

## Introduction: Encountering Medievalism

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Several of the contributors to this issue at an ICMA-sponsored night at Medieval Times.

## Fantasy, Fiction, Film, and Fandoms: Playing with the Middle Ages

Pop culture visions of the Middle Ages significantly shape the field of medieval studies, and practitioners of the serious scholarly study of medieval art and history often can look back to medievalism, including fairytales and fantasy that draw on medieval themes, as the foundations of their fascination with the Middle Ages. This issue of *Different Visions*, “Encountering Medievalism,” features the personal accounts and reflections of individuals who credit their intellectual development in part to medievalism. We take ourselves as subjects, writing about our own experiences in different ways than we do in more traditional academic modes of inquiry with which we might be more comfortable. Tracing our current interests back to our early engagement with medievalizing stories, films, games, theme parks, and more, is a fun and fascinating exercise, and these reflections also reveal much about our current times and the intellectual questions different generations of medievalists bring to the study of medieval art and architecture.

The early experiences shared here are deeply personal, powerful, and significant in almost subconscious ways. Several of the contributors discuss not even having been aware of the degree of influence that these experiences of medievalism had on them until being asked to think critically about them for this issue, recognizing these aspects only in hindsight. We contributors discuss many avenues to the “real” (or “reel”) study of the Middle Ages, but in nearly every case, see an insistent and direct connection between our current professional identities and our early (and often continued and simultaneous) exposure to medievalism in all its forms. Positionality matters, and each author addresses some aspect of identity, including discussions about class, gender, race, and sexuality. As editors, we thank the contributors to the issue for their vulnerability in sharing their own life experiences. Taken together, these essays demonstrate the diversity of the field that is dependent on and indebted to the existence of an elaborate popular culture infrastructure of medievalism.

That said, medievalism has sometimes been seen as a corollary to historical inquiry, an inevitable but ultimately problematic aspect of studying the Middle Ages, at best an innocuous diversion for an incurious and nebulous “general public” audience and at worst an “inaccurate” hurdle to true understanding. For those teaching the Middle Ages, medievalism has sometimes been the bait, a way to “get students interested” in our field by luring them with the political drama of *Game of Thrones*, for example, and drawing them into any number of riveting but ultimately niche medieval subjects. Similarly, a spectrum of curatorial strategies for engaging (or not) with

medievalisms in museum galleries, exhibitions, public programming, or social media initiatives exists. “Seriousness,” historicity, and “authenticity” are sometimes used as criteria for determining the inclusion or exclusion of medievalism in such institutional settings.

As editors, we view the seemingly boundless love for the Middle Ages from multiple perspectives. On the one hand, we recognize that this passion has been an entry point to medieval studies for so many great scholars. Indeed these medieval iterations themselves enable insight about the past and about our current world, lives, and imaginations. On the other hand, we have joined fellow scholar-activists to condemn the misuse of the medieval past to justify racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other prejudices that stem from a myopic view of the Middle Ages. We can keep track of historic fact, and we can also embrace the new and continued life of the Middle Ages responsibly. Empowering the fans, whether of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Wheel of Time*, *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*, *Pentiment*, or other works only invites more people to share in our love of this period. Fans pack our classrooms and exhibits, and this enthusiasm at all levels should be nurtured and validated. Fans also join scholars in critiquing the inaccurate and harmful effects of a monolithic white, heterosexual, cisgender European Middle Ages in medievalizing fantasy. Wouldn't we rather invite a wide audience into the tent than to cordon it off only for those with traditional training? Might iterations of medieval themes in today's media be just the bullhorn we need? In this moment when medieval studies programs, the study of languages, faculty lines, and medieval exhibitions seem to be shrinking, is it possible that the fandoms may, in fact, save the field?

Rather than divorcing scholarship from popular historical fiction to protect the “true” Middle Ages, we call on the field most broadly defined to think creatively about medievalism not just as a subject of inquiry itself, but also as method and pursuit. Collaboration rather than dismissal will bring more people into the Middle Ages and stoke public interest in the period, while potentially increasing accuracy.<sup>[1]</sup> Interested artists and writers could reach out to the contributors to this issue, scholars who love pop culture, for conversation, and vice versa.

A range of creative practitioners bring the Middle Ages to life today. While we may immediately think of filmmakers, costume designers, composers, and Medieval Times or Renaissance Faire staff as having the most widespread popular appeal, we can also include calligraphers, armorers and weavers, or those engage in live-action role playing (LARP), individuals who produce remedies or potions based on medieval manuscripts (we might call them herbologists or alchemists), astrologers or tarot

readers, and even scholars since our work is a combination of research investigations and imagination. The Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) is the most famous international organization devoted to this work. In museum and academic conference contexts, many medievalists will be familiar with workshops devoted to topics such as astrolabe or pilgrim badge making, armor or hurdy-gurdy demonstrations, calligraphy lessons, or the occasional joust and historical reenactment for good measure. As editors with various museum experiences (as visitors and staff), we have found that such activities elicit responses from colleagues ranging from eye rolls to participation and everything in between. At the Getty, for example, Bryan has fond memories welcoming a range of enthusiasts—who are each scholars in their own rights—to study and admire a copy of Fiore Furlan dei Liberi da Premariacco's combat treatise called *Flower of Battle* (*Fior di Battaglia*; about 1410).[2] Not only did these groups come with their own impressive knowledge of each move depicted in the volumes, but they also knew the intricacies of European court culture. A video on the Getty's YouTube page is proof of these skills.[3] On one occasion, Bryan accompanied a megafan to Italy to track down a related volume in a private collection and spent hours pouring over and photographing each page for comparative study.[4] Observations by the contemporary swordsmith provided multiple pathways for academic inquiry and exhibition development.

Modern and contemporary artists, writers, designers, and scholars are not alone in recreating and celebrating the past, in harnessing it to influence our own worlds. Medievalism, after all, was already an essential part of the Middle Ages – medievalism is perhaps the most medieval of methods. Throughout the period itself, the spirit of recreation – cyclic re-creationism – is apparent. History writing, and parallelism, enabled people to retell earlier stories and recreate earlier worlds to interpret and influence their own societies.[5] The *Shahnameh* (977-1010) and *The Golden Legend* (1265-66) each created medieval equivalents to the multiverse in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), enabling readers at the time to experience the amped-up stories of imperial expansion or martyrs' miraculous feats, thereby respectively affirming Islamic and Christian zeal.[6] Other Christians looked back centuries in the Song of Roland, written around 1100 mythologizing Charlemagne's Battle of Roncesvalles of 778. It's medieval medievalism! Many other comparisons appear across art and architectural history and literature of a global Middle Ages, including the many Alexander Romances (Arabic, Persian, Ethiopian, and European versions, 9th-14th centuries), the *Ramayana* (retellings in Southeast Asia, 12th-15th centuries), Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), and the *Popol Vuh* of the Maya (16th century).

Thinking about medievalism as a critical methodology that has the power to shape our scholarly, historical inquiry is a departure from how medievalists have used and considered medievalism in the past. Often, the homogeneity of approach in higher education and graduate programs in medieval studies asks scholars to suppress personal identity, and even to ignore it completely, in pursuit of the fantasy of a kind of historical objectivity that foregrounds the archive, primary sources, and fact-based evidence to the exclusion of experimental or creative approaches. Applications to graduate school almost universally call for a document called a “personal statement” that specifically asks applicants to tie their biographies and previous personal experiences to their academic work, making a case for what they, uniquely, bring to the study of their material. Yet, that biography is almost always deemphasized upon entry into the program, and scholars are shaped in the image of their advisors, some spending a career to return to interests, methods, and subjects they were discouraged from pursuing. Reframing, acknowledging, and even foregrounding, personal experience as a critical aspect of scholarly work has the power to expand the field in new and essential ways. As editors, we are excited to present this issue in a digital medium with *Different Visions*, which has allowed contributors a creative freedom to include multimedia aspects (voice recording, graphic arts, video confessions) and explore the fun parts of our collective medieval fandom in the form of a medievalisms resource page. If these essays inspire you, we encourage you to reach out to us to submit your own! There is room for all.

A second issue to complement the present one is in the works. There we invite scholars to write longer, more traditional academic articles about medievalism as a way to further demonstrate the importance of a multi-pronged approach to interrogating or championing this field. For some, medievalism as method dovetails with topics that are as urgent today as they were in the Middle Ages – such as class, gender, globality, race, and sexuality – even if or when the words for describing such experiences differ between periods. For others, medievalism remains a site for examining what the medieval means at different points in history and why that matters for how we conceive this term historically or stylistically in the future. Moreover, medievalism can provide a path for expanding access to the scholarly study of the medieval period and can also be instructive as at times we gain reciprocal insights about the past or present through fantasy, fairytales, and fandoms. In both *Different Visions* issues, medievalism is ultimately about thinking creatively about the Middle Ages in every medium possible.



## References

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- 1 For example, Boyd Morrison and Beth Morrison, *The Lawless Land*. London: Head of Zeus, 2022; Boyd and Beth Morrison, *The Last True Templar*. London: Head of Zeus, 2024.
- 2 The manuscript is Ms. Ludwig XV 13 (83.MR.183).
- 3 See <https://youtu.be/80ilvoJuZHo>.
- 4 Other related volumes can be found in the Pisani Dossi collection in northern Italy and at The Morgan Library & Museum (MS M. 383).
- 5 Elizabeth Morrison and Anne D. Hedeman, *Imagining the Past in France*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010; Larisa Grollemond and Bryan C. Keene, *The Fantasy of the Middle Ages: An Epic Journey through Imaginary Medieval Worlds*. Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2022.
- 6 Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.