

Misused Medievalism

To what extent has the misconstruing of European medieval history since the late modern era influenced medievalism in the western public imagination?

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History

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Introduction: Medieval history versus medievalism

The Middle Ages, as a concept, is loose, because it never truly existed as a singular era.

However, the period commonly defined as “medieval” is c. 500 A.D. to 1500 A.D., according to Encyclopedia Britannica. As the gap between the glorious Ancient Rome and the modernist, intellectual Renaissance, the era is widely less studied and more generalized in the scope of world history, and therefore misconceptions easily arise. At the same time, though, the era’s imagery is used in many ways in the modern world, such as in politics, and it is a common setting for dramatic stories of brutal violence.

Medievalism, on the other hand, is simply the ideas associated with the Middle Ages. Medievalism is not necessarily historically accurate; it is a somewhat fictional account of the medieval era that appropriates concepts associated with the period in a rather fantastical way. John Simons defines the term in *Medievalism in England II* as “the process by which the Middle Ages is transformed into a useful discourse out of which can be produced ideologies and practices which comment upon or contest other contemporary beliefs” (5). Alternatively, Amy S. Kaufman defines the term as “the appropriation, and often revision, of the medieval past.” The differences between these definitions are dependent on the context of the source, Simons writes to fellow scholars in a published collection of essays while Kaufman writes in an online article that specifically addresses the medieval imagery in the Ku Klux Klan. Though, both scholars agree that medievalism is the purposeful usage of history.

In other words, medievalism is how medieval history is used to the advantage of the modern-day, whether this is for pride, study, entertainment, or hate. Popular medievalistic concepts also mainly revolve around specifically *Western* European history— such as knights,

chivalry, Catholicism, and feudalism. Even the popular concept of “Vikings” can also be considered medievalism in itself.

The term “western world” mainly refers to the generalized culture of Europe (often specifically Western Europe such as Britain and France) and North America (often specifically the United States). The “public imagination” is how concepts are generally interpreted in a culture, and it mainly relies on how educational systems, pop-culture entertainment, and public figures present said concepts. I write from the perspective of an American, and some generalizations and assumptions must be made for the sake of the argument.

To the average modern “western” person, the line between the real medieval past and commonly-seen medievalisms may be quite indistinguishable. For example, a 2009 McDougall Littel standard history textbook mentions largely fictional films such as *Braveheart* as a notable representation of medieval warfare and substantially generalizes common life by only presenting a few primary sources to represent seven hundred years of history (368).

The beginnings of the popular medieval narrative were introduced by Victorian romanticism and the Gothic Revival. For example, the tale of King Arthur was popularized by Alfred Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885), and in 2001 the name of the iconic king’s fantastical sword was used by the far-right British National Party in the branding of a summer camp called Camp Excalibur (Goodman) in which teenagers are taught to “distribute BNP leaflets in their school and recruit members for the party” (Waugh).

This essay seeks to explore how and why the imagery of the medieval era is so often misused for political and social ideology, how this trend started in the nineteenth century, and how this misinformation affects the general public’s view of the era as a whole. The sources that were used are mostly secondary analyses of media and events that misuse medievalism.

Conservative medievalism

Conservatives of Western European descent have long since had an attachment to the medieval era, as in many ways it can represent a “traditional” way of life, according to stereotypes and misconceptions. Some concepts are more favored by extremists, such as the fact that the Church had power over the people, powerful men controlled the lower class, and there was little class mobility. However, some less radical ideas are still widely idealized today, such as the perceived strict gender roles of strong men and frail women, small local government, and the glory of battle and war.

From the research of this essay, it seems the medieval past is modernly appropriated in multiple ways, but two approaches are most notable. First, the idea that the culture of the Middle Ages was the pinnacle of tradition and heritage for Western Europe’s descendants. Second, the notion that the Middle Ages was a time of ignorance in comparison to the advancements of the modern day. On occasion, these two viewpoints can even act jointly, such as when former United States President Donald Trump spoke about his plan for a wall on the Mexican border: “They say it’s a medieval solution. It’s true. It’s medieval because it worked then, and it works even better now.” This statement both gives the connotation that medieval technology was barbaric *and* that society should revert to historical practices because “it worked.” It is contradictory, and not based on much historical truth, but a clear example of how “medieval” as an adjective is used today.

I. The Victorian Gothic Revival movement

In Western Europe and its diaspora, medievalism has often been used to justify conservatism.

The beginning of the medievalist tropes and symbols that are commonly romanticized in media

and misused by hate groups was sparked by Victorian England's Gothic revival movement that rose to prominence in the early to mid 19th century.

For context, Victorians witnessed rising global industrialization, which was a sharp change from established ways of society. The culture shifted as the economic boost caused by industrialization allowed more class mobility than ever before and a new wave of progressivism. According to Stephen Fliegel, the Victorian years posed "problems of social order, industrialization, poverty, and crises of faith." The Gothic Revival is inherently conservative, as it was a push against modern progress in politics, technology, and the arts. Additionally, these beliefs lay heavily in the Christian faith for some, as society became more secular and globalized. Revisiting the past was comforting for those that resisted industrialization. Stephen Fliegel assesses that "nineteenth century medievalism fostered the sense of brotherhood and affection between men."

This sense of brotherhood naturally developed into English nationalism as a contestant to globalization. The concept of Anglo-Saxonism also rose in regards to it being a nationalistic race of English people rather than a cultural ethnicity (Similarly to medieval vs. medievalism, there is a difference in the meanings of the terms "Anglo-Saxon" and "Anglo-Saxonism").

II. America's post-medieval crusaders

Medievalism developed differently in America than in Europe. Before the Civil War, Southern American society was practically feudal. For example, many parallels can be drawn between the medieval lord and the Southern plantation owner. They were the noble minorities of society, & owned both their land and the people that worked on it. European serfs did not have much more

freedom than African-American slaves (M. Martin). Of course, the plantation had major differences to the medieval manor, such as their unified solidarity throughout the South, compared to manors, which were often at odds with each other. However, the similarities were one cause of an association of medievalism and conservatism, especially in the Southern United States.

One source found in the research for this essay contests this. Eugene Genovese has a unique interpretation, from the perspective of a leftist Marxist turned traditional conservative. In his essay, “The Southern Slaveholder’s View of the Middle Ages” in *Medievalism in American Culture* (1989), Genovese essentially asserts that the two situations were too different to be compared, and Southern slaveholders thought the ways of the Middle Ages were below them.

Objectively, though, traces of American medievalism can still be seen today. For example, Rhodes Hall in Atlanta, which was inspired by a medieval Scottish castle, is littered with Confederate imagery in its stained glass windows; similarly, the Washington National Cathedral formerly was home to windows that memorialize Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson in a distinctly medieval art style [See Figure 1.].

The Ku Klux Klan was a notable perpetrator of American medievalism as well. Their branding is riddled with medievalistic symbolism, and it extended to their representation in pop culture. A quote from the infamous 1905 novel *The Clansman* outright compared the hate group to the Crusaders of the 11th century: “...[the] men with their tall spiked caps made a picture such as the world had not seen since the Knights of the Middle Ages rode on their Holy Crusades” (Dixon). Similarly, the film adaptation of the same novel, renamed *The Birth of a Nation* (1910) pictures an overtly Crusader-like image on its theatrical release poster [See Figure 2].

The Ku Klux Klan saw themselves as knights defending chivalry (Kaufman), which by their definition, was “a commitment to protect the virtue of ‘American’ women” (MacLean 114). These “knights” of the Klan lead “crusades” against minorities to protect the medievalist value of chastity while upholding the myth of chivalry. The supposed violence of black men on white women gave the Klan a more appealing mission than simply terrorizing the South for the sake of racism, leading to over 4 million Americans supporting the Klan at its peak in 1925, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. However, the real root of the Klan’s terrorism stems from the Reconstruction era after the Civil War, in which black people were able to rise up in Southern society for the first time ever. Similar to how Victorians underwent societal turmoil during the Industrial Revolution, some Southern white people felt that their dominance and supremacy were being threatened. So, they looked towards Medieval Europe, in which the white man reigned supreme (Modern scholars, though, have determined that the idea of race was a construct of the Renaissance and medieval Europe may have been much more diverse than previously imagined [Young]). Similar to today, their view of the Middle Ages was quite skewed by the popular narrative, which at the time was perpetuated by Victorian literature. Notably, the Klan originally took a liking to English poets such as Sir Walter Scott, as seen in the fact that they took Scott’s image of the “fiery cross,” a Scottish symbol of war, from *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) and adopted it into their iconic practice of burning crosses.

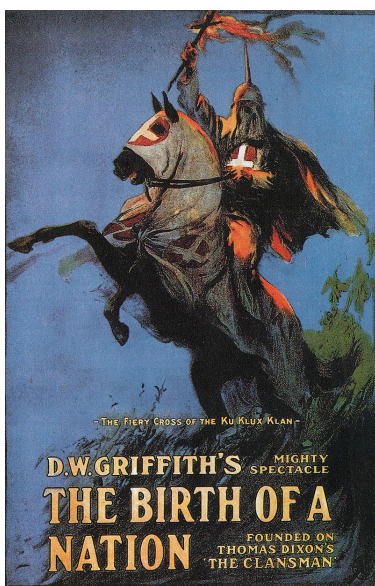
Overall, it is clear that medieval history has been abused by conservatives, at least to some extent. This connotation can be seen in how the term “medieval” is used by others, too. In President Joe Biden’s speech on January 6, 2022, he claims that “one [police] officer called [the

riots of January 6, 2021], quote, ‘a medieval battle.’” “Medieval” is now an adjective with *intention*, rather than an objective word to describe truths about the era.

Figure 1: Windows previously in the Washington National Cathedral, now donated to the Smithsonian Museum. (Washington National Cathedral)



Figure 2: D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* theatrical release poster. Public domain.



Medievalism in the modern public imagination

Though it is impossible to accurately gauge how the general public perceives the Middle Ages and the concepts around it without substantial surveyal data, it is worth examining how it is represented in popular culture, as it gives insight into what consumers learn about the period indirectly. Again, since “medievalism” is not necessarily historically accurate, the concepts discussed in this section are merely ones associated with the Middle Ages for one reason or another (likely through media), not depictions of medieval history intended to be realistic such as historical biopics, biographies, or otherwise grounded forms of historical fiction.

I. Disney’s fairy-tale medievalism

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a fairy tale as “a story (as for children) involving fantastic forces and beings (such as fairies, wizards, and goblins).” However, think of what common concepts appear in fairy tales. Royalty, knights (in shining armor), witches, and castles, for example, are all associated with the Middle Ages.

Some fairy tales have transcended culture and time, such as the basic structure of the story of Cinderella, which is estimated to be at least 2,000 years old (first appearing in *Claudius Aelianus His Various History*, Book XIII, from the 6th century BCE). However, the version most popular to Western audiences is that of the Grimm’s fairy tales.

The Grimm brothers’ collection of fairy tales, first published in 1812, is the basis for many 20th and 21st century fairy tale adaptations, such as Disney’s extremely popular animated films *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Tangled* (2010). *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) is another example, though it was not based on a Grimm tale. These films in particular all are ripe with medievalism. They generally have stereotypical medieval

aesthetics consisting of princesses, illuminated manuscripts, tapestries, castles, and a world of deindustrialized nature. At the very least, the worlds of these films invoke a historical setting, whether based in any truth or not.

Snow White in particular creates an interesting disposition as it was produced during the Great Depression, so the positive showcases of simple, natural, conservationist, and honest life (that is generally associated with feudalism) proved appropriate (Kelly 192-195). However, “while *Snow White* invokes the Middle Ages indirectly... *Sleeping Beauty* explicitly quotes the art of the Middle Ages” (196). Art directors and animators for *Sleeping Beauty* directly referenced tapestries, manuscripts, and architecture of the late Middle Ages to design the world design of the film (196-197). For example, the storybook presented in the opening sequence of the movie closely resembles illuminated manuscripts of the late Middle Ages [see Figure 3], albeit in a more legible and colorful way to appeal to children.

Figure 3: Storybook from the opening of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) displayed at Disneyland.

(Coles)



II. Monty Python's mess of medievalism

Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975) represents a self-aware, comedic, and overall ridiculous “Middle Ages.” It tells the Arthurian legend of the holy grail, set in 932 A.D. In the process, though, it makes medieval people out to be simply idiotic. Of course, *Holy Grail* was never intended to be taken seriously, as it is a comedy film. However, the Python troop pokes fun at concepts as if they were true in the first place, even though the story is based on a legend about a king that may or may not have existed in the first place (Britannica). For example, as David D. Day puts it, *Holy Grail* consistently upholds the modern preconception of “a tendency to regard the time as one of grim and barbarous tyranny, an age in which the lower class was ruthlessly exploited by its feudal overlords” (Day 86). The Pythons also consistently insert modern rhetoric into the film, as if to say our modern (Marxist, as Day puts it) political and economic stances are objectively superior to those of the medieval past, because in hindsight, of course, a communist manor would seem more ethical than a feudalist one. Day describes it as the phenomenon of the “Medieval Other.” That is to say, medieval people exist in a foreign, foolish, and fatuous period that should not be taken seriously at all.

This film is an interesting example of how medievalism is used to the advantage of the modern day, not to glorify the past, but to strengthen the superiority of the present. We can laugh at the absurdity of the myth of the holy grail because something like that would never be taken seriously in the world we know today. However, there were never crazed knights looking for a magical chalice in the tenth century, when the legend was not given Christian significance until the late 12th century (Britannica). Monty Python frames the scene as if it were true, but perceived, critiqued, and humored through the lens of modernity. As a result, as one of the most esteemed comedy films of all time, the idea of the “Medieval Other” still persists.

III. The modern fantasy genre

Cambridge Dictionary defines the “fantasy” genre as:

“*a type of story or literature that is set in an imaginary world, often involving traditional myths and magical creatures and sometimes ideas or events from the real world, especially from the medieval period of history.*”

This definition implies that the fantasy genre is inherently connected to medievalism, even if not every fantastical media outright displays it. (Other dictionary definitions of “fantasy” do not outright specify this, such as that of the Oxford and Merriam-Webster dictionaries.)

This is because, according to Jessica Hines, a professor of medieval literature at Duke University, the medieval setting occupies a less grounded time in history for the general public, therefore making it easier to insert unrealistic aspects of fiction that can ultimately have a deeper meaning. This may be because the medieval era sits between two intellectual periods, Rome and the Renaissance, and in comparison, the medieval period is much less studied and taught. As a result, fantasy stories may take advantage of this groundlessness to subtly perpetuate a certain ideology or otherwise reflect the author’s prejudices.

George R.R. Martin defends the concerning amount of sexual assault against women and overwhelming whiteness in his book series, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–), more popularly, the television drama *Game of Thrones*, by claiming he is simply “show[ing] what medieval society was like” in an interview with Entertainment Weekly. However, the series could not be farther from historically accurate, so why does Martin seek to display *only* the supposed whiteness and the rampant sexual assault of the Middle Ages, and not the *actual* reality of it? There were no dragons or ice walls in the true medieval era. The story is fantasy, which may derive some aspects from medieval imagery, but it is not anywhere near a correct representation of history.

The *Game of Thrones* series was incredibly popular, its viewership at its peak was 32.8 million viewers per episode, according to Time Magazine. So, Martin claiming that his story is *medieval* perpetuates the stereotypes that allow creators and critics to excuse blatant misogyny and other types of bigotry in media by claiming it as “realistic to history.” This is, again, an example of the impact of conservatism in medievalism, and though it is not extremist, it certainly has a large impact on the public perception of the era at hand.

Similarly, according to Dr. Helen Young, the society of Middle Earth (the world of *The Hobbit* [1937] and *The Lord of the Rings* [1954-1955] by J. R. R. Tolkien) has its roots in the racism of the real world:

“In Middle Earth, unlike reality, race is objectively real rather than socially constructed. There are species (elves, men, dwarves, etc.), but within those species there are races that conform to 19th-century race theory, in that their physical attributes (hair color, etc.) are associated with non-physical attributes that are both personal and cultural. There is also an explicit racial hierarchy which is, again, real in the world of the story. Middle Earth is literally a racist's fantasy land.”

Because *Lord of the Rings* was, and still is so influential on the fantasy genre, these racial parallels spread to many other hugely popular franchises, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *The Elder Scrolls*, even if the creators and fans are not aware of the real-world connotations.

Conclusion

It is clear that, to a considerable extent, the period of European history labeled “medieval” is currently associated with conservative values in many different ways. The origins of this generalized conception are many, from the Victorians to the KKK to Disney fairy-tales to modern fantasy stories. However, it is also used to perpetuate modern rhetoric as superior, by portraying the past as barbaric and moronic in contrast to today’s society. It has been used for the advantage of the modern day from numerous perspectives and now the line between facts and fiction is blurry in the western world.

The field of medieval studies has gradually been moving past the fallacies that now haunt the legacy of the era. However, this legacy still remains in the eyes of the people. Nor is the medieval era the only period of history with misinformed connotations.

The clear solution is education. The medieval world needs to be grounded in the public consciousness with what scholars have uncovered about the era in recent decades. Not just Europe, but the rest of the world as well, from the Mongols to the Islamic scholars of North Africa, because the era was not only a world of European kings, knights, and war. As previously mentioned, the Middle Ages has occupied a less realistic period of history since the late modern era where fiction can easily be inserted (Hines), whether that be simple fantasies of dragons or harmful ones of misogyny, racism, and overall bigotry.

This is a tough cross to bear, though. According to Dr. Eleanor Janega, the medieval period is “not generally taught before the university level because it is really quite complicated,” and “it requires a solid understanding of history as a discipline.” Therefore, the accurate Middle Ages and analysis of how society views the past are topics that should be taught hand in hand. Unfortunately, history is so often taught as a list of facts to be repeated, which can again be seen

in the Mcdougal Littell textbook referenced in the introduction, and throughout education systems all across the West.

Amy S. Kaufman and Paul B. Sturtevant note in their book, *The Devil's Historians: How Modern Extremists Abuse the Medieval Past*, that “how we imagine the past—and the way we misremember it—can be a window into the present. Our view of the past reveals our understanding of the world, our highest hopes and our darkest fears” (12). Medievalism, though it can be harmful to the perception of history, can give insight into the public consciousness and imagination.

The field of medieval studies has gradually been moving past the fallacies that now haunt the legacy of the era. However, this legacy still remains in the eyes of the people. Nor is the medieval era the only period of history with misinformed connotations. History has always been misused for the sake of others, but now more than ever the West has the ability to dissuade this.

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