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Cultivating Medievalism: Feeling History

Sara Hutchinson [was]... both a symbol of possible renewal in Coleridge’s emotional life, and also a fantasy-figure – an alternative to domestic duties, an escape from professional pressures, a temptingly unattached woman... Coleridge gave [her]... a Christmas present of Anna Seward’s *Original Sonnets*, which he inscribed light-heartedly ‘to Asahara, the Moorish Maid’.

This chapter surveys how both men and women influenced the gradual recovery of the medieval spirit for cultural consumption. The gendering of Romantic medievalism encodes the ambivalence of troubadourian masculinity from two directions: the first stems from the fact that women began to discuss publicly their interpretation of medievalism particularly in terms of their expectations of courtly love and the chivalric ethos; the second from the viewing of medievalism through the screen of courtly literature which emphasizes the troubadour’s love for a lady, while viewing it through the screen of metrical and prose romances emphasizes knightly endeavour. The first focuses on loss and the unattainable lady, bound up as she is with unattainable property, nature, and desire; this is a system that can only exclude the woman poet. The second focuses on male honour and quest, a value system that pushes women to the background. Grounded either way, she is at the same time supposed to be the locus of the ideal on earth. Temporally (at the same time) she is both present and eternal; spatially (grounded either way) she is both background and centre. Presumably what a real woman wants from this ideological double bind is romantically plausible but realistically impossible: to be the beloved, to be pre-eminent by combining the best of both options in returning the lover’s love (experiencing true love herself) and having that lover protect her chivalrously.
But what real women Romantic poets wrote about was not this compliance with the ideological bonds; rather, they attempted to redesign temporal and spatial ground rules in order to break the subject–object dividing line that, in medievalism, keeps them in their place.

In order to examine how medievalism developed from the cultural and artistic concerns that dominated late eighteenth-century thought, I propose to work through a trajectory of Romantic medievalism by following the development of discursive schools of thought and practice. These strains are highly influenced by the development of sensibility, and the new relation of mind to body through the affective disposition that sensibility entails. One of the most important of the late eighteenth century's dominant concerns, nature, is intimately coupled with sensibility and questions of subjective experience. But nature is also affiliated with troubadour poetry because the lady, as an object of natural beauty, is best pursued in a space devoted to lovemaking, the garden or bower. How Romantic thought yokes these different attitudes to produce a historical self-consciousness will govern the following pages.

The bower invokes a medieval setting, a lady's space of privacy and beauty less regulated than the interiors of the castle. The bower inverts the usual designation of women’s space as domestic, interior and internal, and men’s space as external.2 This is, of course, the irony of Coleridge's bower poem, ‘This Lime-tree Bower My Prison’.3 The medieval bower was external to or closeted from the male-defined and male-regulated court. For the eighteenth-century middle class, struggling to define itself against and yet within courtly terms, the bower represented the paradigm female space, an exterior version of the lady's closet, an enclosure that is both safe and liberating, female nature contained.

The grand passion for gardens, lawns and landscaping develops the bower's femininity on a larger scale. As the middle-class man found himself more and more at home with the domestic improvements and increasingly affordable comforts brought about by the mid-eighteenth century, the home was increasingly dominated by the male presence (99–103). Similarly, the garden bower was ‘improved’, its extension, planting and regulation viewed as a male endeavour, as the weight given to Henry Crawford's opinion in Mansfield Park makes clear. The professionalization of landscaping (conducted by Capability Brown and Humphry Repton, to say nothing of Pope himself), coincides with the sentimentalizing of nature (especially by William Collins and Erasmus Darwin), the dissemination of the picturesque aesthetic (by West, Gilpin, Knight, Price and Mason), and thus with tourism as a consumerism