Masterpieces of the Middle Ages

The period of the Middle Ages—approximately A.D. 500–1500—encompasses a thousand years of European history distinguished by the unique fusion of a Heroic-Age society with Greco-Roman culture and Christian religion. The era is fairly well marked off by the emergence and disappearance of certain massive forces. It begins with the collapse of the Roman Empire in Western Europe, a development coincident with and partly occasioned by the settlement of Germanic peoples within the territory of the empire. It ends with the discovery of the Western Hemisphere, the invention of the printing press, the consolidation of strong national states, the break in religious unity brought about by the Protestant Reformation, and the renewal—after a lapse of nearly a thousand years—of direct contact with Greek art, thought, and literature. The medieval centuries created, or at least refashioned, and bequeathed to us such institutional patterns as the Christian church; the monarchical state; the town and village; the traditional European social order—the "lords spiritual," the "lords temporal," with the hierarchy of nobility and gentry ranging from duke to knight, and the third, or bourgeois, estate; the university; the system and logical method of Scholastic philosophy; Romanesque and Gothic architecture; and a rich variety of literary forms.

The literature of the earlier Middle Ages reflects directly and clearly the life and civilization of a Heroic Age. The dominant figure is the fighting king or chieftain; the favorite pursuit is war; the characteristic goals are power, wealth, and glory; and the primary virtues, accordingly, are valor and loyalty. The literary pattern is based on actuality, of which it presents a kind of idealization. In early Germanic and Celtic society the king ruled a small, essentially tribal nation; he and his companions in battle constituted a formal or informal noble class controlling the life of the people. The poems of such a society naturally tell chiefly of the fights of great champions, though also of the druids or other counselors who advised them and of the minstrels who entertained them. The proportions and the emphasis are much the same in the literature of the Irish, the Scandinavians, the French of the twelfth century, the Germans of the thirteenth. The hero of the *Song of Roland*, a twelfth-century French work, combines the fighting chieftain, serving his king, with the devout Crusader; and Archbishop Turpin is both spiritual adviser and fighting champion.

In the literature of the fourteenth century, the warrior plays a smaller rôle and is assimilated to the more extensive pattern of later medieval civiliza-

tion. Thus in Dante's Heaven only one of the nine celestial spheres—Mars—is occupied by great men-at-arms, all devout Christians, of course. Chaucer's Knight and Squire are only two among twenty-nine pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. The Knight is devoted to truth and honor, generosity, and courteous conduct, while his son, along with other virtues appropriate to a young soldier, possesses those of a courtly lover. The fighting champion of the Heroic Age has become the "officer and gentleman" of the modern world.

This gradual assimilation of the Celtic and Germanic hero to a civilization in which Christianity ordered the Greco-Roman culture to new ends was made possible by the religious unity and authority of Western Europe. The medieval millennium was indeed an age of faith, though it was far from being an age of religious passivity or inertia. The first half of the period was occupied in winning the new peoples of Europe to Christianity. When this had been accomplished, the Crusades began—a series of holy wars intended to rescue Palestine from pagan occupation and, in general, to defeat and either destroy or convert the pagans, chiefly Mohammedans. But the Greek and Arabic learning and philosophy which these non-Christian people introduced into Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries demanded an intellectual alertness. The sharpness of the Crusader's sword had to be matched by the acumen of the Scholastic philosopher; one of the chief works of St. Thomas Aquinas is a summation of principles in defense of Christianity "against the pagans" (his *summa contra Gentiles*). Medieval Christianity could never afford to take itself for granted. For the first four centuries after Christ the new religion was aggressively on the defensive; thereafter it had to be actively on the offensive in both the practical and the ideological spheres. Nevertheless, in Western Europe itself the combination of theological unity and ecclesiastical authority was a phenomenon unmatched either before or after the Middle Ages. The Roman Empire had provided political unity, law, and order, to assure the success of secular pursuits. Beyond that, it had left moral and spiritual problems to be handled by the individual, singly or in voluntary or ethnic groups. In medieval Europe political disunity was at something like a maximum; but under the leadership and direction of the Church there was achieved a remarkable unanimity of spiritual, moral, and intellectual attitudes and ideals.

The community of European culture in this period was such that the productions of individual countries look like regional manifestations of a central nuclear force. Generally speaking, students and scholars moved freely from land to land; monks, abbots, and bishops might be sent from the country of their birth to serve or preside in distant places; artists and poets wandered widely either in the train of or in search of patrons. Besides his native tongue, the educated man might be expected to speak and write the common "standard" language of Europe—Latin. In an age when the political state was relatively weak, a man's strongest loyalties were to an individual, a feudal lord, for example; to a code, such as the code of chivalry; to an order—of monks or friars or knights; or simply to the Church itself, if, like so many medieval men of intellectual interests, he was a cleric of some sort.

These ties—except for the feudal, and sometimes including that also—were *international* in nature. In such a cultural atmosphere the themes and

subjects and techniques of art and literature circulated freely throughout Europe. The *Gothic* architecture of a building is a more central aspect of it than the fact that it was designed and built by an English, a French, a German, or an Italian school of builders. Christianity itself furnished a common subject matter for painters, sculptors, and countless others skilled in the graphic and plastic arts; the biblical stories and scenes had the same meaning in every country. The stories of Charlemagne, Roland, and Arthur, of Aeneas, of Troy and Thebes, were European literary property. They were handled and rehandled, copied, translated, adapted, expanded, condensed, and in general appropriated by innumerable authors, writing in various languages, with no thought of property rights or misgivings about plagiarism. There were no copyright regulations and no author's royalties to motivate insistence on individuality of authorship; there was comparatively little concern about the identity of the artist. Many medieval poems and tales are anonymous, including some of the greatest.

The submergence of the artist in his work is accounted for in part, at least, by the medieval system of human values. The dominant hierarchy of values—we have seen that it did not dominate universally, especially in the literature of northern Europe—was based on the Christian view of man. Man, in this conception, is a creature of God, toward whom he is inevitably oriented but from whom he is separated by the world in which he must live his earthly, mortal life. Human civilization under Christian direction may be regarded as ideally designed—even if not actually so functioning—to assist man on his way to union with God. This is the criterion for the ultimate appraisal of all the institutions of society and all the patterns of culture. Hence derive the scale, the order, the hierarchical categories of medieval life and thought. Since the spiritual side of man transcends the material, the saint becomes the ideal. The saint is one whose life is most fully subdued, assimilated, and ordered to the spiritual. On earth he may be a hermit, like Cuthbert; a reformer of monasteries, like Bernard; a philosopher and a theologian, like Aquinas; a king, like Louis IX of France; or a humble man in private life. Since communion with God—the essential aspect of bliss in heaven—is an experience of the soul, the contemplative life, which prepares for the mystical communion, is superior to any form of the active life. Hence the monk—by virtue of his vocation—has an advantage over the secular priest, just as the priest is, other things being equal, in a position spiritually more desirable than that of the layman. As a whole, medieval literature is a study in human life judged according to this scale of values. The scale is represented clearly in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Secular-value patterns are assimilated to it, for instance in the *Song of Roland*; or it may be taken for granted without much emphasis, as in Chaucer's works. But it is always there, whether below or above the surface. For the modern reader it supplies a focus for the adequate reading and understanding of most of the literature of the Middle Ages.

Robert S. Hoyt, *Europe in the Middle Ages* (1957), is a good historical survey. For a view of medieval thought and culture as a whole, the standard older work is H. O. Taylor, *The Mediaeval Mind*, 2 vols., 4th ed. (1925). A more recent book is F. B. Artz, *The Mind of the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (1954).