

## Author Biography

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Jess O'Leary is a second-year history major. She wrote her paper, "Enlightening the 'Dark Ages'" for Dr. Call's Historiography class. Some of her research interests include religious and intellectual histories and the history of the California Central Coast.

# Enlightening the “Dark Ages”: Historical Geneology and the Medieval Narrative

*Jess O’Leary*

In December of 2021, columnist Petula Dvorak published an article in the *Washington Post* headlined “America Is Living in the Dark Ages and It’s Time for the Enlightenment.”<sup>1</sup> The article reflects popular cultural perceptions of the Early Middle Ages and the Enlightenment to evoke an image of America languishing in filth, death, and disease, hoping for a revolution of culture and intellect and a return to the light. In her article, Dvorak writes that, for the past few years, America has been “a medieval pottage of religious extremism, anti-science sneering, conspiracy theories, and ill-conceived, ragtag, spear-and-pole crusades.”<sup>2</sup> Why did Dvorak unequivocally characterize the medieval period as a low point of history, failing to mention the era of intellectual innovation brought about by the invention of the university, the agricultural boom that took place during the Middle Ages due to innovative new farming technology, or the

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1 Petula Dvorak, “America Is Living in the Dark Ages and It’s Time for the Enlightenment,” *The Washington Post*, Dec. 30, 2021.

2 Dvorak.

Carolingian Renaissance, during which manuscripts and artwork were preserved under a concentrated effort of Charlemagne?<sup>3</sup>

The Early Middle Ages have been portrayed as “dark” since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when Petrarch invented the notion of medieval “darkness” and his fellow Renaissance humanists perpetuated the idea.<sup>4</sup> For centuries, common perception has held that the so-called “Dark Ages” were a time of little social, cultural, or intellectual advancement.<sup>5</sup> In her comparison, Dvorak draws upon this image of darkness, which is pervasive in both popular culture and academic scholarship.<sup>6</sup> Due to popular conceptions about the “Dark Ages,” for many readers, the headline of this article likely conjures up images of plague-ridden rats scuttering across cold, damp, stone floors. Similar to many other scholars and journalists, Dvorak seems to have been deceived by a reductive and inaccurate representation of the Early Middle Ages. Using the historiographical lens of genealogy, as developed by Nietzsche and Foucault, this paper will examine how the characterization of the Middle Ages as a period of “darkness” has been perpetuated to portray subsequent societies as comparatively advanced civilizations.

The historiographical theory of genealogy was developed in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* and later expanded upon by Michel Foucault. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche suggests a model of historiographical inquiry that examines the cultural circumstances under which an idea or institution was developed. In this book, Nietzsche searches for the historical origins of morality, attempting to identify the social conditions and

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3 David Gabriele and Matthew M. Perry, *The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe* (New York: Harper, 2021); Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000* (New York: Penguin Group, 2010).

4 Theodore E. Mommsen, “Petrarch’s Conception of the Dark Ages” *Speculum* 17, no. 2 (1942): 242.

5 Mommsen, 226.

6 Andrew B.R. Elliott, “Let’s not go back to the Middle Ages’: Medievalism, the Dark Ages, and the Myth of Progress,” in *Medievalism, Politics, and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), 13-14.

values that moral concepts evolved under. Unlike Marx's teleological narrative,<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche's theory of genealogy proposes that history is arbitrarily dependent on underlying variables and has no ultimate destination. In Nietzsche's view, there is no such thing as absolute truth: Every idea is created under a set of mutable variables, and therefore every idea is liable to change.<sup>8</sup> From Nietzsche's genealogical perspective, ideas are not eternal or unchanging, nor are they the result of any natural course of history. Instead, he claims, our concept of morality arose from and pivots on evolving power relations.<sup>9</sup> The key argument of Nietzsche's project of genealogy is his claim that identifying the origin of an idea reveals the values and social structures that the idea is based upon, allowing for a fuller and more nuanced understanding of our system of morality.<sup>10</sup>

The term "Dark Ages," which is typically used to refer to the Early Middle Ages (roughly 500-1000 C.E.) in Europe, has been the subject of serious historiographical debate since at least the mid-1800s.<sup>11</sup> From the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, historians commonly held that the Early Middle Ages, which followed the fall of Rome, was a period characterized by brutality and backwardness, devoid of significant cultural or intellectual achievements.<sup>12</sup> Over the past two centuries, scholars have challenged the narrative describing the Early Middle Ages as culturally and intellectually inferior, representing the era in a more equitable and complex way. Published expressions of this new and revised historical viewpoint can be found as early as 1844: English historian Samuel Maitland's essay collection *The Dark Ages*. While Maitland concedes that the "dark" characterization of the "Dark Ages" is accurate in describing the knowledge of

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7 Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *Houses of History*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 49.

8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1989), 112.

9 Ibid, 58.

10 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 133.

11 S.R. Maitland, *The Dark Ages* (London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1844).

12 Maitland, 1-4.

the era compared to the knowledge of his own time period, he argues in favor of a more multifaceted understanding of the Early Middle Ages, citing a variety of intellectual and cultural advances as proof of “lightness.”<sup>13</sup>

By 1904, literary scholar W.P. Ker adopted and altered Maitland’s argument, claiming that the term “Dark Ages” is wholly misleading and impedes a serious and unbiased study of the era.<sup>14</sup> Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more historians began arguing against previous characterizations of the Early Middle Ages. During the mid-1900s, scholars such as Theodore Mommsen and Wallace Ferguson traced the origin of the “Dark Ages” nomenclature back to Renaissance humanists who wanted to distinguish themselves from the previous time period and portray their own intellectual achievements and culture as comparatively “bright.”<sup>15</sup> A majority of present-day historians acknowledge that the long-standing condemnation of the Middle Ages was biased and largely ahistorical.<sup>16</sup> This perspective is exemplified in *The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe*, a book published in 2021 by medieval historians David Gabriele and Matthew M. Perry. Gabriele and Perry claim that the common understanding of the Middle Ages as a dark and bloody time period is reductive and has served a variety of agendas throughout history, most of which are based on the desire to make one’s own group or time period appear culturally and intellectually superior.<sup>17</sup>

The perception of the Early Middle Ages as being unequivocally “dark” exists because a lack of written records left this time period as an expanse of history that could be conveniently filled with myths and rhetoric to serve the agendas of historians and societies subsequent to the “Dark Ages.” The concept of the “Dark Ages” exists in two domains: popular culture and academic study. To alter popular

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13 Maitland, 1-9.

14 W.P. Ker, *The Dark Ages* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 1-23.

15 Mommsen; Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948).

16 Gabriele and Perry.

17 Ibid.

perceptions of the medieval period and improve public historical understanding, scholars should further consider both the achievements and pitfalls of the Middle Ages and keep in mind the values and context underlying previous scholarship, as is dictated in Nietzsche's genealogical approach to historiography.

Michel Foucault's "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" expands on Nietzsche's concept of genealogy. In this essay, Foucault encourages historians to consider the seemingly minute details that influence the development of ideas and institutions, drawing attention to forces that may appear to be "without history," such as "sentiments, love, conscience, [and] instincts."<sup>18</sup> According to Foucault, a genealogy must consider the "details and accidents"<sup>19</sup> that led to the creation and maintenance of an idea. Foucault defines "origin" in the context of genealogy not as a singular event but as a perpetually ongoing process.<sup>20</sup> This means that a genealogist must examine not only the inception of an idea, but the factors that have caused the idea to be changed, eliminated, or perpetuated over time. By moving away from a definition of "origin" that denotes a precise beginning, Foucault emphasizes that ideas are not the result of some predetermined course of history. Rather, he argues that ideas and institutions arise from a chance set of circumstances. This perspective differentiates genealogy from the historiographical theories of Hegel or Marx, who view history as teleological.

Applying genealogy to the concept of liberty as an example, Foucault writes that, "genealogical analysis shows that the concept of liberty is [according to Nietzsche in *The Wanderer and His Shadow*] an 'invention of the ruling classes'<sup>21</sup> and not fundamental to man's nature or at the root of his attachment to being and truth."<sup>22</sup> This perspective expresses the idea that history could have

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18 Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 76.

19 Ibid, 80.

20 Foucault, 76.

21 Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Wanderer and His Shadow," in *Complete Works* (New York: Gordon Press, 1974), 9.

22 Foucault, 78.

followed any number of courses: Accepted ideas are developed and maintained by chance.

Foucault argues that ideas that are deemed to be inherently “true,” such as Nietzsche’s example of morality, should be especially subject to this genealogical method of historiography. He writes that “truth is undoubtedly the sort of error that cannot be refuted because it was hardened into an unalterable form in the long baking process of history.”<sup>23</sup> Ideas that are held as “true” are no less dependent on the random course of history than any other idea. “True” ideas are just more deeply cemented into the collective consciousness. The prevalent conceptualization of the Middle Ages as a time of “darkness” was, for the most part, not challenged by historians until the 19<sup>th</sup> century at the earliest. This is not because this interpretation was the only reasonable or logical way to characterize the time period. Rather, the notion of the “Dark Ages” has been pervasive for so long in academic and popular historical perception *because* it went unchallenged. A cycle of unchallenged acceptance of the “Dark Ages” concept cemented the idea as “truth.”

Contemporary historians analyze the works of Nietzsche and Foucault to guide their practice of the historiographical method of genealogy. In an article published in 2014, David Garland writes that genealogy “traces how contemporary practices and institutions emerged out of specific struggles, conflicts, alliances, and exercises of power, many of which are nowadays forgotten.”<sup>24</sup> This definition summarizes the methodology of Nietzsche and Foucault, providing a technique for contemporary genealogists to follow.

In *A Companion to Foucault*, Christopher Falzon identifies two major implications of the genealogical approach to history. First, Falzon argues that once historians no longer impose structures and principles that are considered

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23 Foucault, 96.

24 David Garland, “What Is a ‘History of the Present’? On Foucault’s Genealogies and Their Critical Preconditions,” *Punishment & Society* 16, no. 4 (Oct. 2014): 372.

to be “universal, necessary, and timeless”<sup>25</sup> upon their study of history, it becomes possible to acknowledge and understand the role of these structures and principles in the historical development of ideas and institutions. The second implication of genealogical historiography is that the examination and evaluation of presupposed concepts and structures allow these so-called “intrinsic” ideas to be changed through human agency.<sup>26</sup> When a historian practices genealogy, they can detach themselves from ideas and structures that are rarely questioned, making their historical inquiry more rigorous.

Falzon places genealogy as a historiographical method in opposition to Hegelian historicism, Marxism, and empiricism. Marx and Hegel both conceptualize history as teleological, which Falzon argues is contradictory to the genealogical idea that history is composed of random events leading to a random end. Falzon claims that historiographical empiricism, which is typically defined as a search for objective, observable facts amidst historical sources, is “epistemologically naive.”<sup>27</sup> In reference to empiricism, Falzon echoes Foucault’s argument that “true” ideas are invented and depend on random turns of history. Falzon posits that historiographical empiricism, particularly the form of empiricism shaped by Leopold von Ranke, is a futile effort, as interpretation always plays a role in the study of history.<sup>28</sup> Genealogy is antithetical to both determinist and empiricist views of history, as genealogy argues that history does not progress toward an ultimate purpose, nor can it exist outside of human influence and interpretation.

In “Nietzsche’s Genealogical Histories and His Project of Revaluation, philosophy scholar Christoph Schuringa argues that the process of genealogy itself is not critical, and cannot possibly be critical; genealogy, by definition,

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25 Christopher Falzon, Timothy O’Leary, and Jana Sawicki eds. *A Companion to Foucault* (West Sussex, UK: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2013), 255.

26 *Ibid.*, 282.

27 Falzon, O’Leary, and Sawicki, 288.

28 *Ibid.*

is intended to be an unbiased search for the origins of an idea.<sup>29</sup> Schuringa's reasoning is understandable, but he misinterprets the function of genealogy in the writing of both Nietzsche and Foucault. Although it is true that genealogy strives to be an unbiased search for an idea's origins, tracing the lineage of an idea is not done without a purpose: genealogists attempt to undo the constraints of presupposed ideas by identifying their origins and destabilizing them. In this way, genealogy is necessarily critical. If practiced in the method of Nietzsche and Foucault, genealogy deconstructs truths that are frequently seen as inherent or natural, and a historian must approach their subject with a critical lens in order to do this.

The intention of genealogy, as established by Nietzsche and Foucault, is to question the usefulness of an idea by reevaluating its origins and the values under which it was formed and perpetuated. Genealogy emphasizes that ideas are not conceived of in a linear fashion, and it requires critical thought to identify the seemingly random turns of history that contribute to the development of an idea. Following the genealogical perspective, the characterization of the Middle Ages as being a time of squalor and backwardness was not an inevitable conclusion but arose based on the values of the historians who developed the idea.

The basic principles of genealogy are frequently embraced in historical inquiry, even by historians who may not necessarily view themselves as genealogists. In *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, Alexander Nehamas claims that "genealogy simply *is* history correctly practiced."<sup>30</sup> Nehamas argues that Nietzsche and Foucault did not coin a new way of thinking about history with their ideas of genealogy, rather they described the way that historians who had been doing their work "correctly" approached history. Similarly, Christopher Schuringa characterizes genealogy as

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29 Christoph Schuringa, "Nietzsche's Genealogical Histories and His Project of Revaluation," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 31, no. 3. (2014): 257.

30 Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche, Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 246.

“the telling of a historical narrative that aims to be true.”<sup>31</sup>

Genealogy is the most useful historiographical approach in understanding the periodization of the “Dark Ages.” Though they may not necessarily identify themselves as genealogists, many medieval historians have employed an approach to studying the medieval period that is paradigmatic of historiographical genealogy. An article written by Theodore E. Mommsen in 1942 entitled “Petrarch’s Conception of the Dark Ages” thoroughly traces the coinage and use of the term “Dark Ages.” In this article, Mommsen seeks to identify Petrarch’s general “historical conceptions”<sup>32</sup> and the way that these conceptions led to his interpretation of the Middle Ages as being “dark.” As his main point of inquiry, Mommsen asks whether Petrarch characterized the Middle Ages as a time of “darkness” due to the lack of historical sources from the era or if Petrarch was making a value judgment on the overall character of the Middle Ages. After examining the writing of Petrarch, Mommsen concludes the latter. Mommsen identifies two primary ideas behind Petrarch’s assessment of the Middle Ages. He argues that Petrarch conceptualized the medieval era as a time of “darkness” because it followed the Roman Empire, which Petrarch believed to be the pinnacle of history.

This belief is clearly expressed in Petrarch’s own words, as he asks, “What else, then, is all history, if not the praise of Rome?”<sup>33</sup> Mommsen also claims that Renaissance humanists, such as Petrarch, condemned the medieval era as being “dark” because they wanted to distinguish themselves from the preceding time period and portray their own intellectual achievements and culture as comparatively “bright.” Petrarch’s conceptualization of the Middle Ages was laden with value judgment and reflected his high esteem for the Roman Empire and his ambitions of cultural sophistication for his own time period. In identifying

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31 Christoph Schuringa, 256.

32 Mommsen, 228.

33 Ibid, 236.

Petrarch and his fellow Renaissance humanists as the source of the “Dark Ages” concept and attributing the concept’s inception to the values and beliefs under which it was formed, Mommsen’s reasoning exemplifies an effective use of the genealogical method.

The interpreted or intended meaning of “Dark Ages” differs between historians: some interpret the term to mean a period of little cultural and intellectual advancement, while others take it to mean a period for which we have very few available sources. Petrarch conceptualized the term as the former, but some contemporary historians intended to convey the latter.<sup>34</sup> Even this seemingly neutral second meaning, however, carries a value-loaded history. Following the genealogical perspective, we must ask *why* some scholars have written off the so-called “Dark Ages” as being devoid of historical sources.

In “New Light on the ‘Dark Ages’: How the Slave Trade Fueled the Carolingian Economy,” medieval historian Michael McCormick uses the methods of genealogy to provide an answer to this question. McCormick characterizes the perpetuation of the “Dark Ages” idea as a cycle: Few scholars research this time period because of its dim reputation, rendering the era unable to shake its reputation as intellectually and culturally devoid.<sup>35</sup> The use of genealogical methods allows McCormick to understand why historians hold that the Middle Ages lack valuable sources: He identifies the tradition of looking down upon the medieval period as the origin of the notion that little to no useful evidence from the “Dark Ages” is available to historians.

Many would concede that there are fewer written sources from the Middle Ages than there are from the European periods immediately preceding and following. Europeans during the medieval period tended toward oral traditions of knowledge, parchment was expensive, and papyrus, which had been

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34 Janet L. Nelson, “The Dark Ages,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 63 (2007): 196.

35 Michael McCormick, “New Light on the ‘Dark Ages’: How the Slave Trade Fueled the Carolingian Economy,” *Past & Present*, no. 177, (2002): 18.

used in antiquity, was no longer readily available. However, historians who write off the Middle Ages as a black hole of historical knowledge fail to consider the abundance of archaeological records from the Middle Ages as a valuable source. By genealogically examining the origin of this notion, one can see how the idea that the “Dark Ages” are devoid of historical sources is a convenient rhetoric that fits nicely with the characterization of the Early Middle Ages as a time of cultural backwardness. Sources from the medieval period are available, but scholars will only seek them out and spread them if they believe that the time period is worthy of serious historical inquiry.

The development of any idea or structure is rarely contingent on one historical factor, and the “Dark Ages” are no exception. Contemporary historians have expanded on Mommsen’s proposed origin of the “Dark Ages” concept, and many have traced the origin of the term in a genealogical fashion. Like Mommsen, historian Rabia Umar Ali concluded that the Western world has historically used the term “Dark Ages” to distance itself from the Middle Ages. However, Ali expanded upon Mommsen’s interpretation by identifying a value motivating this desire to be distanced from the Middle Ages that Mommsen did not consider.

At the time that Europe underwent the so-called “Dark Ages,” the Islamic world was flourishing. What historians term the “Islamic Golden Age” lasted from the 8<sup>th</sup> century to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, coinciding with the Middle Ages. In the Islamic world, this was a period of great cultural, economic, and scientific advancement. In “Medieval Europe: The Myth of Dark Ages and the Impact of Islam,” Ali posits that post-medieval European scholars wanted to downplay the achievements and innovations of the Muslim world during the Middle Ages and did so by broadly representing the medieval era as an age of darkness. She writes, “The western notion of unbridled superiority thus makes its own past a victim consigned to, in this case, deliberate obscurity.”<sup>36</sup> Rather than acknowledging

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36 Rabia Umar Ali, “Medieval Europe: The Myth of Dark Ages and the Impact of Islam,” *Islamic Studies* 51, no. 2, (2012): 167.

that a significant amount of intellectual and cultural progress during the Middle Ages came from the Islamic world, Ali argues that European scholars decided to obscure the medieval period in myths of darkness and emptiness.

Ali's historical inquiry is a clear and effective example of the genealogical method. She defines the goal of her article as an attempt to uncover "the reasons and factors responsible for the attempt to relegate the entire era as unworthy of notice and credit,"<sup>37</sup> which sounds like the exact definition of genealogy. Mommsen and Ali both effectively practice genealogy, but both historians uncover slightly different potential motivations and values underlying the concept of the "Dark Ages." Genealogy seeks to show the plurality, complexity, and contingency of the values and ideas that underlie a concept such as the "Dark Ages,"<sup>38</sup> so the slightly different conclusions of Mommsen and Ali can coexist without conflict.

The genealogies of Mommsen and Ali inquire into the inception of the "Dark Ages" concept and its support from Renaissance humanists, but the search for the genealogy of an idea does not end at the idea's formulation. In "The Middle Ages: 'Dark Ages' or the Dawn of Technology?," Giancarlo Genta and Paolo Riberi examine how myths about the "darkness" of the medieval period continued to permeate popular and academic culture after Renaissance humanists were no longer around to uphold them. More than 300 years after the death of Petrarch, influential Enlightenment historian Voltaire wrote of the Middle Ages that "barbarism, superstition and ignorance covered the face of the earth."<sup>39</sup> What drove scholars, more than 600 years removed from the Middle Ages, to perpetuate the concept of the "Dark Ages"?

Genta and Riberi argue that Enlightenment historians and Renaissance

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37 Ali, 60.

38 Foucault, 81.

39 Voltaire, *Complete Works*, vol. 12, quoted in Giancarlo Genta and Paolo Riberi, "The Middle Ages: 'Dark Ages' or the dawn of technology?" in *Technology and the Growth of Civilization* (Springer Praxis Books, 2016), 97.

scholars upheld the myth of the “Dark Ages” for the same reason: Both groups wanted to signal that their own time period was one of modernity, so they contrasted their own civility against the “barbaric” Middle Ages to do so. The Middle Ages, though not inherently more “backwards” than previous time periods, has been unable to shake the reputation it inherited from Petrarch. Tracing this development from a genealogical perspective, one finds that the “Dark Ages” concept originated from and has been perpetuated by societies that valued their status of sophistication.

In *Medievalism, Politics, and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century*, Andrew B.R. Elliott argues that the myth of the “Dark Ages” is upheld over time because it provides a conveniently obscured expanse of history upon which any person or group can superimpose their own agenda or ideas. Elliott argues that perceptions of the medieval era in popular culture are almost completely disconnected from any historical basis. Terms like “medieval” or “Dark Ages” no longer come to directly signify the time period that they originally represented. Instead, they represent the general set of characteristics associated with the Middle Ages: backwardness, brutality, primitiveness, and a general air of gloom. Elliott claims that references to the medieval era are used in order to establish a strict differentiation between the present, which we want to view as comparatively sophisticated and civilized, and the barbaric past. This was true for Petrarch, who wanted to set his own time period apart from the preceding era, and it is still true today. While Renaissance humanists pejoratively characterized the “Dark Ages” to distance themselves from the actual period of history lasting from 500-1000 C.E., Elliott argues that negative references to the medieval era no longer refer directly to these years. Instead, phrases like “Let’s not go back to the Middle Ages”<sup>40</sup> signal that something is the antithesis of modernity,

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40 Andrew B.R. Elliott, “Let’s not go back to the Middle Ages’: Medievalism, the Dark Ages, and the Myth of Progress,” in *Medievalism, Politics, and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), 55.

whether or not it has any connection to the period of time that we call the Middle Ages.

When politicians or mass media sources use references to the medieval period to describe, for example, Islamic extremism, Elliott writes, “they are both drawing on and simultaneously perpetuating the negative associations of the term.”<sup>41</sup> From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment to the present day, scholars have used allusions to the “darkness” of the Middle Ages to paint their own society in a more sophisticated and civilized light. What has changed in recent times, however, is what the concept of the “Dark Ages” signifies. Through a genealogical analysis of the values underlying the present-day use of medieval references, Elliott accurately concludes that, although originally meant to communicate the “darkness” of the medieval era, medieval references have now come to signify a more general sense of “darkness” with no chronological attachment to the Middle Ages.

Marxism would not be an effective theory to evaluate the history of the term “Dark Ages” because, as historians Anna Green and Kathleen Troup explain, Marxists approach historical narratives from a teleological perspective,<sup>42</sup> looking to fit a historical narrative into a specific model rather than deconstructing said narrative without preconceived biases. Psychoanalysis, similarly, would be an ineffective method of understanding historical views of the Middle Ages. Psychoanalysts, like Marxists, approach history through a theory that assumes inherent truths. In using Marxist theory, one presupposes that history serves to realize an ultimate goal. Psychoanalytic history, in the eyes of Freud, operates on the assumption that the individual and society are at odds.<sup>43</sup> Both of these presuppositions would render a historian biased in their attempt to understand the historical progression of the concept of the “Dark Ages.” Freud and Marx

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41 Elliott, 56.

42 Green and Troup, 49.

43 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930; repr., New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 148.

both make assumptions about inherent truth and human nature, and although psychoanalysis and Marxism may be effective lenses in other historiographical circumstances, the origin of an idea can only be evaluated in a truly objective way through the lens of genealogy.

Using the genealogical method of historiography, historians have discovered that, from the Renaissance to today, scholars and popular culture used the concept of the “Dark Ages” to establish themselves as living in a comparatively more advanced and desirable time period. This motivation holds true whether “Dark Ages” is meant to refer to the chronological Middle Ages, as Petrarch intended, or a more nebulous notion of a barbaric time, as is often intended in present-day popular culture. In light of recent scholarship refuting the broad characterization of the Middle Ages as brutal and archaic, some historians such as Janet L. Nelson, argue that the term “Dark Ages” should be retired from use, as the term only serves to continue a false narrative.<sup>44</sup> Identifying the values and structures that culturally entrenched ideas such as the “Dark Ages” are contingent upon enables historians to more easily evaluate these ideas for their cultural significance and value. Genealogical historiography can deconstruct ideas that are assumed to be intrinsic truths, making it possible for such ideas to change.

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<sup>44</sup> Nelson, 198.

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