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Barbarian Memory and the Uncanny Past

Abstract: This chapter argues that barbarian memory—the awareness that the Roman Empire in the West had been invaded and disrupted in the fifth century by peoples such as the Goths and Vandals—is an important theme in late medieval and early modern literature. After recounting examples in Shakespeare of this material ranging from Henry V to Hamlet even to Touchstone’s quip about the Goths in As You Like It, the chapter surveys attitudes toward barbarians throughout Western Europe, from the Sweden of Olaus Rudbeck to the Spain of Miguel de Cervantes. The chapter examines how, even as barbarian memory was solicited to provide a rousing cultural origin, its discourse got booed down in pedantry and obscurity. The chapter concludes by situating barbarian memory as it evokes the uncanny past.

1 The possibility of barbarian memory

This book concerns barbarian memory, the awareness that the transition from the Roman Empire to what came after it brought war, invasion, and the migration of peoples in its wake. In the fourth and fifth centuries, the Roman Empire in the West was disrupted by the presence of non-Roman peoples such as the Goths, Franks, and Vandals. The Goths settled in Italy and, more durably, in Spain, the Franks in what is now France, the Vandals in North Africa. Later, in the waning decades of the sixth century, another barbarian group, the Lombards, occupied northern Italy. The warlike nature and the comparative lack of civilization of the peoples called barbarian remained a part of the memory of Europe. The past does not only reside in the archive; it beckons to the present, allowing later meanings and purposes to infuse its elucidation. Even events of a 1,000 years before can still matter, no matter how obscure, especially if they are not just as lifeless annals but also as parts of a still-conscious awareness.

This sense of not only the past but also the past’s past has the potential to burst out of what Harris calls “period purification.” As Patricia Clare Ingham observes, assertions of “absolute cultural alterity” often run parallel to those of absolute historical alterity in customary formulations of self and other, present and past.¹

Classical scholars, such as Christopher Krebs and Jonas Grethlein, theorize a construction of time as the “plupast” (after the term “pluperfect”), denoting the past as embedded in a given narrative and the aspects of a narrative placed earlier than its own temporal articulation.² Examining the plupast of a text that to its current readers is already in the distant past solicits a complex, striated tension that requires we become aware of multiple temporalities at once. This book focuses on the late medieval and early modern period. It asks, how did the residue of the time when, as the English antiquarian William Camden put it, “there ensued an universall and utter confusion, full of wofull miseries and calamities, what with barbarous nations of the one side making incursions and invasions,” and “the Roman Empire began to decline and decay, and barbarous Nations every way made foule havocke of the provinces all over the Continent,” affect Europe’s sense of its history and identity?³ Focusing on writers as famous as Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare, and as obscure as William Davenant and Gian Giorgio Trissino, we will see how barbarian memory is used both to