

# Introduction

## *Television Medievalisms*

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The past decade and a half has seen an impressive resurgence of popular interest in the Middle Ages. Since 1997, J.K. Rowling's acclaimed *Harry Potter* series and Peter Jackson's cinematic adaptation of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–03) have led to a renewed exploration of the medieval past—or at least our magical and mythical fantasies about it. Today, such excitement for all things medieval continues unabated, especially in small screen medievalisms. Television presents us with a wide and diverse array of “medieval” offerings such as BBC's *Merlin* (2008–12), HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–), and Starz's *Camelot* (2011), among others. The last few years also bear witness to a slow, yet noticeable shift in the type of medium associated with medieval-themed narratives. Whereas the Middle Ages used to inhabit primarily the world of film—where sweeping natural landscapes and scenes of carnage could be emphasized in all their glory—depictions of the medieval have come to fit more and more comfortably on the small screen. Most of the last major film productions to deal with the Middle Ages, such as *A Knight's Tale* (2001), *King Arthur* (2004), and *Beowulf* (2007), date to the first decade of the 21st century while television programs set against a medieval background continue to attract viewers well into 2014.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the growing number of medieval-themed series on commercial television on the one hand and the importance of the connection between popular medievalism and the medium of television on the other, there exists at present very little scholarship on the image of the Middle Ages in television. Unlike

film, whose use of the medieval has been examined repeatedly by scholars—examples of such recent scholarship on “medieval” films include *A Knight at the Movies* (2003), *The Reel Middle Ages* (2006), and *The Medieval Hero on Screen* (2004)—television medievalisms have garnered scarcely any critical attention. On the rare occasion when they have found themselves subject to critical analysis, television medievalisms have been treated as essentially similar to cinematic ones. The excellent volume *The Medieval Hero on Screen* (2004), for instance, explores various popular medievalisms in cinema and television without distinguishing between the two media. The goal of the present collection is to fill this gap: we hope to draw our readers’ attention to the existence of television medievalism, a subdivision of popular medievalism different from other kinds of contemporary reimaginings of the Middle Ages—including but not restricted to other visual media such as film and video games.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, we seek, both in this introduction and in the essays that comprise our collection, to begin to sketch the outline of popular television medievalism and identify some of its unique characteristics.

Before launching into a discussion of television medievalism, we must first examine the unlikely alliance between medievalism and the commercial medium of television. The question of the relationship between medievalism and television is more loaded than might, at first, seem to be the case. Loosely defined by Ute Berns and Andrew James Johnston as “the investigation into different ways in which the Middle Ages have been perceived and constructed by later periods,”<sup>3</sup> medievalism has a long and healthy history going back at least to the 18th century. Throughout most, if not all, of that history, the medieval was reimagined almost endlessly to serve various contemporary ends, ones with ideological overtones. “In the 19th century,” John M. Ganim argues, “medievalism was constructed as a fierce reproach as well as a utopian escape from the present, and that reproach was framed in explicitly political terms.”<sup>4</sup> Ganim presents William Morris as an example of a 19th-century scholar and artist whose use of the medieval encompassed both the realm of fantasy and that of political and social activism.<sup>5</sup> In the middle of the 20th century, the opposite became true, with the Middle Ages reinforcing conservative values after the devastation of World War II and during the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> Today, our perception of the medieval has come to acquire new meaning and to serve yet another function: in a 21st-century society that no longer believes in the effectiveness and fundamental integrity of the nation-state or in the Renaissance myth of continuous growth and progress, the Middle Ages is starting to displace the Renaissance as a point of origin for the modern period.<sup>7</sup> In Steve Guthrie’s words, “Popular fiction images of the Middle Ages focus on personal trial as a training ground in times of crises, when the central authority of the nation-state is absent or failed and the world has gone local, without

the Renaissance beliefs in statecraft and progress to hold it together.”<sup>8</sup> The medieval world is beginning to look, sound, and feel more comfortable; rather than a time and place full of cruelty, plague, and bad teeth, the Middle Ages now bears an uncanny resemblance to our own day.

If medievalism is influenced at least in part by ideological considerations, the same cannot so easily be said of television programming. Television usually operates according to strict capitalistic principles: its goal lies in bombarding its viewers with images that will entice them to purchase the products featured on the channel’s publicity spots, airtime itself obtained as the result of a financial exchange between the channel and its client. Looking at television from this purely consumerist perspective, one might argue that television shows, “medieval” and otherwise, exist simply to ensure that audiences remain entertained enough not to change channels before the first commercial break. The more captive the viewers, the more likely they are to watch advertisements while waiting for their favorite program to resume and the greater the chance that they will buy the goods publicized.

At the same time, most channels develop a set of characteristics, a personality of sorts, that allows them to attract specific audiences for whom advertisements—and, of course, programs—are then tailored. FOX, HBO, and PBS, for example, are very distinct from one another; each of these channels has become known for a particular type of programming with clear ideological implications. Although less in evidence than consumerism, ideology, then, is not completely absent from the production of medieval-themed (and other) shows. While a channel’s capitalist needs often dictate its ideology, especially in the case of pay-television channels such as HBO, the latter greatly influences ad selection and placement on other occasions—for instance, ideology plays an important role in determining programming on FOX. If ideological concerns take an active part in shaping the creative decisions that result in a given television program, however, these are closely intertwined with consumerism on most, if not all, such visual products.

In this, television stands apart from its older and more “serious” sibling, cinema. Although both commercial film and television share the need to entertain their audiences visually, their relationship with the consumerist, capitalist culture that produces them differs considerably one from the other. Even the most unabashedly commercial film does not present the kind of marketing opportunities available on television. Rather, much thought must go into the marketability of such concoctions, with entire teams dedicated to creating casts of characters that will translate into attractive supermarket shelf toys—and the much cheaper Happy Meal versions that will entice children to make their parents buy them the real thing. Angela Jane Weisl has shown, for example, the

ways in which the *Star Wars* franchise replicates itself endlessly simply to generate more toys and greater marketability.<sup>9</sup> But even *Star Wars* cannot sell generic products effortlessly. This remains the prerogative of commercial television with its format of hour-long programs within which are embedded four publicity breaks; only with such a format in place can a show set against the background of 14th-century England sell soap.

What about networks such as HBO, Starz, and Showtime, channels that pride themselves on precisely their lack of commercials? Pay-television presents yet another approach to consumerism, one that appears closer to that embraced by commercial film than free-to-air television. Like FTA television, HBO and its ilk aim to sell: cable networks have to render themselves appealing to customers who believe they are purchasing a “special” commodity marked by high-quality programs and greater viewing pleasure. In short, cable channels have turned the absence of advertising into a tool that enhances their desirability to subscribers. Thus, pay-television, like its FTA counterpart, participates in and perpetuates consumer-centered programming. However, the product promoted by cable television is the network itself, just as a commercial film must market itself in order to attract potential viewers.

The ability for audiences to stream television programs commercial-free on host websites such as Amazon, Netflix, or Hulu further contributes to blurring the line between cinema and television. Not only does streaming significantly reduce the distance between film and television—since both can be viewed in much the same way, usually on the same website—but it also introduces new dynamics to the screening experience. In the case of television serials, it becomes possible to “binge-watch” a program, seeing as many episodes as one likes in a single sitting. Both films and television programs can now be enjoyed in one sitting and without these commercial breaks that constitute such an important factor in the relationship between audience and show on FTA television.

Yet the experiences of screening a film and viewing a television program, even when both are streamed from start to finish in one sitting, remain distinct from one another. The serialization of most conventional television programs means that viewers usually develop a far more sophisticated bond with the characters and world of a television show than those of a two-hour-long film. As Andrew B.R. Elliott has argued in the case of Arthurian serials, “unlike their cinematic counterparts which create a ‘disposable’ Middle Ages, serializations must invoke a believable medieval world to which they will return on a weekly basis.”<sup>10</sup> A film director must construct a setting, atmosphere, and characters that will grasp the viewer’s attention in the short span of time allotted a film preview so as to ensure a healthy audience on the film’s opening weekend. In contrast, the producers of a television series can take their time describing the world

they have devised. In HBO's *Game of Thrones*, for example, we are first immersed in the lives of the people of Winterfell before our attention is diverted to other important spaces (such as King's Landing). This leisurely pace is even more essential where the story's characters are concerned. Once again, a comparison with film, and especially Hollywood productions, might prove useful here. The characters of commercial film are less complex individuals capable of revealing depth, growth, and humanity than simple, generic types. Blockbuster films cannot do without the list of usual suspects: the hero, the villain, and the plucky heroine (who usually turns into a damsel in distress in the second half of the film). The hero may stray from the right path for a few minutes, but he must eventually do the right thing and return to fight the bad guy, and the villain may have endured some personal tragedy that led him to lose faith in humanity but, ultimately, he must commit some monumentally wicked deed so we, the viewers, can despise him (or, very occasionally, her). Such a formula works particularly well in epic superhero movies such as the seemingly never-ending *Spiderman* series. The serialization of television, however, makes it possible for both the greatest of heroes and the worst of villains to display some level of psychological depth. To confront viewers with the same heroic characteristics on the one hand and villainous behavior on the other would prove tedious very quickly. In order to avoid boring their viewers—causing ratings to plummet—television producers must emphasize their heroes' flaws and develop their villains' humanity to a greater extent than commercial film. The BBC's *Merlin* exemplifies the need for such ambiguity. While King Uther is portrayed as a negative character—he hunts down all those who practice magic, including children, and intimidates his own offspring, to name but two of his flaws—we also sympathize with him when Morgana, his ward and illegitimate daughter, betrays him. Likewise, we understand that Morgana feels rejected by her father and seeks revenge for Uther's oppression of magic-users. Television series like *Merlin* thus allow for the formation of a bond between characters and viewers that is much more difficult to establish when watching a film.

The personal nature of the connection between viewer and character is heightened by the intimacy with which we experience television programs. Television is ultimately a domestic medium, one that allows for audiences to enjoy their favorite shows while cooking, eating, or getting ready for bed. Unlike the public act of screening a film, which, for most people, involves dressing, some kind of transportation, and participating in a communal viewing experience with relative or complete strangers, television is usually consumed in private. For some viewers, the choice between film and television, private and public, does not even exist: "The domestic is the primary site of the audiovisual for most people at the end of the 20th century especially for, say, a single mother living

in a rural setting far from a cinema.”<sup>11</sup> Although one might argue that watching television while occupied with mundane activities lends itself to distraction rather than immersion, viewers engaging with a program at home bring its world and characters into their most private space: the show is no longer “a” show but “their” show. As a result, their involvement with television becomes even more visceral. Without others to check them from giving free flow to their emotions and to steer their response to characters and situations, they are all the more likely to project their own sympathies on what is unfolding on the screen.

What does this discussion of the main attributes of television mean for *television medievalism*? Television’s consumerist bent, its serialization, and its domesticity all combine to make the medieval more comfortable and more appealing while television’s democratic nature ensures that made-for-TV versions of the Middle Ages reach as many people as possible. Here, it might be useful to pause for a brief discussion of two specific aspects of this process.

First, the Middle Ages as represented on television has come to be associated increasingly with the genre of fantasy. Overall, recent television programs focusing on the Middle Ages or set against a medieval background show a marked decline in concern with historical accuracy, glorifying instead in the imaginary and the fantastical and thereby looking more like medieval romance—with its own cast of dragons, monsters, fairies, and magical adventures—than any contemporary notion of historical realism. BBC’s *Merlin*, for example, does not seek, as have so many other visual retellings of the Arthurian narrative—including Bruckheimer’s *King Arthur*—to place Arthur in a fixed time and place. Rather, the series unabashedly mixes the medieval with the modern—Morgana’s stiletto heels—and the downright mythological, such as magic and dragons. Such lack of interest in historical “truth” is further in evidence in HBO’s *Game of Thrones* set against the imaginary world of Westeros. In truth, neither of these shows attempts to depict the medieval historical era. Rather, they—like most contemporary “medieval” shows—take place in a vague pre-industrial culture, one that we are meant to recognize as proto-medieval but that is not clearly designated as such.<sup>12</sup>

That series like *Merlin* and *Game of Thrones* embrace and celebrate their nature as medievalisms rather than attempt to teach us about the “real” Middle Ages—one that can never truly be captured anyways—also allows for greater aesthetic license. Whereas most instances of medievalism produced during the 1980s and 1990s portrayed the medieval world as rife with injustice, disease, and misery, recent examples of television medievalism display a variety of different approaches to the subject. While some, such as Starz’s *Camelot*, still revel in the idea of a grungy Middle Ages, others associate a new, “cleaner” image with the medieval period. To use *Merlin* as an example once again, the BBC

production emphasizes bold primary colors, especially in the costumes of Merlin, Arthur, and the latter's knights, sweeping natural landscapes, and lavish domestic spaces.

If the clothes worn by characters in *Merlin* do not necessarily help viewers feel more at ease with the medieval, other features of this series clearly strive to solicit audience sympathy. Especially significant in *Merlin* and other recent television medievalisms is the conspicuous absence of organized religion, specifically Christianity. The Church, whose ominous presence contributed greatly to the negative image of the Middle Ages in the popular medievalism of the 1980s and 1990s, seems to have all but vanished from today's contemporary medievalisms. What is particularly striking about this phenomenon lies in its close relationship with the medium of television. HBO's *Game of Thrones* gives us some insight into the erosion of the religious on television. Although Christianity plays no role in either the television show or the series of books, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, on which it is based, the books dwell at length on the various religious beliefs of the people of Westeros. While some of this material is retained in the television version, especially in the person of Melisandre and those who, like her, worship the God of Light, much of it is pared down as if in an effort to avoid the topic of religion as much as possible. Other series either present viewers with a non-Christian world—again, *Merlin*—or one in which magic reigns (*Merlin*, *Camelot*). Without the looming “threat” of the medieval Church as it was imagined in the last quarter of the 20th century, viewers may allow themselves to form an attachment not simply with the characters of medieval-themed shows but also with the world they inhabit. Through its representation on commercial television, the medieval is thus slowly reclaiming its function as a site of popular escape and fantasy.

Television medievalism stands outside both the medieval and the contemporary, presenting audiences with the best of the two eras. Recent examples of television medievalisms eschew some prominent aspects of the medieval experience in favor of more attractive elements of the period. Such products reduce or eliminate any discussion of class, gender, and racial inequalities in the Middle Ages while emphasizing the sense of adventure and fantasy at the heart of much of medieval literature.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, where the Church once stood, we now find wild, untamed nature and magic. Contemporary television medievalisms offer us a romantic, pre-industrial world free of inequities and injustice, the world the Industrial Revolution led to creating without the industrialization, consumerism, and sense of awareness that played an essential part in shaping it. For the duration of our favorite medieval-themed show, we can live in the past without fearing the Church; we can feel a medieval European's sense of wonder at the world while knowing exactly where we stand in an increasingly shrinking

global network. Last but certainly not least, we can pretend to ignore our society's consumerist impulses while deciding what to buy on our next outing to the supermarket. Television medievalisms thus confront us with multiple contradictions. Yet, in spite—or perhaps because—of, their paradoxical nature, such popular medievalisms serve a crucial function: they reassure us that it is possible to enjoy the comforts of modern society while continuing to grasp for some higher, more fulfilling goal.

By examining individual television programs from a wide variety of sources and an equally great range of perspectives, the ten essays in this collection further probe the nature of television medievalism in terms of Personal and Political Desires (Part 1), Narrative and Genre (Part 2), and Gender and Sexuality (Part 3). In the first essay of Part 1, “The Most Dangerous Sport in History Is About to Be Reborn: Medievalism and Violence in *Full Metal Jousting*,” Angela Jane Weisl discusses how the History Channel’s *Full Metal Jousting* (2012) enacts a simultaneous engagement with and rejection of the Middle Ages, creating an “authentic fantasy” of the Middle Ages that is fraught with the tensions and ironies of postmodern masculinity. Stephanie L. Coker’s piece, “*Joan of Arcadia*: A Modern Maiden on Trial,” explores what it means for Jeanne d’Arc to find her place in American pop culture by playing a role in civic education in a television series aimed at teenagers. This essay provides a close reading of episode nine, “St. Joan,” of *Joan of Arcadia* (2003–05) wherein high schooler Joan Girardi reconciles religious faith and secular education. Coker argues for how *Joan of Arcadia* refuses the spectacle in Jeanne’s story in favor of confronting the “mysteries of faith in a non-religious age.” In “William Webbe’s Wench: Henry VIII, History and Popular Culture,” Shannon McSheffrey turns to an analysis of one of the more obscure scenarios from Henry’s sex life included in the BBC/Showtime *Tudors* (2007–10). This exploration reveals much about what kind of cultural work television does for us, and indeed about how the popular culture of the past underlies our scholarly work. Such cultural work is also the focus of Evan Torner in “Nature and Adventure in *Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen*.” This fourth essay examines how the made-for-TV adventure film is a very serious national-pedagogical project attempting to re-enchant what is seen as a shared German medieval past while glossing over the recent and far more disturbing history of the Third Reich.

In Part 2, authors turn to issues of narrative and genre while attending to medium, audience, and context. Melissa Ridley Elmes’s “Episodic Arthur: *Merlin*, *Camelot* and the Visual Modernization of the Medieval Literary Romance Tradition” suggests how useful it is to consider television programs such as the BBC’s *Merlin* (2008–12) and Starz’s *Camelot* (2011), rather than their film counterparts, as “the modern visual successors of the medieval literary romance

tradition,” highlighting the medievalism inherent in the very notion of “episode” and episodic storytelling. Both shows are anachronistic and ahistorical, presenting the Arthurian legend in ways calculated to appeal visually to a modern audience steeped in the enchantment of medievalism. In this, Elmes argues, they are very like their medieval counterparts that also sought to inculcate a sense of timeless nostalgia. Complementing her colleagues’ work on adult programs, Sandy Feinstein’s “Are You Kidding? *King Arthur and the Knights of Justice*” explores how the sport-metaphor in animation series such as *King Arthur and the Knights of Justice* (1992–93) shapes the political, specifically royal, medieval past for juvenile audiences. By situating this animated serial within a history of remediation, with particular attention to the legacy of Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, Feinstein further theorizes the notions of fandom, technology, and immediacy.

The final four essays are concerned primarily with gender and sexuality in television medievalism (Part 3). In “Television’s Male Gaze: The Male Perspective in TNT’s *Mists of Avalon*,” Michael W. George places this adaptation in the context of televised “warrior women” and “strong female characters” such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Xena Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) to demonstrate how the 2001 TNT miniseries *Mists of Avalon* reinforces the male gaze. By analyzing characterizations, camera angles, zooms, and crosscuts, as well as features of Marion Zimmer Bradley’s novel that Edel omitted, this essay demonstrates that the miniseries “androcentrizes” Bradley’s narrative, “bringing it into line with not only much of Arthuriana but also much of television medievalism.” The androcentric nature of many instances of television medievalism is further emphasized by Elysse T. Meredith in “Gendering Morals, Magic and Medievalism in the BBC’s *Merlin*,” an essay that explores the gradual othering of female magic in the series. Meredith suggests that *Merlin* is a medievalism of gendered morality that comments on religion, monarchy, and the role of governmental devolution in contemporary British society. This essay further demonstrates how contemporary Arthuriana can be potently nationalistic, serving as quasi-propagandistic material that expresses anxieties over contemporaneous political and social issues by depicting corresponding subjects as inherently dangerous.

The volume’s penultimate essay, Tara Foster’s “Arthur and Guenièvre: The Royal Couple of *Kaamelott*,” allows for a more optimistic reading of the intersection between gender and medievalism on the small screen. Using Maureen Fries’s categorization of Arthurian women—heroine, female hero or counter-hero—as a framework, Foster demonstrates how the serial format allows a character such as Guenièvre to move among various roles. Foster suggests that Guenièvre and other female characters not only contribute to the sexual humor

of the French series *Kaamelott* (2005–09) but also interrogate medieval and modern gender inequities, indicating the extent to which the Arthurian legend still serves as a powerful framework for evoking societal ideals. Finally, Torben R. Gebhardt's "Homosexuality in Television Medievalism" explores how homosexuality is represented in HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–).

Each of the essays that follow testifies to the importance of television in fashioning a "new" Middle Ages for the 21st century. That medieval-themed narratives seem to be migrating more and more from the big to the small screen might initially appear to reflect a gradual loss of interest in the medieval. However, this is far from the case, and the popularity of the medieval period on television—as proven by the abundance of programs set against a medieval background—only helps to draw attention to the ubiquity of medievalism. At a time when cinema has begun to wane as a popular medium, especially for young adults, television is providing medievalism the opportunity to grow. Through television, popular images of the Middle Ages retain their currency, adapting to the needs and desires of various new audiences and ensuring that the medieval can continue to capture the hearts and minds of succeeding generations.

## Notes

1. Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) and *Robin Hood* (2010) present two interesting exceptions to this rule.
2. The popularity of video games such as *Assassin's Creed*, *Crusader King II*, *Mount and Blade: Warband*, and *Chivalry: Medieval Warfare* stress the importance of this new form of medievalism.
3. Ute Bernd and Andrew James Johnston, "Medievalism: A Very Short Introduction," *European Journal of English Studies* 15.2 (2011): 97.
4. John M. Ganim, "The Myth of Medieval Romance," in *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper*, ed. R. Howard Bloch and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 148.
5. Ganim, "The Myth of Medieval Romance," 148. Of course, not all 19th-century medieval enthusiasts embraced Morris's leftist ideology. Here, it is important to note that the Middle Ages inspired individuals from a wide political spectrum from the eighteenth century onwards.
6. Richard Utz, "Robin Hood, Frenched," in *Medieval Afterlives in Popular Culture*, ed. Gail Ashton and Daniel T. Kline (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 153.
7. Steve Guthrie, "Time Travel, Pulp Fictions, and Changing Attitudes Toward the Middle Ages: Why You Can't Get Renaissance on Somebody's Ass," in *Medieval Afterlives in Popular Culture*, ed. Gail Ashton and Daniel T. Kline (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 110.
8. Guthrie, "Time Travel, Pulp Fictions, and Changing Attitudes toward the Middle Ages," 109.
9. Angela Jane Weisl, *The Persistence of Medievalism: Narrative Adventures in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 204–6.
10. Andrew B.R. Elliott, "The Charm of the (Re)making: Problems of Arthurian Television Serialization," *Arthuriana* 21.4 (2011): 53.
11. Rod Stoneman, "Nine Notes on Cinema and Television," in *Big Picture, Small Screen: The Relations between Film and Television*, ed. Elizabeth Sklar and Donald Hoffman (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), 120.
12. Based on medieval Norse sagas, the History Channel's *Vikings* (2013–) presents an interesting exception to this rule.

13. ABC's *The Quest* (2014–), for example, represents a new fantasy/reality television hybrid that gives its contestants the opportunity to populate a fantasy medieval world void of racial and gender discrimination.

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