

Reconstructing the Middle Ages

Reconstructing the Middle Ages:
Gaston Paris and the Development
of Nineteenth-century Medievalism

By

Isabel DiVanna

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Reconstructing the Middle Ages: Gaston Paris and the Development of Nineteenth-century
Medievalism, by Isabel DiVanna

This book first published 2008

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2008 by Isabel DiVanna

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,
or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or
otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-0064-3, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-0064-8

FOR JOE AND LEO

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Preface	xi
Chapter One.....	1
Have we been here before? The Medievalisms of Then and Now	
Chapter Two.....	19
Gaston Paris and Politics: The Epic as a National Legend	
Chapter Three	85
Gaston Paris and Science: The <i>fabliaux</i> and the Case of Nineteenth-century Orientalism	
Chapter Four.....	123
Gaston Paris and History: Arthurian Tales and the Anti-national Myths	
Conclusion.....	163
Bibliography.....	169

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is my pleasure to acknowledge here the contribution of so many academics and friends who have made this work possible. The original idea for this book can be found in another continent over a decade ago. As a student of History at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, I was fortunate to have found extremely kind and well-versed scholars who allowed me to work on the myth of Tristan and Isolda as my BA dissertation. It was because I was researching *Tristan et Iseut* that I first came across Gaston Paris's writings on medieval literature. Thanks are due to my dear friend Luis Costa Lima, who in 1997 fired my interest in nineteenth-century philological positivism and the institutionalisation of medieval studies in Europe. Thanks also to Flávia Eyler, who acted as my dissertation supervisor at PUC-Rio in 1998. I would also like to thank Carlos Ziller Camenietski, my former research supervisor at a CNPq-funded project, for his insight and comments on an early version of this work, and Marc Chinca for his stimulating course on Tristan and Isolda at Cambridge's Medieval Summer School in 1997. It is safe to say that although my ambitions at the time were to become a medievalist, now, over ten years later, I am delighted to have followed a different path and joined the group of nineteenth-century historians and those concerned with the history of historiography and of medievalism.

Special thanks are due to Stephen Rigby, my PhD supervisor, for his patience in reading and rereading each chapter of the thesis which engendered this book, and to Stuart Jones for his helpful comments about nineteenth-century France. The staff at John Rylands University Library in Manchester, at the Deansgate Library in Manchester, and at the University Library in Cambridge, were particularly kind to me while I was researching the printed sources. Likewise, the staff at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Richelieu site, are also deserving of my thanks.

I would also like to express my thanks to Elizabeth Emery, who read and commented an earlier version of my PhD thesis and provided valuable input regarding nineteenth-century medievalism. An enormous thank you is owed to Michel Zink for organising the colloquium on Gaston Paris at the Collège de France in 2003, and to Ursula Bähler and Stephen Nichols for many interesting discussions on Gaston Paris's work. Thanks also to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht for all his support.

To my friends Jeanne-Marie Musto and Phillipa Kim, I would like to say “thank you” for their continued support and help in exchanging bibliographies and reading articles for publication. An enormous thank you to Howard Bloch, for his kind support, and to Sue Reynolds, for allowing me to share my early ideas about Gaston Paris at the International Colloquium of Medieval Studies in Sewanee, Tennessee, in 2002.

I also would like to thank Gareth Stedman Jones, Tim Blanning, Astrid Swenson, Rosalind Crone, David Gange and Dawn Dodds for some interesting discussions about late nineteenth-century medievalism at Cambridge. Thanks also to the staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their care and attention to detail, and to Maggie Lythgoe for proof-reading the text.

Thanks are also due to the fellows of Wolfson College, Cambridge, for offering me a research fellowship and for allowing me to spend some time working on this manuscript before embarking on a new project.

Finally, thank you to my husband Joe and my son Leo, for their support, their love, and for being there when I need them.

Isabel DiVanna
Wolfson College, Cambridge
November 2008

PREFACE

Gaston Paris is one of the main names of nineteenth-century French medievalism. A controversial scholar, known for his sometimes romantic, sometimes positivistic approach to medieval literature, Paris was one of the academics responsible for introducing medieval studies as a professional discipline in Paris in the period 1860–70. Although some of his contribution is now rightly seen as an element of the history of historiography, in modern medieval studies and books by today's historians and literary critics, it is still possible to see many instances of the influence left by Gaston Paris and his generation. More importantly, the nationalistic imprint left by Gaston Paris's generation on medieval studies can be seen in modern studies in medievalism throughout Europe. The importance of memory, nationhood and identity makes Gaston Paris's work, produced in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1, a fundamental reading for those trying to understand the political conflicts of the early twentieth century, *revanchisme* and nationalism in their many varieties.

The nature and development of nineteenth-century medieval studies is of interest to scholars for several reasons. First, one becomes acquainted with the paradoxical character of nineteenth-century medievalism concerning methodology and theory. Second, looking at nineteenth-century medievalism enables one to identify the instances in which its legacy to later generations was also paradoxical and filled with duplicity. Third, when approaching nineteenth-century medievalism, we are faced with the efforts of scholars and academics in general in the second half of the nineteenth century to restore and, ultimately if not consciously, to recreate the French national past. Fourth, since the early 1900s, the work of nineteenth-century medievalists has been regarded as having established a body of solid evidence for medieval studies. For example, if a modern scholar decided to produce an edition of *La chanson de Roland*, he or she would inevitably use a nineteenth-century edition/translation as a guide. It is also likely that the dictionary to be used would be one that either was produced in the nineteenth century, or was based on a nineteenth-century dictionary/grammar; the historical context of *La chanson de Roland* is now almost commonplace because it was so well popularised from 1850 to 1900. Nineteenth-century scholars, often criticised by modern scholars,

were the first to make sense of medieval texts and to suggest the historical context which they describe and in which they were written. As such, we are still living with their intellectual legacy.

Interest in late nineteenth-century medievalism can be said to have started in North America in the 1980s and 90s, where a number of scholars from language departments of Ivy League universities like Berkley, Harvard, Yale and Johns Hopkins brought postmodernist approaches to the study of the history of history-writing in the nineteenth century.¹ Credit must be given to them for proving that an investigation of the work of late nineteenth-century medievalists was desirable as a means to understand modern medieval studies. Gaston Paris became, as an object of academic investigation, more popular than ever before in the years 2000–03, as scholars celebrated the 100 years since his death (in 2003). The *Revue des langues romanes* devoted an entire issue to him in 2002. Likewise, Michel Zink organised a colloquium about Gaston Paris's medievalism in Paris in 2003, a volume of conference proceedings being published the following year.² A younger generation of academics started their career in the early twentieth century by re-examining Gaston Paris's philological approach and offering an elegant intellectual biography of Gaston Paris and his most famous student, Joseph Bédier.³ Both groups, the so-called North American "new medievalists" and the new generation of European philologists and literary critics, have looked at the work of Gaston Paris and his contemporaries from the perspective of what it can tell us about our own modern-day practices, in terms of literary and philological analysis and criticism, and our current understanding of science and its role in society.

Without wishing to diminish the value of work produced in the past two decades on Gaston Paris, I am more interested in following a historian's approach to Gaston Paris's work in order to understand what his work and that of his colleagues tell us about late nineteenth-century medievalism at a time when academic studies and nationalism crossed

¹ For example, Howard Bloch, Stephen Nichols, Lee Patterson, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, David Hult and many others.

² Zink, ed. *Le moyen age de Gaston Paris*, with articles by Bähler, Nichols, Gumbrecht, Corbellari, Ridoux, Gasparini and many other experts on Gaston Paris.

³ For example, Ursula Bähler, Alain Corbellari, Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet and Philippa Kim. While Bähler's book on Paris is well researched, offering a great variety of archival material about Gaston Paris, there is less analysis of his ideas and how his theories intertwined with a cultural-political discourse in late nineteenth-century France.

paths in ways that have yet to be fully understood.⁴ A few scholars have attempted to solve the puzzle of late nineteenth-century historians and their particular methodology,⁵ but they have paid little attention to the importance of medievalism in the late nineteenth century. Likewise, those who have focused on medieval studies paid less attention than one might have wished to the actual methodology used by scholars like Gaston Paris⁶ and to the possibilities of a comparison between the methods of historians and literary critics and philologists in late nineteenth-century France. While it would be a great achievement to accomplish both (an examination of the method of philologists and literary critics in late nineteenth-century France *and* a comparison with the methodology of historians and sociologists at the same time period), the aim of this book is more modest. Here, I will simply re-evaluate the importance of understanding Gaston Paris's methodology by looking at his work on three medieval literary genres: the epic, the *fabliaux* and the poems and novels of the Arthurian cycle.⁷ Choosing an approach based on Gaston Paris's own theories about these literary genres (starting with what scholarly work influenced Paris, then how he created his own hypotheses based on new methods of scholarship, how he tested them on each literary genre, and finally what criticism his theories received) seems to me to be a profitable way to understand his ideas without, as previous scholarly work on Paris has done, forgetting that theory and methodology need to be assessed by looking at the object of investigation as well as the primary elements of theoretical knowledge.

This book focuses on the context, characteristics, methods and most prominent figures of late nineteenth-century medievalism. Chapter One offers a review of the legacy of nineteenth-century scholars that is passed on to modern medieval studies. Chapters Two to Four each outline one particular aspect of the legacy of nineteenth-century medievalism for modern studies of medieval literature via an analysis of scholarly work produced by Gaston Paris about the epic, the *fabliaux* and the tales of the

⁴ Excellent work has been done by Digeon in the classic *La crise allemande de la pensée française*, and by Berger, Donovan and Passmore in *Writing national histories*, for example.

⁵ See, for example, Carbonell, *Histoire et historiens* and Pim den Boer, *History as a profession*.

⁶ Ridoux's *Évolution des études médiévales en France* contains very little about this issue, which he considered briefly in "La carrière et la personnalité scientifique de Gaston Paris," and left one hoping for further considerations.

⁷ For an examination of the work of historians in late nineteenth-century France, see DiVanna, *Writing history in the Third Republic*.

Arthurian cycle. Chapter Two looks at Paris's claim that epics were "poems without a poet," meaning that epic poems were not produced by an individual, but by the collective work and memory of the people of a nation. Chapter Three discusses *fabliaux* as "poems without poetics," alluding to Paris's claim that the *fabliaux* were written in transparent language and mirrored day-to-day life. Chapter Four examines Arthurian poems as "poetics without a poem," in reference to Gaston Paris's criticisms of Paulin Paris's long-held idea that the first Arthurian tales were actually prose ones, and that the poetic texts of the troubadours came later. Throughout the book, I will keep in mind Gaston Paris's claims of an unbiased analysis, guided only by scientism, to reassess the validity of these claims as well as the validity of any claims of objectivity in historical studies. While I acknowledge the work of scholars in the 1970s, who have done much to discredit the usefulness of labels such as "positivistic" and "romantic" to understanding the work of late nineteenth-century historians,⁸ I nevertheless disagree with much of what they argued. I will show how the use of these labels was not simply a rhetorical device, nor a misunderstanding of one or another epistemological project.⁹ Neither were they simple misconceptions about the work of nineteenth-century medievalists with origins impossible to trace.¹⁰ Rather, in emphasising the use of a certain methodology that they interchangeably called "*philologique*," "*scientifique*" and/or "*positive*"¹¹ and contrasting it with a different set of guidelines which they themselves named "*romantique*," late nineteenth-century scholars reconstructed the history of their own discipline while recreating the French medieval past. This is the most crucial, and yet least understood, aspect of nineteenth-century medievalism, and it is safe to say that medieval studies would not have gained the impetus they received in 1860s France without the label of "scientific" studies and the development of a number of methodological practices.

In order to avoid confusion, I will refer to Gaston Paris's method as "scientific-positivistic" and "philological" interchangeably as scholars at

⁸ Such as Carbonell (with *Histoire et historiens*) and Keylor (with *Academy and community*).

⁹ See the articles by Gaulmier and Carbonell in *Romantisme. Le(s) positivesme(s)*.

¹⁰ Which seems to be Bähler's argument when she sets out to defend Gaston Paris's work from four common misconceptions to his approach without actually identifying the source of the misconception (see Bähler, "Gaston Paris et la philologie romane," 13–40).

¹¹ As we will see, they used different denominations for their methodology in different decades.

the time did, and use the contrasting label of “romantic” to works and approaches which would have received that name in the same period. What I understand by these labels is that a romantic methodology was one which, according to nineteenth-century scholars, followed a non-scientific process of deduction and reasoning, being, therefore, highly subjective. Romantic scholars, as they were called, were more likely to proceed to a literary than a philological analysis, and their work was very often seen as politically biased. Their understanding of what science meant and what its role was in French society was viewed as fragmentary, and although they attempted to explain cultural, social and political phenomena rationally, they were unsuccessful in doing so.

In contrast to this, the philological or scientific-positivistic approach was one which followed the new German theories about linguistics and philology and French positivism (meaning the use of the law of three stages, the need for an observation-based approach to human sciences, and the existence of positive knowledge at which one arrives through empirical means). Unlike a romantic approach, the scientific-positivistic approach offered the possibility of inductive analysis, which was thought to be less open to subjective considerations. The quest for the origins of texts and their component elements—linguistic, stylistic and plot-related—was preferred, and any political or religious bias was seen negatively. The idea of the evolution of the human spirit and yet a belief in the continuity of institutions and the cultural components of a people was part of the scientific-positivistic approach, alongside a comparative intent and the use of human sciences in the re-evaluation of the nation’s role and place in Europe. The creation of a unitary science, as in the Comtean positivistic programme, was popular among these scholars.

While presenting the work of Gaston Paris as representative of nineteenth-century scholarship, I will highlight the elements, concepts, theories or hypotheses which Paris created that can still be found in modern medieval studies, and analyse the responses of scholars in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century to Paris’s work. The book offers examples of the use of these concepts or theories in modern works and concludes with an assessment of the effectiveness of new medievalism as a project for medieval studies both in its views of nineteenth-century works and of medieval works themselves. The aim is to provide a criticism of nineteenth-century medievalism, but also—although to a smaller extent—of the medievalism of today.

Throughout this book, it becomes clear that the matter of nineteenth-century medievalism is not one which should solely interest literary critics, historians and those concerned with medievalism in its strictest sense.

Rather, nineteenth-century French medievalism is a topic which involves discussion about identity, the construction of the self-image of France before relations with Germany became hostile and especially as a result of the war with the Prussian Empire, as well as memory and modern views of nationhood. Issues such as race, gender and academic warfare are addressed here to create an image of late nineteenth-century France as a nation in which scholars as well as citizens were coming to terms with one fact: that the modernisation of France and its positioning in Europe against England, Germany and Italy meant that the only way to project the future of the nation was to look at her past. If one could not change that which has been, one could surely highlight the glorious elements which constituted it and construct (even if involuntarily) a past of which to be proud.

CHAPTER ONE

HAVE WE BEEN HERE BEFORE? THE MEDIEVALISMS OF THEN AND NOW

Il y avait cependant quelque chose dans l'air, quelque chose de subtil et d'inconnu, une atmosphère étrangère intolérable, comme une odeur répandue, l'odeur d'invasion. Elle emplissait les demeures et les places publiques, changeait le goût des aliments, donnait l'impression d'être en voyage, très loin, chez des tribus barbares et dangereuses.¹

The publication of medieval records in France under government auspices attained a level of quality in the nineteenth century somewhere between the consistent professionalism of the Germans and the idiosyncratic amateurism of the English.²

Introducing Medievalism

Medievalism is one area of study that has attracted increasing attention since the late 1970s, culminating in a great production of texts in this field in the 1980s and 90s. Broadly defined, medieval studies have long sought to examine medieval history, culture, economics, politics, art and literature, philology and philosophy. On the other hand, medievalism can be defined as the study of the history of medieval studies, or the investigation of the ways in which scholars and philosophers have constructed an image of the Middle Ages since the sixteenth century. In this sense, it is possible to see medieval studies as an empirical field of historical and literary studies, whereas medievalism concentrates on theoretical aspects of medieval studies, such as motivation, objectives, methodology and the results of these studies for the general understanding of the Middle Ages as a period of history.

As an academic discipline, medieval studies were born in nineteenth-century Europe as part of a movement of growing emphasis on all human

¹ Maupassant, *Boule de suif et autres contes de la guerre* [1880], 53

² Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages*, 33.

sciences and criticism (literary, textual and historical), in both France and Germany.³ A similar development of academic institutions, chairs and the growth of medievalism happened in Germany, France and then England. The French scenario is of course most relevant to Gaston Paris's views on medievalism, although the development of medieval studies in Germany also influenced his work and the work of other French historians, literary critics and philologists.

Historical and medieval studies gained great impetus in nineteenth-century France. In 1821, the Bourbon government founded the *École des chartes* with the purpose of stimulating critical historical research. This first effort was followed by the creation of a chair of Medieval French Language and Literature at the Collège de France in 1853, under the auspices of Hippolyte Fortoul, Louis Napoleon's minister of education. In 1860, a chair of Romance philology was created at Strasbourg University. The Collège de France separated the disciplines of history and geography from the other fields of humanities in 1869.⁴ In the late 1860s and 1870s, the government funded the creation of several institutions of higher education, such as the *École pratique des hautes études*, founded by Victor Duruy in 1868, one of the colleges where Gaston Paris was to teach Old French.⁵ These were just some of the many institutions created in the mid- and late nineteenth century with the purpose of promoting higher education in the field of humanities, including the emerging discipline of medieval studies.

The creation of the first chair of French medieval literature in Paris in 1853 symbolised this growing interest in historical studies, especially of the medieval period. From the 1850s, medieval studies became more and more professional, in the sense that they were now regarded as best carried out within the walls of academic institutions. The work of previous generations of scholars and researchers of the medieval period then came to be seen as pre-professional. With some notable exceptions, work produced between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries had been highly derogatory of the medieval period, and the image of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages prevailed until the early nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, however, the Middle Ages emerged as the national muse, the point of formation of the French character, the most important period in French history. How did this happen, and why?

³ For general information, see Belis, *La critique française à la fin du XIXe siècle*; Berg, *La querelle des critiques en France à la fin du XIXe siècle*.

⁴ Monod, "La chaire d'histoire au Collège de France," 242–5.

⁵ Dakyns, *The Middle Ages in French literature 1851–1900*, 37.

During the late eighteenth century, studies of the Middle Ages fell into two categories: first, the unflattering texts by Enlightenment philosophers who viewed the Middle Ages as, at most, a necessary step in the human path to progress and happiness; and second, antiquarian works, such as those of Saint-Palaye,⁶ Papon⁷ and Le Grand d'Aussy.⁸ What characterised these antiquarian works was the lack of an explicit methodology for dealing with their object, which, to us, makes these authors' texts seem merely a chaotic summary of documents or literary texts.⁹ The legacy of antiquarian historians can be seen clearly in early nineteenth-century medieval studies, but progressively disappeared during the period 1830–50. Scientific-positivistic scholars of the late nineteenth century considered that the antiquarian legacy had been completely superseded in the 1870s and 80s, the era of self-proclaimed scientific approaches to medieval themes.

As noted above, as a professional academic discipline, French medieval studies were born in the 1800s. The birth of medieval studies was not, however, itself an object of study until the late twentieth century. In the 1980s, scholars such as Howard Bloch, Stephen Nichols, Kevin Brownlee and others started a movement in North America which they themselves called New Medievalism.¹⁰ Their purpose was to review the roots of medieval studies as an academic discipline, looking back at the period 1850–80 as that of the institutionalisation of medieval studies and the birth of medievalism. Coming from a consciously postmodern perspective, the new medievalists claimed that in understanding where medieval studies came from, they could comprehend where they now stand and where they will develop in future. For them, nineteenth-century medievalists, viewing medieval studies as a means both of knowing the past better and reinforcing traditional French values (such as loyalty, courage, religion), were not only changing the sense of medieval texts, but also reinventing their own France, and since then medievalism has been, to a great extent, linked with the idea of restoring a lost past.

Emphasising the birth of medieval studies as a part of the rise of modernity in the late 1800s, Bloch and Nichols highlighted the influence of nineteenth-century polemics and debates about literature and history on modern medieval studies. New medievalist scholars have thus produced a

⁶ Sainte-Palaye, *Mémoires sur l'ancienne chevalerie*.

⁷ Papon, *Voyage littéraire de Provence*.

⁸ Le Grand d'Aussy, *Fabliaux ou contes du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle*.

⁹ Glencross, "La matière de Bretagne dans l'érudition française à l'époque romantique," 95–105, and *Reconstructing Camelot*, 50–5.

¹⁰ Brownlee et al, eds. *The new medievalism*, 1–15.

number of studies of nineteenth-century savants, such as Gaston Paris, Ferdinand Brunetière and Joseph Bédier. Their work interests us here because of their characterisation of late nineteenth-century medievalism in terms of an emphasis on historical analysis based on documentary research and philology, a belief in the transparency of language, and nationalism as a key influence on the views of scholars of the period. Each of these themes will be examined in detail below in order to offer an assessment of new medievalist views of nineteenth-century medievalism.

The very idea that a medievalism can be “new” requires further explanation, although this is not an easy task for several reasons. The medievalism of Gaston Paris and his school of innovative thinkers was, at its time, also new. In order to proceed to a comparison between two new medievalisms roughly 100 years apart, one is quickly faced with a severe crisis of conscience and belief. In order to understand medieval studies in the 1870s, it is crucial to remember that scholars of that period viewed their task as that of reaching the true Middle Ages, not merely producing a representation of it. If scholars today are aware of the impossibility of truly knowing a historical period and tend to see their work as an attempt to recreate it with the aid of existing sources, nineteenth-century scholars had a different attitude. This makes it rather complex for us to assess nineteenth-century scholars’ work on the Middle Ages as it was based on different grounds from our own. Of course, as historians, we can move past this first difficulty and invoke all the elements of historicism to keep nineteenth-century medievalism quite apart from modern medievalism.

Another reason why our task to understand nineteenth-century medievalism as viewed by modern scholars is made harder is that the founders of the project of new medievalism in late nineteenth-century France never clearly defined the objectives of their studies, even though they constantly emphasised the significance of their work. The third difficulty is that modern-day new medievalism incorporates most fields of historical studies devoted to the Middle Ages, such as geo-history, psychological history, art and literary history, philological studies, cultural and social studies, to mention just a few, making some of its texts quite specialised and difficult to assess. Each separate field seems to have one thing in common: the claim that a modern approach to medieval studies cannot be separated from an extensive understanding of where medieval studies came from, how and why they were founded, and the personalities of their founders.

North American new medievalists of the 1980s approached these problems in a fascinating way. In fact, rather than shedding light on late nineteenth-century medievalism, they somehow made it even more

obscure than it already was. One only has to have a good look at the two bibles of new medievalism (Bloch and Nichols' *Medievalism and the modernist temper* and Brownlee et al.'s *The new medievalism*) to be sure to understand slightly less about Gaston Paris and his fellow scholars than ever before. With a complicated neo-historicist, postmodernist approach and a tendency to overemphasise discourse where discourse was not necessarily used, new medievalists intentionally or subconsciously (one should interpret it as one must) decided to keep readers in the dark. Instead of focusing on the nineteenth-century historians' method and trying to understand it within the context of their own discipline and the historical context in which they lived, the new medievalists resorted to psychology, psychoanalysis and a wide variety of ancillary sciences to avoid approaching the real problem of nineteenth-century medievalism, namely the reliance on a particular methodology which did not quite fall into the category of scientific-positivistic in spite of scholars' own aims. In fact, nineteenth-century studies of medieval history and literature used contradictory, even opposing elements in their methodological core. Making use of elements of what was then called "romanticism" alongside what was called "positivism," Gaston Paris and his fellow medievalists developed a medievalism which can only be understood by looking at the intellectual context in which it was born, as opposed to predominantly discussing intentionality and discourse. More than this, the medievalism of Gaston Paris and his colleagues can only be appreciated if one looks at the method used to produce knowledge of the French Middle Ages in relation to a wider system of thought in late nineteenth-century France.

Introducing Gaston Paris

Choosing Gaston Paris as the man responsible for the development of nineteenth-century French medievalism is not necessarily an original task. As noted above, the hundredth anniversary of the death of Gaston Paris in 1903 brought increased awareness to the subject.¹¹ It so happens that Gaston Paris is one of the most prolific French scholars of all times, founder of two particularly important journals of French history and literary studies, and by far the most well known of all late nineteenth-century French medievalists. In spite of this, work on Gaston Paris and late nineteenth-century medievalists thus far has mostly been done by literary critics and philologists, and, as a result, the questions they uncovered about Gaston Paris as a literary critic and a philologist point to a gap in the

¹¹ Zink, ed. *Le moyen âge de Gaston Paris*.

understanding of Gaston Paris in his historical context and of his work in terms of the history of historiography. This is precisely what this book will try to do: understand Gaston Paris's work in context and recognize his contribution as representative of a certain understanding of what history meant, who it was for, and how it should be done.

Gaston Bruno Paulin Paris (1839–1903) was the only son of Pauline and Paulin Paris (1800–81). Paulin Paris was an archivist and librarian who, in the 1830s, pioneered in Paris a movement of bringing awareness to medieval French texts. As his father's son, Gaston dedicated his life to the humanities. When he was 18 years old, he graduated from the Collège Rollin, where he studied Classics. In 1856, his father sent the young Paris to Germany so that he could learn the language and the methods of Germanic research.¹² When Gaston returned to France, he completed his *maîtrise* with the thesis *Étude sur le rôle de l'accent latin dans la langue française*.¹³ In 1865, he completed his *doctorat* following the requirement of producing two theses: *Chronique du Faux-Turpin* (in Latin) and *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne* (in French). The latter won him the Prix Gobert, being acclaimed as the first work of French literary criticism to use historical methods of comparative analysis. Later, Paris produced his edition of *La vie de Saint Alexis* based on German philologist Karl Lachmann's editing methods, which also won the Prix Gobert (1871). He did not write any monographs and indeed he only published three books after 1871, all of them collections of his own articles and lecture transcripts.

In 1872, Gaston replaced his father as lecturer of the chair of French language and literature at the Collège de France, where he taught until 1902. He was a successful lecturer and writer. He had so many functions in major Parisian academic institutions and institutes of higher education that it is not surprising that he married quite late in life, in 1885, when he was 46 years old. His first wife, Marie Paris, died four years later. In 1891, Paris married Marguerite Savary, with whom he had one daughter, Marguerite.¹⁴ He died suddenly of a heart attack in 1903. Paris's theories on medieval studies, especially his work on medieval literature, have been

¹² Bloch, "Mieux vaut jamais que tard," 68–9.

¹³ Paris, *Étude sur le rôle de l'accent latin dans la langue française*.

¹⁴ Meyer, "Funérailles de M. Gaston Paris" in *Bulletin historique et philologique du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques*; Monod, "Nécrologue: Gaston Paris"; Romero, ed. "Gaston Paris" in *Epistolario de Rufino José Cuervo con Alfred Morel-Fatio*; Ker, "A great French scholar," 101–12.

the focus of several short articles by medievalists¹⁵ who seek to understand how medieval studies were created and to what extent nineteenth-century theories and methods still influence medieval studies today.¹⁶

Paris's life was dedicated to medieval studies. He produced over one thousand works, among which are many articles, a few books, a large number of book reviews and some lecture transcripts. He developed theories on the epic, the *fabliaux*, the Arthurian romance, moralising literature, saints' lives, and studied French, Italian, Portuguese, English, Germanic, Hungarian, Danish and Indian literature in several periods of history. He founded the journals *Romania* and *Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature* and collaborated on several others. Paris was also responsible for the creation and popularisation of concepts and theories, such as *amour courtois*, the Indian origin of the *fabliaux* and the Celtic origin of the Tristan tales, which are still known to most scholars in the field of medieval studies and literary studies in general.

Earlier on, I mentioned that one of the reasons why the new medievalists examine Gaston Paris and scholars of his generation is because they are said to have both founded medieval studies in France and imprinted particular characteristics to these studies. It is important to note that the work of Gaston Paris was never systematically approached before the 1980s (a few footnotes about his definition of *amour courtois* are the only pre-1980 references to be found).¹⁷ Before then, no special attention was given to him or his contribution to medieval studies. Since this

¹⁵ See, for example, Gumbrecht, "Un souffle d'Allemagne ayant passé," 1–37; Kelly, "The varieties of love in medieval literature according to Gaston Paris," 301–27; Aarsleff, "Scholarship and ideology," 93–113; Bähler, "Notes sur l'acception du terme de philologie romane chez Gaston Paris," 23–40; Camille, "Philological iconoclasm," 192–224; Hult, "Gaston Paris and the invention of courtly love," 371–401; Bloch, "Naturalisme, nationalisme, médiévisme," 62–87; Bloch, "Mieux vaut jamais que tard," 64–86; Brownlee et al, eds. *The new medievalism*; Cerquiglini, *Éloge de la variante*.

¹⁶ Bähler started her book on Gaston Paris by proceeding to a fascinating analysis of Paris's description on his passport versus his own self-image as he "corrected" the data as per the police archivist (see her *Gaston Paris et la philologie romane*, 27–310). As interesting as this sort of analysis can prove, here I focused not on private papers and letters of Gaston Paris, but rather on his printed work to understand the image of the Middle Ages and medievalism that he helped create in late nineteenth-century France.

¹⁷ See the three classic pre-1980 works on medievalism: Doolittle, *The relations between literature and mediaeval studies in France from 1820 to 1860*; Dakyns, *The Middle Ages in French literature*; Stock, "The Middle Ages as subject and object," 527–47.

increased interest in Gaston Paris seems to have started with new medievalism, I will analyse three main issues. The first issue concentrates on the methods of nineteenth-century scholars and the ways in which they influenced and continue to influence medieval studies. The second issue is that of new medievalism, that is, how and why scholars of the past few decades decided to approach late nineteenth-century medievalism, the conclusions at which they arrive, and how valid these conclusions are. Third, I will point to the necessarily intricate and yet fundamentally contextual, important elements of late nineteenth-century France and the correlation of the development of medieval studies at the time with the particular political and intellectual changes happening in France before and after 1870.

My chief concern in this introductory chapter is to outline Gaston Paris's general method and intellectual context, and identify the main claims of modern scholars about Gaston Paris and nineteenth-century medievalism. The strengths and weaknesses of these claims will be assessed in Chapters Two to Four on Paris's work on the epic, the *fabliaux* and the Arthurian cycle, where I turn to Paris's published writings to verify if he practised what he preached in terms of methodology, and to show the claims in which in spite of himself he failed to follow a rigorous methodology that he would have considered scientific-positivistic.

Gaston Paris's Medievalism

Despite the huge range of topics covered by Gaston Paris's publications, his work was given a unity by his desire to make French medieval studies more scientific. For Paris, the most important lesson that he had learned during his stay in Germany was that historical and literary studies needed to have a clear and well-defined methodology. For him, academic studies should not be based on subjective feelings; rather, they needed to be objective, and in order to be objective, they had to be based on primary sources. Whether these sources were fictional texts or historical/archival documents was of no importance; what was important was the method used to analyse and make sense of these sources.

While in Germany, Paris was exposed to the theories of several of the great German theorists of historical and literary studies, such as Curtius and Diez. He also studied Ranke, Kant, Wolf, Lachmann and the Brothers Grimm. He gathered from Ranke that history had to be based on a critical

assessment of the primary sources.¹⁸ From Kant he learned to be suspicious of metaphysics as a foundation for knowledge.¹⁹ From Wolf and Lachmann he learned methods of editing texts and how to establish whether a work such as the *Iliad*, the *Nibelungenlied* or *Roland* had been written by one poet or by a group of people.²⁰ Finally, from the Brothers Grimm he learned the importance of popular culture and literature in understanding a nation's past.²¹ Relying on these scholars as the source of a new, scientific or philological approach to medieval literature, Gaston Paris became the French herald of a new order of medieval studies which would bring greatness to France.

Back in France in the 1860s, Paris was confronted with a problem that was then common to all scholars in the field of the humanities. How could he ensure that the work produced on medieval themes was scientific by Germanic standards? Science, for Paris, was indivisible, as he shared a commonly held view about the unity of science.²² The first step that Paris identified for unified scientific work was that of finding a primary source.²³ This was vital because, in his opinion (in which Ranke's influence can clearly be seen), only primary sources were trustworthy. But there was still another problem: of all the versions of a primary source of a poem (for example of *Tristan et Iseut*), how could scholars identify the oldest, the original poem? The only possible way seemed to be by using philology and adopting Lachmann's method of developing a genealogical tree of manuscripts.²⁴ Lachmann had claimed that if one took a poem and compared it to other versions of it, one would certainly find discrepancies in the narrative, which would then allow the identification of the original poem (the simplest one) and the later versions of it (the more complex ones). In theory, this was a straightforward issue: it was a matter of identifying manuscripts that were alike and attributing them to a family of manuscripts. Once the oldest surviving manuscript was found, one could start analysing it, as it provided the true basis of historical/literary knowledge.

¹⁸ Iggers and Powell, eds. *Leopold Von Ranke and the shaping of the historical discipline*; Ranke, *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations from 1494 to 1514*.

¹⁹ See Kant, *Critique de la raison pure*, 50–5.

²⁰ Wolf, *Prolegomena ad Homerum*.

²¹ Antonsen et al., *The Grimm Brothers and the Germanic past*; and Grimm, "Preface" to *Kinder - und Hausmärchen gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm*, 439–42.

²² A view popularised in France by Ernest Renan in his *L'avenir de la science*.

²³ Paris, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*, 33–6.

²⁴ See Timpanaro, *La genesi del metodo del Lachmann*, especially Chapters 1–3.

After doing this, the work was still only partially done. It was then necessary to contextualise the literary work as a historical document, which meant taking painful steps to establish the date when it was produced and to ascertain possible authorship. This done, the work had then to be read in its context, that is, in relation to other works of the same period or by the same author. For Paris, this was a relatively simple and straightforward task. However, the next step of the work (compiling the edits, variations and comprehensive explanatory notes into a philological edition) was more complicated and time-consuming. If all steps were followed, the end-result, Paris thought, was unquestionably reliable and accurate.

The problems that modern scholars can easily identify in Paris's approach are twofold. First, the use of philology did not mean that scholars were avoiding subjectivity in their readings, as Paris believed. Second, the claim that later variations that scribes introduced in their rewriting of literary texts were valueless in terms of understanding medieval literature meant that they ignored an important part of the literary production of medieval times.²⁵ As we will see on Chapters Two to Four, this sort of modern criticism, while valid, was not entirely unknown in late nineteenth-century scholarship. Whereas many scholars in Gaston Paris's generation ignored the second problem, the first problem was well known to nineteenth-century literary and textual critics. After all, when scholars of Paris's time read a text, they were very aware that their subjectivity necessarily interfered with the reading of that text. This was exactly their criticism of romantic scholars, meaning that the romantics were too subjective in their historical and literary analysis.²⁶ They anguished endlessly over this problem. The arrival of German methods provided a solution. The apparently flawless methods of linguistics, philology and comparative language studies were revolutionary. Scholars then believed that any subjectivity could be overcome if one followed the scientific methodology, identifying the date when manuscripts had been produced so that the sense of a sentence or a word could be established by comparing it with its use in other works of the time. By using philology and linguistics, one could thus reach an objective conclusion about the meaning of a word and, ultimately, the entire text. Consequently, there was very little need to interpret a text or read between the lines in most medieval fictional works,

²⁵ See, for example, Camille, "Philological iconoclasm," 377–81; Hult, "Reading it right," 122–7.

²⁶ Paris, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*, vii–viii; Paris, "Paulin Paris et la littérature française du moyen âge," 249–50.

because philology provided an instrument of science with which scholars could solve all problems.

In their enthusiasm, nineteenth-century medievalists went a bit too far at times; they saw chemistry and geology as excellent ancillary sciences as well, as they used every method known to man to show how to analyse (meaning to separate chemical substances) and trace origins (meaning to find out the date when a rock was formed). The trend of applying physical sciences to human sciences was very popular in the 1860s, but thankfully it died out in the mid-1870s, when scholars realised the limitations of comparing medieval texts and language to quartzite, marble and other metamorphic rocks.

In addition to the use of philology and other less orthodox ancillary sciences, nineteenth-century scholars were confident in another aspect of medieval literature which they believed could guarantee an objective reading of a text: the transparency of language. A Rankean idea widely adopted by nineteenth-century scholars, this concept, as Ranke intended it, meant that the language in which historical documents were written was always clear, not needing any interpretation of the content “between the lines.” Ranke’s transparency of language as applied to medieval literature allowed scholars to infer that all medieval literary genres had one thing in common: they mirrored the reality of day-to-day life. In their opinion, in reading medieval texts, one was not reading mere works of fiction, but rather accurate chronicles of medieval life. If a piece of medieval literary work contained obscure references to legends, allusions or metaphors, a modern reader could still arrive at an understanding of it based on historical knowledge.²⁷

There are at least four major problems with the nineteenth-century understanding of medieval texts, problems which have been discussed since as early as the 1890s. First, philology is a human science, and therefore one cannot rule out the possibility of error even in a philological analysis. One might admit that in physical sciences errors do occur, but they become self-evident due to the observation of hard evidence in the real world. In human sciences, however, mistakes are harder to prove, because they often depend on (subjective) points of view. Second, philological analysis does not exclude the possibility of reading between the lines and finding hidden meanings in a text; the author may have placed these meanings there or they may be anachronistic additions of the modern reader. Third, even if there is no hidden sense in the fictional work and philology is a reliable instrument with which to interpret it, this still

²⁷ Paris, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*, 41.

does not mean that one study of a work is more scientific than any other. The criteria of what can be viewed as scientific work change constantly, as do the methods and objectives of literary and textual analysis. Fourth, the very idea of transparent language poses problems for the understanding of literary production, problems I will examine in the chapter on the *fabliaux*. The point is that Paris's literary theory, a theory which seemed so obvious to him, is in fact highly debatable, one reason why his work has been the focus of contemporary criticism.

However, despite such criticisms, Paris's work remains a significant contribution to the history of literary theory, medieval studies and medievalism. The questions and problems that scholars in the late nineteenth century were debating were, quite understandably, not always the same as those of today, which is why Paris's work needs to be understood in its own intellectual context. In particular, in Paris's career, the central problem of medieval studies was how to be more scientific and how to supersede the romantic influence in French intellectual life. Yet, if one approaches Paris's work as representing simply the rejection of romanticism and the ultimate triumph of positivism, one understands only one aspect of nineteenth-century medieval studies.²⁸ In fact, as I aim to show, a romantic influence continued to be strong in late nineteenth-century French scholarship, and the triumph of positivism was far from complete.

Romanticism and Positivism: A Matter of Definitions?

When, in 1901, Ferdinand Brunetière began to write on Comtism and positivism in nineteenth-century France,²⁹ it became clear that the positivistic contribution to French intellectual history was no minor issue. For 50 years, positivism had been seen as an essential approach to human sciences, as well as a method, a theory of knowledge and a philosophical doctrine. For Brunetière, its original meaning, the meaning as Comte had intended it, was hard to retrieve. In fact, positivism is one example of those terms of nineteenth-century intellectual life that Nicolet refers to as *mots voyageurs*, because their meanings depend on the context where they were used.³⁰ In a sense, this is true of any word, because the sense of a term is always given by the context in which it is being used. However,

²⁸ Aarsleff, "Scholarship and ideology," 94–6.

²⁹ Brunetière, *Sur les chemins de la croyance*, iv–xvi. See also Bähler's article, "Gaston Paris et Ferdinand Brunetière," 49–68.

³⁰ Nicolet, *L'idée républicaine en France (1789–1924)*, 16–18.

with positivism one comes across another issue: as a philosophical doctrine, Comtean Positivism was very clearly defined by its creator. Yet, by the late nineteenth century, it had been transformed so that it became hard to retrieve its original sense from the different meanings that had been given to it. In order to understand positivism, we must see how it was used in a variety of intellectual contexts.

An initial definition of the term “positivism”³¹ should necessarily relate it to Auguste Comte’s work, which sought to establish an understanding of how humanity had evolved and would further progress until it finally reached its most perfect state. Combining social positivism (the science that studied the human race, focusing on the social relationships between individuals), the religion of humanity (the ethical, non-theistic religion based on the collective and individual aspects of humankind) and a theory of knowledge (based on the assumption that humans evolve from the theological stage into the metaphysical one and then to the positive one, not yet fully achieved), positivism in this sense is a viewpoint that knowledge can be attained only through observation and empiricism, and that these form the basis of modern science. In this context, positivism can be seen as a reaction to the pre-nineteenth-century theories of knowledge, which based some or all their arguments on a priori knowledge and relied upon metaphysical, religious or moralistic assumptions, not simply on material reality.³²

However, the issue here is not Comte’s Positivism, but rather how nineteenth-century scholars of philology, linguistics, history and mythology saw positivism, and how they adopted and sometimes defined this term for their own particular purposes. It should be stressed, however, that most late nineteenth-century scholars hardly ever called their own studies positivistic or ever explicitly mentioned Auguste Comte. Gaston Paris never once mentioned Comte when describing his methodology, although he used the term “*science positive*.” In practice, what scholars did was apply Comte’s system in terms of the essential steps of human civilisation (theological, metaphysical and positive), the importance of science, and the need for order to achieve progress. These aspects of Comtean philosophy came to form part of the common heritage of the academic milieu in mid- and late nineteenth-century France. As Simon suggested, there was thus a difference between institutionalised positivism, which adhered to Comte’s own philosophical statements, and that

³¹ In order to set the difference between Positivism as Comte’s doctrine and the general use of positivism by other nineteenth-century savants, the former will be capitalised, whereas the latter will not.

³² Charlton, *Positivist thought in France during the Second Empire*, 5–7.

practised by those he called “partial adherents,” whose commitment to the positivist cause was less explicit.³³

Among the list of self-proclaimed positivistic scholars were Émile Littré, Hippolyte Taine and Ernest Renan, who were often seen as representatives of the earlier generation of positivists of the Second Empire. Yet Charlton maintained that even they were not “true positivists,” for they used only specific aspects of Comte’s thought while rejecting others.³⁴ Ernest Renan, whose writings on Celtic literature were so influential to Gaston Paris’s generation, highlighted the non-Comtean character of positive academic works in the Second Empire, namely that scholars made a commitment to the democratic order and the need to make France a greater nation.³⁵ Another self-proclaimed positivist and adept of Germanic theories and methodologies was medievalist Gabriel Monod, one of Paul Meyer’s disciples. Monod was, at the time of his involvement in the founding of the *Revue historique* (1876), an enthusiast of the positivistic (but not necessarily Comtean) character of modern historical studies. By positivism, Monod meant the application of an empirical method in the study of the humanities and the moral objective of those studies, which used Germanic scholarship to be more scientific.³⁶ “*Notre siècle*,” Monod said, “*est le siècle de l’histoire*.”³⁷ Relying heavily on the fact that positivism was a term that demanded no further explanation—although it confuses modern readers to no end—nineteenth-century scientists defended the use of the positive method in order to produce scientific knowledge in history and its related disciplines, and, in some cases, to defend a republican, democratic order free from clerical domination. Echoing the discourse of Enlightenment philosophers and their rejection of religion and metaphysics, positivist scholars eagerly turned against what they considered to be the speculative and abstract nature of the studies of their romantic predecessors.

³³ Simon, *European positivism in the nineteenth century*, 10.

³⁴ Charlton, *Positivist thought in France during the Second Empire*, 2–3.

³⁵ Gaulmier, “Tout est fécond, excepté le bon sens,” p. 8.

³⁶ Carbonell disagrees with the idea that Germanic historiography and methods had been incorporated into French historiography in the late nineteenth century, showing the reduced importance of Germanic knowledge in periodicals other than the *Revue Historique* (see Carbonell, “La réception de l’historiographie Allemande en France (1866–1885),” 327–44). Nevertheless, for the group that followed Monod and interacted with Gaston Paris and Paul Meyer, Germanic principles of scientific thought were particularly important.

³⁷ Monod, “Du progrès des études historiques,” 27.