the belief system of the movement, but instead she uses medieval sources and medievalism for her own purposes, refuting the gender constructions of chivalry to highlight contemporary social problems.

Two ballads in particular demonstrate how Barrett rewrites her sources to show contempt for contemporary gender structures that demand female passivity, what she called in a letter to Mitford, “the sin and shame of those divine angels, called women, daring to tread in the dust of a multitude, when they ought to be minding their clouds” (*BC* 10: 84). Marjorie Stone has provided the most detailed and insightful analysis of Barrett’s ballads in contemporary literary criticism, noting how Barrett’s ballads adapt and develop the ballad tradition.² Stone notes the development of Barrett’s ballads, that “The Romaunt of the Page” first appeared as the lead poem in Mary Russell Mitford’s 1839 *Findens’ Tableaux*, but was heavily revised for Barrett’s 1844 *Poems*, where it was published alongside “Rhyme of the Duchess May,” a striking reworking of “Edom O’Gordon” from Percy’s *Reliques*. Barrett casts “The Romaunt of the Page” as a “Female Warrior” story that “exposes to view and subverts—at least by implication—the structuring according to gender of its world” (Dugaw, 11). Other works in this tradition include “A Not-browne Mayd” and “Child Waters” in Percy’s *Reliques*, the disguise of Constance in Scott’s *Marmion*, and Hemans’s “Woman on the Field of Battle,” from *Songs of the Affections* (1830).