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## MEDIEVAL MARXISTS: A TRADITION<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a number of individuals from the last two centuries who, for varying reasons, have been attracted to both medieval studies and action for social change. Karl and Eleanor Marx, William Morris, and F.J. Furnivall are among the illustrious exemplars of this dual tradition, to which Margaret Schlauch, in whose honor this conference was convened, also belonged.

I begin with two disclaimers. The first is that this is not a formal paper but rather a series of impressions and anecdotes about several people in this and the last century who were committed to medieval studies and to social change. This is because the paper originated as a talk in a panel on women medievalists at the International Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo. I was asked to speak about my career and I chose instead to do a prosopographic piece, inserting myself into what could loosely be called a tradition, one to which Margaret Schlauch also belonged. Since the point of being a Marxist is precisely in community, context and history, this seems appropriate, and I am sure that Schlauch (with the modesty I have learned was characteristic of her) would have approved.

My second disclaimer is about the looseness of what I am calling a tradition, because I don't claim to have been directly influenced by any of the people I will mention, except for the first one, who was not a medievalist. I will bring out

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly edited version of a keynote address given at the Schlauch Symposium in Poznań, May, 2002. I am grateful to Alan Lupack of the Robbins Library at Rochester for sending me copies of Margaret Schlauch's letters to the Robbinses. Ross Robbins once asked me to edit this correspondence, but I was unable to at the time. I also appreciate the cooperation of Greg Finger, who supplied information about his aunt Helen Ann Mins Robbins's political life, and of Professor Jacek Fisiak of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland, Schlauch's student and colleague. My research assistant Margot Kaminski has been an invaluable help in this as in other projects.

some points of contact among these individuals and between them and myself as a Marxist medievalist.

Karl Marx wrote about medieval economics, as he had to in order to document the development of mercantile capitalism during the high Middle Ages. These scattered items, collected by Eric Hobsbawm in *Precapitalist economic formations*, have been used by many cultural historians – Ernst Fischer, Arnold Hauser, Norbert Elias, Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel, Jacques LeGoff, Perry Anderson among others – and remain useful to materialist-minded medievalists. Marx well understood the radical intellectual and social innovations of the high medieval period (e.g., the Italian city-state) and admired high medieval culture. He paid special tribute to Dante, ending his preface to the first edition of *Capital* with a line from “the great Florentine” that might well have served as his own life motto: “Segui il tuo corso e lascia dir le genti”.<sup>2</sup>

The beautiful and erudite Eleanor Marx, Karl’s oldest daughter, had close friendships with two important figures in nineteenth-century medievalism who themselves were social activists. One was the artist and printer William Morris, with whom Eleanor, along with Friedrich Engels and others, founded the Socialist League in 1884. Morris’s medievalism was a lifelong commitment, starting with his childhood reading of the novels of Sir Walter Scott, then reinforced at Oxford by John Ruskin’s work, especially “The Nature of Gothic”, and by fashionable Anglo-Catholicism (Meier 1978: 95; for other work on Morris’s Marxism, see Grennan (1945 [1970]), Boos and Silver (1990), MacDonald (1999)). His early “Defense of Guinevere” (1858) picks up the art-nouveau medievalism of the period (also exhibited in Tennyson’s Arthurian cycles, in some of Browning’s dramatic monologues, and in the work of several painters) as well as its nascent feminism. His epic *The Earthly Paradise* is set against the backdrop of the Black Plague; his “Dream of John Ball” commemorates the leader of the great and nearly successful 1381 rebellion; and his socialist utopia, *News from nowhere*, combines certain aspects of medieval life with Marxian notions of revolutionary struggle, full genuine socialism and the development of human personality. As a craftsman, Morris produced what has been called one of the most beautiful books ever made, the *Kelmscott Chaucer* (in 1894). Morris had little use for what he called “the maundering side of medievalism” – the merely aesthetic attraction to medieval art, and the sentimental romanticization of the period evident in the work of various poets and painters. Instead, Morris constructed a “realistic” medievalism. For him, what tied Marxism and medievalism together was, in his own words, “hatred of modern civilization” – a hatred gen-

<sup>2</sup> This appears to be an emended quote, for the first half of the line appears as “Vien dietro a me...” (Purg. 5.13) in John Sinclair’s edition/translation (1939).

erated in turn by “the desire to produce beautiful things ... the love and practice of art” (Briggs 1994: 36-37). In this sense, both his art and his politics were strategies of protest and of reconstruction.

Eleanor Marx was never as close to William Morris as she was to F.J. Furnivall, the famous editor of medieval texts, founder of the Chaucer, Ballad, Wyclif and Early English Text societies, and organizer of what eventually became *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Furnivall was a militant activist for the rights and education of working men and women; he organized, he marched, he demonstrated, he led protests in the streets. Furnivall’s socialism, unlike Morris’s, was not of the Marxian revolutionary type, but rather the semi-utopian good-works Christian Socialism fashionable among English intellectuals at mid-century. His Middle Ages was far different from the one envisioned by his contemporary Thomas Carlyle, whose *Past and Present* evoked a peaceful, static feudalism in which everyone knew his place. (A rather similar vision was revived not so long ago in D. W. Robertson’s influential *Preface to Chaucer* (1962)). Part of Furnivall’s attraction to medieval literature lay in what he saw as its populist thrust; thus in 1858 he lectured on *Piers Plowman* “because of its sketch of working men in the fourteenth century”, as he put it (Munro 1906: xxxvi). He must have felt deeply gratified when the introduction to the EETS volume for 1870 – a collection of English guild records – became an important document in the development of English trade union law (see Haas 1989: 319-332).

As an employee and friend of Furnivall, Eleanor Marx gave papers in several of his societies, especially the Browning Society and the Shelley Society, for Shelley’s work in particular was a touchstone of social radicalism for many, including for Eleanor’s famous father.<sup>3</sup> She took her dear papa to literary meetings, for he was a lover of romantic poetry and of Shakespeare’s work.<sup>4</sup> A private Shakespeare club grew out of Furnivall’s larger Shakespeare society; it often convened at the Marxes’ house, and the two men evidently met, there or elsewhere, for Marx described Furnivall as resembling “a pilgrim on the way to

<sup>3</sup> Eleanor and her companion, Edward Aveling, wrote a pamphlet called *Shelley’s socialism*; she recalls “the Byron and Shelley-worship of the Chartists” whom she knew in childhood, and Engels’s comment: “We all knew Shelley by heart then” (Kapp 1976, 2: 250).

<sup>4</sup> Marx was also a writer of romantic poetry: cf. the City Lights edition, *Love-poems of Karl Marx* (1977), by Lawrence Ferlinghetti; these are juvenilia addressed to, or about, his then-fiancée, Jenny. As for Shakespeare, the quotes are everywhere, most notably in “The power of money in bourgeois society” from *Economic and philosophical manuscripts*. For an in-depth appreciation of this complex relationship, see Jacques Derrida (1994).

the Holy Land to seek St. Anthony's beard" (Kapp 1976, 1: 172 n).<sup>5</sup> At least one can say that the two men were well matched in the matter of beardsmanship, as well as in literary taste and unconventional social views. Eleanor worked at the British Museum for Furnivall's massive dictionary project and for his Philological, Chaucer, and Shakespeare Societies. Among other items she transcribed the manuscript of the so-called Macro plays in 1881-2: the three fifteenth-century morality plays in the collection of the Rev. Cox Macro (*Wisdom, Mankind, and The castle of perseverance*).

I started reading the revolutionary classics as a graduate student at Columbia University from 1964-67. In 1968 I was fired from my first job, at Queens College, CUNY, for what now seems like fairly minor departmental political activity: agitating, with a group of my young colleagues, for a range of departmental reforms that are now completely normal everywhere (e.g., maternity leave, an appeals procedure, the right to vote for untenured faculty, etc.). I was then hired into a new remedial program (SEEK: Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) at City College during the period of open admissions, then fired from that before I could start, along with the two people who had hired me – in short, I was blacklisted. So I had an enforced year off, which I used to become more political. I compiled my first book, *Counter-Tradition. The literature of dissent and alternatives* (1970) and joined the New University Conference (NUC), a new-left organization in which I met the Progressive Labor Party (PL), a left split from the Communist Party.

PL provided an attractively militant pro-labor alternative to the rather flaky new leftists of NUC. But flakiness has never prevented anti-communism, and when NUC expelled PL in its own little witch-hunt I went with PL as a sympathizer. I sold their paper, *Challenge*, in the garment district downtown and cut my hair the better to do so: long hair whipped in the wind too much and provoked flirtation from garment workers to whom I wanted to sell the paper. One non-activist friend, Marshall Berman, was horrified: "You sacrificed your femininity to the party!", he gasped. I thought I had a better grasp on my femininity than that, so I was amused at his analysis. I should add that years later, when I sent for my FBI file under the Freedom of Information Act, I found all the most interesting parts blacked out: the parts that would have enabled me to identify the agency's informants at Queens, at Columbia, in NUC or perhaps even in Progressive Labor.

<sup>5</sup> Another member of the Shakespeare Club described Marx senior this way: "As an audience he was delightful, never criticizing, always entering into the spirit of any fun that was going on, laughing when anything struck him as particularly comic, until the tears ran down his cheeks – the oldest in years, but in spirit as young as any of us" (Kapp 1976, 1: 193).

With the help of my main PL contact, an astro-physicist, I began to read Marx, Lenin and other classics. I wanted to integrate this into my scholarship, and I looked to Margaret Schlauch as a model, having heard that in 1951, some 15 years earlier, Schlauch, a Communist, had left her job as an English professor at NYU and defected to Poland, which was then off-limits to Americans. Much later I learned that she had a number of reasons for going. Her sister was there, married to a Polish physicist, Dr. Inman, who had been expelled from Canada as a Soviet spy.<sup>6</sup> In the U.S. of 1951, the cold-war anticommunist witch-hunt was gathering strength under President Truman; the Korean War was in progress; Senator Joseph McCarthy was firmly in the saddle and the famous televised Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954 would soon transfix the nation. I watched them daily after school. Margaret's close friend Edwin Berry Burgum, a critic of the modern novel, had just been fired from his position at NYU for refusing to sign the loyalty oath required of all public employees. Schlauch was about to be called before an NYU committee for interrogation; she too would have refused to sign and would have been fired, so her leaving was a pre-emptive gesture. Schlauch thus re-enacted the scenario of her best-known book, *Chaucer's Constance and accused queens*, the Columbia University doctoral thesis she published in 1927. It is a study of the romance topos of the falsely accused noblewoman forced to flee her homeland. A difference, of course, is that the romance heroine returns; except for a few short visits, Margaret Schlauch did not. Nor, in Schlauch's case, was the accusation false.

In my search for a scholarly model, I read Schlauch's 1956 book, *English medieval literature and its social foundations*, and was disappointed. It juxtaposed social and literary data without demonstrating the interpenetration of the two on the level of consciousness and style, that is, apart from explicit social content or message. For example, when Schlauch discussed the literary influence of urban growth and commerce in the high Middle Ages, she did so in terms of the exotic stories brought back to Europe from distant lands, rather than in terms of what a bourgeois consciousness might mean to poetry, art or ethical values. Or again, she explained troubador poetry with a rather heavy-handed and unilluminating quotation about adultery from Engels's *Origins of the family, private property and the state*. Through other reading I eventually learned that this well-intentioned but schematic type of work was fairly typical of scholars sympathetic with Stalinist parties, and I realized one had to return to Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky for models of how to work with subtlety as well as rigor.

<sup>6</sup> Though not named in the infamous Gouzenko affair (1946-7), Inman's expulsion probably was a consequence of the Cold War hysteria that swept Canada in its wake. Gouzenko, a defector from the Soviet Union, accused various people of conveying classified information to the Russians, including atomic weapon secrets.

A few years later, the early 70s, in Vancouver, I looked for a Marxist journal in which to publish, for at that time openly partisan work was not accepted in mainstream journals. I found *Science & Society* (*S&S*), a Marxist journal in New York, edited by one Henry Mins. *S&S* took several of my long pieces, and eventually invited me to serve as an advisory editor, as I still am. The journal, founded in 1936, has the longest continuous publication history of any Marxist journal in the world – now over 65 years. Among the responses I received from international readers was a congratulatory letter from Margaret Schlauch in Warsaw. In December 1974 she wrote, “I can only say that I wish [your article] had been available to me when I was writing my book (many years ago) on *English medieval literature and its social foundations*. I could have profited from your exposition in many ways” (personal letter, Dec. 11, 1974). This was wonderfully generous encouragement to a young scholar, especially one encountering bitter resistance to Marxian method from the Anglophone medieval establishment. In a second letter a couple of months later, Schlauch wrote that her book on Constance “stemmed partly from my commitment to women’s rights and votes for women in the period before World War I. I was an adolescent then, but I bicycled around in the suburb where I lived, getting signatures supporting an amendment to the Constitution of the U.S. that would give women the vote” (personal letter, Feb. 28, 1975). Furthermore, it turned out that Schlauch had been a founding editor of *S&S*, and that the journal had been an important outlet for her political writing. There, through the 30s and 40s, she published on topics both current and medieval, obviously understanding, like many before her and since, the contemporaneity of the medieval.

It is tempting to suggest that Schlauch’s solution to the question of how to be a Marxist medievalist was to split the two functions, publishing relatively conventional medieval material in mainstream books and journals, and tough-minded political pieces in *S&S*. This would not be entirely fair, because she did, at several points, introduce a class or other political perspective into several of her books.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, Schlauch’s scholarship overall seemed to me to implement the typical CP strategy of the day: never reveal your whole agenda, keep a low profile, only rarely invoke the big trouble-making names, and influence people gradually. This has not been my approach, for a number of reasons I have no space to specify here.

<sup>7</sup> *The gift of tongues* (1942) has a chapter called “Social aspects: class, taboos, politics”. *Modern English and American poetry* (1956) is a no-nonsense manual meant to cut through what Schlauch calls the “tricks and devices” of formalism in order to get to “the heart of what poets are saying”; her models are Whitman, Neruda, Mayakovsky and Aragon – the last three communists or pro-revolutionary. Dalton Trumbo, a brilliant screenwriter and member of the blacklisted Hollywood Ten, is studied as a gifted experimental poet.

But then, besides scholarship, there is political activism. One of my colleagues on the *S&S* editorial board is the indefatigable Annette Rubinstein, now over 90 years old, who left the CP in protest against the party’s self-liquidation into the Democratic Party. Schlauch was Annette’s faculty advisor at NYU in 1925; later they became close friends and political co-workers. In a short memoir she graciously sent me, Annette tells this story, set in 1949, about Margaret Schlauch’s practical medievalism:

Vito Marcantonio, the veteran radical congressman, had decided to run in the mayoralty election, and I was campaign manager. We planned an early morning sound truck appearance at the lower west wide docks, which were almost entirely worked by Italian-Americans. Since the ‘shape-up’ for the day’s job took place at 5 AM, our meeting began at 4. ... Marc and I rode down on top of the truck, and as we approached the designated corner we saw Margaret chatting with a group of longshoremen. She had climbed the ladder and was with us before we could greet her. “Maggie” took over, said a few words of English then smoothly slid into Italian. When she ended her introduction of Marc with a quotation from Dante there was a roar of approval.

For me what’s significant about this anecdote is not only Schlauch’s use of Dante (himself a consummately political writer) in her organizational work, but the dockworkers’ obvious familiarity with Dante – a tradition going back to the poet’s own time.

Annette continues with a poignant sketch of how Margaret Schlauch left America. She had invited Margaret to speak on “Homer and the Iliad” at a left-wing adult evening school, the Jefferson School, on a Saturday evening.

Wednesday I received a note from her: “My dear Annette, I’ve never done this to a chairman before, and I’m desperately sorry to do it to you, but when you see the papers tomorrow you’ll understand why I have to stand you up and why I couldn’t let you know earlier”. Headlines the next day told me that Professor Schlauch ... had surreptitiously sailed the night before.

How was Schlauch received in Poland? She became chair of her department at Poland’s top university in Warsaw, and had a small apartment of the type reserved for the privileged few, with a view of the river. Her letters say virtually nothing about politics or Polish social life generally; they were certainly subjected to the scrutiny of censors. So it is again to Annette Rubinstein’s memoir that I am grateful for an account of Schlauch’s “painful experiences during the first years” of her residence in exile:

Her colleagues ... thought her appointment had been made entirely on political grounds, perhaps even through Soviet pressure, and many felt that she was usurping a position which should have gone to an anti-fascist Polish professor. ... Her first years were very lonely ones; while formal relations were

always correct it was a very long time before she was invited for an informal meal at a colleague's home or included in any small social gatherings.

So I found that *S&S* had had a major medievalist as one of its editors during the 30s and 40s. I didn't know that Henry Mins, the editor I corresponded with, would provide yet another medieval connection. Mins was a linguist from NYU and, according to Annette, "a rigid and orthodox" CP member. He had several brothers and sisters, all of them CP members or sympathizers. One of his sisters, Helen Ann Mins, was married to Rossell Hope Robbins, the well-known editor of medieval lyrics. Helen's bridesmaid had been Margaret Schlauch, and Carleton Browne, another famous editor of medieval songs, married them. Henry Mins told his brother-in-law Ross about the Marxist medievalist in Vancouver, and I was invited to Robbins's gala retirement conference, "Chaucer at Albany II", in 1982. A few interesting things happened at the banquet. One is that Ross had asked for a medieval Latin grace before the meal, and everyone was asked to stand during this grace. Evidently he did not realize how many well-known American Chaucerians – including myself – were Jewish, and therefore did not stand. Another sign of changing times was Helen Ann's after-dinner address directed to the many women present, urging them to do as she had done in service of some great scholar and reminding us that (in John Milton's words) "they also serve who stand and wait". So it was a welcome surprise to me when I recently learned from a nephew of Helen's that she was the radical of the pair, though I do not doubt for a moment that Ross saw his editorship of popular medieval songs much as F. J. Furnivall saw his: as an aid to historical, radical and populist consciousness.

Those of you who knew Ross will remember how proudly he displayed the large medal he had been awarded by the French Legion of Honor; he always wore it over a black turtleneck sweater. It was given for writing, not fighting. As an army officer, Ross wrote propaganda for American troops in Europe, particularly on the subject of how they should interact with French culture. Helen Ann's politics were more pointedly left. During the Spanish Civil War she worked in Paris for the Spanish Republican government in exile. Back home, she organized New York City public school teachers into the predecessor to the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), at a time when it was illegal for public servants to unionize. Even much later, when I was at Queens College from 1967-69 and the AFT existed, the City University system was not yet organized. We (untenured faculty) had no voice or vote at department meetings; we had no means of appealing a tenure or termination decision, no maternity leave, no right to see our files, and so on. My involvement with a group of other newhires attempting to change all this led to my being fired in 1969 despite my publications and educational pedigree. This coincided with a major student uprising; my re-hiring became a student demand; there followed an exhilarating and much-pub-

licized several weeks of sit-ins and occupations on the Queens College campus – which is, as they say, a whole other story.

In Canada, in the 70s, I sought out the organization closest to Progressive Labor, the Canadian Party of Labor (CPL). I sold their paper in a suburb called New Westminster, in front of the Army-Navy surplus store, where people often told us to "go back where we came from" and on a couple of occasions tried to set fire to our armful of papers with their cigarette lighter. On the other hand, "socialist" was not a dirty word to many Canadians as it usually was in the U.S., though by "socialist". Canadians usually meant social-democratic, for Canada has a rather conservative social-democratic party, the New Democratic Party. My reading continued, and the more I read of revolutionary history, the more I and CPL realized that I was not about to join any Stalinist organization, so we parted ways. Eventually I joined the Spartacist League (SL), a bolshevik Trotskyist organization, and sold their paper, *Workers Vanguard*, to students, longshoremen and the general public. During my first five years at SFU I was active on campus and in town, leading Marxist reading groups first for CPL, then for the SL, organizing and participating in various demonstrations: on Chile, on campus cutbacks, etc. It is perhaps not surprising that I was denied tenure and fired, despite even more publications, including two books. One offense was precisely having published in *S&S*, which a member of my department characterized as a "fly-by-night journal" that would publish anyone who asked. With the help of many a student petition and sit-in, my job was eventually saved by the same university president, Dr. Kenneth Strand, whose policies I had so often denounced in campus demonstrations.

I was in the Spartacist League for about 5 years, and neither resigned nor was expelled – an unusual ending. Instead, the party left town because of priorities elsewhere, and I chose not to follow, since I had a job and two children. When they left, about 1982, I had no money, no friends, no social life, and not a single dress. Demonstrations, marches, and meetings do not require a dress; people were comrades, contacts or opponents; and as for salary, party dues took a large chunk of it every month. I had also not published much during those five years. Still, I always appreciated one of the party leaders, a former physicist, for offering me what he saw as a very generous leave of six months to write a book on Chaucer. I did not take the leave or write the book.

What attracts a Marxist to medieval studies? I was often asked this question decades ago, before Marxist-inflected historicism became as accepted in scholarship as it is today. The question was usually posed with incredulity: what could an atheist, revolutionary Marxist possibly find interesting in such a reactionary, static, monarchic, religion-dominated, monolithic culture as that of the European Middle Ages? Of course the first answer is that no culture is monolithic, and much of my work has been committed to demonstrating that proposi-

tion. My current interest in Jewish studies does the same from a different angle. However, for me it was the other way around: I was a medievalist first (though one with healthy anti-authoritarian instincts). My first Middle English graduate class at Berkeley, with Dorothee Metlitzki (another pioneering woman scholar, recently deceased) made me a medievalist; later, at Columbia I became a Marxist. What I found the two disciplines shared was, first, that they were challenging and difficult, and I tend to prefer something not too easy. Second, both Marxism and Catholicism were comprehensive, systematic and inclusive theories; they could incorporate and make sense of anything: humor, love, death, nature, art. Third, they both offered conceptual and historical structure and excellent writing in a high intellectual tradition.

To wrap up: this sketch shows, I hope, that medievalism need not be an ivory-tower pursuit – that by some of its practitioners it has not only been compatible with militant social activism but has sometimes even been co-opted to that end. I hope it also suggests, most of all to an audience that has experienced life under Stalinism, that Marxism in its original formulations and genuine continuity is far from being that puritanical, anti-sensual dogma to which it was so disastrously reduced in the Stalin era. I cannot say that I have brought my medievalism into my activism, except insofar as revolutionary commitment may resemble *caritas*, but perhaps it suffices to have done it the other way round and attempted an activist medievalism.

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