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SERIALIZING THE MIDDLE AGES: TELEVISION AND THE (RE)PRODUCTION OF POP  
CULTURE MEDIEVALISMS

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

Sara McClendon Knight

May 2012

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## ABSTRACT

In his now canonical “Dreaming the Middle Ages,” Umberto Eco famously quips that “it seems that people like the Middle Ages” (61). Eco’s apt sentiment still strikes a resonant chord some twenty years after its publication; there is indeed something about the Middle Ages that continues to fascinate our postmodern society. One of the most tangible ways this interest manifests itself is through our media. This project explores some of the ways that representations of the medieval past function within present-day reimaginings in the media. More specifically, television’s obvious visual textuality, widespread popularity, and virtually untapped scholarly potential offer an excellent medium through which to analyze pop culture medievalisms—the creative tensions that exists between medieval culture and the way it is reimagined, recreated, or reproduced in the present. By using medievalist studies of cinema as a model, I argue that many of the medievalist representations on television are similar to those found in film. At the same time, the serialized narrative structure of most television programs alters the viewer’s experience of the past in a way that separates medievalist television from medievalist cinema. Incorporating the evaluative tools of medievalism studies and television narratology, this project explores the medievalisms of three narratively diverse television programs—*The Pillars of the Earth* (medievalist miniseries), *True Blood* (series with medievalist storyline), and *Game of Thrones* (fantastic neomedievalist series). Ultimately, these programs serve as case studies to demonstrate how the varied visual and narrative treatment of the Middle Ages on television can reveal cultural desires and anxieties about the medieval past and the postmodern present.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family—Mom, Dad, Matthew, and, of course, Joseph—  
whose love and support made this project possible.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Mary Hayes for her expert guidance, support, and encouragement throughout this process. I would also like to thank Dr. Deborah Barker and Dr. Gregory Heyworth for their insightful critiques of this work.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vi
I. INTRODUCTION: MEDIEVALISM AND TELEVISION.....	1
II. “NOTHING IS SACRED”: THE (DE)CONSTRUCTION OF ICONIC MEDIEVAL PIETY IN <i>THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH</i> .....	23
III. “SO THAT’S WHY HE WENT MEDIEVAL ON TV”: VIKINGS, VAMPIRES, AND QUEER VENGEANCE IN <i>TRUE BLOOD</i> ’S MEDIEVALIST NARRATIVE.....	46
IV. “A WORLD WE HAVEN’T SEEN BEFORE”: THE FANTASTIC NEOMEDIEVALISM OF <i>GAME OF THRONES</i> .....	66
V. CONCLUSION: “ENJOY YOUR MIDDLE AGES!”.....	95
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	100
VITA.....	109

## LIST OF FIGURES

1. Opening credits for <i>The Pillars of the Earth</i> .....	29
2. Wells Cathedral, Somerset, England .....	29
3. Weeping Statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary from <i>The Pillars of the Earth</i> .....	35
4. Bishop Waleran Bigod from <i>The Pillars of the Earth</i> .....	43
5. Prior Phillip from <i>The Pillars of the Earth</i> .....	43
6. Eric Northman and the Viking Crown from <i>True Blood</i> .....	50
7. Eric Northman’s Medieval Flashback from <i>True Blood</i> .....	50
8. Eric Northman’s Revenge from <i>True Blood</i> .....	57
9. Russell Edgington “Gets Medieval on TV” from <i>True Blood</i> .....	65
10. Queen Cersei and Joffrey Baratheon from <i>Game of Thrones</i> .....	81
11. The Game of Chess from <i>The Seventh Seal</i> .....	81
12. Daenerys Targaryen and Her Dragon Hatchling from <i>Game of Thrones</i> .....	85
13. Sean Bean as Boromir from <i>The Fellowship of the Ring</i> .....	91
14. Sean Bean as Lord Eddard Stark from <i>Game of Thrones</i> .....	91
15. <i>The Simpsons</i> Parody <i>Game of Thrones</i> .....	94



## I. INTRODUCTION: MEDIEVALISM AND TELEVISION

In his now canonical “Dreaming the Middle Ages,” philosopher, philologist, medieval studies scholar, and bestselling writer Umberto Eco delineates some of the ways that the Middle Ages continue to exist within present-day cultural memory. Perhaps most famously he quips in this chapter that “it seems that people like the Middle Ages” (61). Eco’s apt sentiment still strikes a resonant chord some twenty years after its publication; there is indeed something about the Middle Ages that continues to fascinate our postmodern society. One of the most tangible ways this interest manifests itself is through our media, particularly in the widespread visual (re)productions of the medieval past. A causal Google search illustrates this point; “medieval” yields some 217 million results, while a search for “Middle Ages” yields another 60 million results.<sup>1</sup> The sheer quantity and variety of visually-based material on the Internet described as medieval or as dealing with the Middle Ages suggests not only that people are actively reimagining the Middle Ages online but also that people are actively searching for it. Probing examples from present-day media like the Internet emphasizes the question at the heart of this phenomenon: Why does such an interest in the Middle Ages persist? Furthermore, what can the variety of present-day medieval appropriations and representations reveal about the relationship between the past and the present? Even though such questions would be difficult to answer definitively, this project will explore some of the ways that representations of the medieval past

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<sup>1</sup> Accessed 16 December 2011. This search tellingly reveals some of the numerous ways we have refashioned “medieval” culture for the Internet. The first three results for “medieval” are as follows: “Middle Ages” article on the public encyclopedia Wikipedia, Medieval Times’ website explaining their “period” banquet and tournament dates and prices, and a link to the academic “Medieval Bestiary Online.” Comparatively, a Google search for pop culture icon Michael Jackson yields roughly 380 million results.

function within present-day reimaginings in the media. More specifically, because television's obvious visual textuality, widespread popularity, and influence on other media like the Internet offers a complex medium that has not received much scholarly analysis, this project will investigate the multifaceted relationship between television and medievalism, or representations of the medieval past in the present.

Because this project focuses primarily on present-day representations of the medieval past, it falls squarely within the recent surge of medievalism studies. Even though "medievalism" is a slippery term that has been the source of much scholarly debate, one might say that medievalism is "the study of the many ways in which modern society and its popular culture interacts with, interprets, and both influences and is influenced by the actual history of the Middle Ages" (Aberth xi). By using this definition, one begins to see how the fields of medievalism studies and medieval studies differ. Rather than being concerned only with actualities of the history, literature, and archeology of the "real" Middle Ages,<sup>2</sup> medievalism studies instead attempts to understand the ways that these actualities have been remade over time. In other words, the emphasis shifts from analyzing medieval culture in its historical context (medieval studies) to analyzing how medieval culture influences or is used by the present.

The process of investigating medievalisms hinges upon the fundamental notion that the past is never singular or stable, but is instead continuously recreated and reproduced during each present moment. A multifaceted medieval past explodes into exponentially diverse medievalist<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Real" and "authentic" are terms that inspire skepticism in some because there is always an aspect of subjectivity in scholarship, whether intentional or not. The crux, then, of medieval scholarship is that we must rely on and interpret cultural artifacts to gain insight into the past. This very act of interpretation thus opens all medieval scholarship up to skepticism regarding subjectivity. This is not to say that medieval scholarship should be disregarded because it is inherently subjective, but rather that we must remember that academic inquiry into the "real," "authentic" or "true" Middle Ages is necessarily impossible. The best one can hope for is to illuminate a perspective regarding medieval artifacts.

<sup>3</sup> Although "medievalist" typically refers to one who studies the Middle Ages, I use it in this project as an adjective to describe something that possesses attributes of medievalism. I refer to those who study the Middle Ages as

representations of it in each passing present, where the layers of medievalist reproductions diverge, converge, and/or build on top of one another to create something that is paradoxically both old and new. Speaking to this very notion, David Marshall in *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture* offers that scholars of medievalism should see the Middle Ages like the “old European castles that have been augmented and modified over the years” because “locat[ing] what parts of the castle are not original” can “better reveal the true edifice” (3). The edifice in this case is the original kernel of “medievalness” that each passing generation continues to augment in hopes of paradoxically (re)creating something that is more ‘medieval’ than the original, or at least more medieval than the last addition. Over time, these constructions build on top of one another like thick layers of paint so much so that it seems impossible to get back to the original shade. Consequently, medievalism studies interrogates these complex, often sedimentary relationships between the actualities of medieval history or contemporary medieval representations of the Middle Ages through its art, architecture and literature, and the present-day (re)constructions of these fragmentary, plural pasts.

Of course, the past/present negotiations that drive the study of medievalism are nothing new. The Romans looked back to the Greeks, medieval thinkers pondered the philosophical and mythological writings of antiquity, and hosts of generations have combed the Middle Ages for clues about their origins (Bull 101). Perhaps as medievalism scholar Angela Jane Weisl suggests, “constructing a present that, through reiterated stories, connects with the past and at once separates itself from that past . . . [reveals a] desire to reinforce comforting, if problematic, values of the past within the seemingly modern forms of the here and now” (15). If people find comfort and wisdom in examining the past, then surely this comfort is rooted in the perceived

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“medieval studies scholars” and those who study medievalisms as “medievalism studies scholars” to maintain clarity.

cyclical nature of history. The idea that historical patterns in culture repeat themselves enables the present to be grounded in a sense of tradition, even if that tradition has become unpopular.<sup>4</sup>

In a broad sense, medievalisms then incorporate both the ways that cultural patterns and traditions are evoked in new contexts and the motives behind such evocations. Medievalism studies thus not only questions temporal relationships but also interrogates the presentist ideologies inborn in these relationships.

Interestingly, this question of the ideologies behind medievalist (re)creations has forced some (at times uncomfortable) reconsiderations within the field of medieval studies. Works like Kathleen Biddick's *The Shock of Medievalism* argue that the advent of medievalism scholarship revealed conservative ideologies hidden within medieval studies dating back to its nascent years in the nineteenth-century. In suggesting that some present-day medievalists are continuing to ignore their own motivations—mainly avoiding engagement with critical theory<sup>5</sup> in favor of romanticizing and thus alienating medieval culture—Biddick alleges that the promulgation of an artificial temporal separation between the Middle Ages and the present inaccurately reinforces the notion of a singular, constricting past:

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<sup>4</sup> There has been much work, authenticated and speculative alike, that has linked Hitler's dream of "racial purity" to Nazi attempts to legitimize their state-sponsored genocide by looking back to the medieval prowess of the Aryans (see Leslie Workman's edited collection *Medievalism in Europe*). This is just one provocative and striking example of how backwards-looking attempts to ground present-day ideologies in (re)created pasts often look very different from historical actualities.

<sup>5</sup> Since Biddick's indictment, many scholarly works have attempted to breach the divide between theory and medieval studies. In *Lacan's Medievalism*, Erin Felicia Labbie explains how medievalism and an engagement with critical theory (psychoanalysis in this case) can work together to create a larger picture. Labbie's study traces psychoanalytic developments attributed Lacan back to his personal exposure to medieval stories and scholarship. Here, Labbie discusses the importance that temporality plays in subject formation:

The speaking subject is always materially bound by way of language to a given historical context. This means that it cannot be ahistorical in any case; the subject is always situated historically and culturally . . . The conscious understood as an abstract, conceptual entity, however, is precisely transhistorical in that it exists in each speaking subject throughout time, whether here is a name for it, the unconscious, or not. (9)

Bruce Holsinger's *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* also provides an extended and well-researched discussion of the important relationships between medieval studies and theory.

The repetitious invocation, then, of images of the “hard-edged alterity” of the Middle Ages is suspect. These images mark a desire rigidly to separate past and present, history and theory, medieval studies and medievalism. They foreclose exploration of how critical theories might historicize medieval studies, theories that are crucial to what Joan Scott has called “historicizing interpretation.” (4)

Without taking the necessary step to historicize medieval studies by placing both the medieval artifact and the present-day effort to interpret it within their respective contexts, medieval studies would be doomed to continue to falsify or ignore the temporal relationships at the heart of our cultural obsession with the Middle Ages. Because, as Eco argues, the Middle Ages are the “root of all our contemporary ‘hot’ problems,” returning to them repeatedly through both scholarly investigation and popular reimagining suggests a search for origination just as “a doctor, to understand our present state of health, asks us about our childhood, or in the same way that the psychoanalyst, to understand our present neuroses, makes a careful investigation of the primal scene” (65). The temporal pull between the past and the present is the very thing that continues to draw our attention to the Middle Ages, and thus medievalist impulses within academia should be recognized as an integral and unavoidable part of medieval studies. In other words, scholars of medieval culture should recognize that they too are in the business of recreating, and to some extent, reimagining the medieval past. Medievalism studies and medieval studies necessarily go hand in hand.

As part of the effort to historicize the fields of medieval studies and medievalism studies, scholars must ask themselves what they want from the past.<sup>6</sup> If one ignores her motivations, even in academic inquiry, then she ignores a crucial component of her research that would effectively

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<sup>6</sup> Questions of ideology are especially important as medieval scholars continue to test conservative academic boundaries by researching new areas like queer studies and disability studies. One might ask, “What bearing do medieval queer studies have on present considerations of queer studies and vice versa?”

and appropriately acknowledge temporal tensions. Medieval studies, after all, deals with fragments of the past that scholars revisit at different points in the present. Some of the most effective medieval scholarship bridges the gap between past and present by being honest about critical motives.<sup>7</sup> In exploring the temporal dialectic between cultural studies and what they term the “modern Middle Ages,” medievalism scholars Eileen Joy and Myra Seaman rightly assert that “the idea is not to distort our understanding of the past as it really was by viewing it through overly contemporary sensibilities, but rather to bring the past and present into creative tension with each other” (8). This “creative tension” aptly describes the temporal pull at the heart of medievalism. Because, as Tison Pugh argues in *Queer Movie Medievalisms*, “every historical period subsequent to the Middle Ages reinvents the era in its own artistic media,” scholars of other periods find cultural parallels in both the Middle Ages and medievalist reproductions from the Renaissance onward (12). The study of medievalism, for example, should be not limited to Victorian interpretations of Chaucer but should also explore how present-day interpretations of Chaucer engage and reflect those earlier Victorian influences. To return to Marshall’s castle metaphor, it can often be difficult to differentiate one addition to the medieval edifice from another when the architectural styles are so similar. However, in seeing the multitude of medievalist productions as a whole of parts, rather than parts of a whole, we can begin to understand how the steady recycling of medieval and medievalist elements within our cultural memory work both to satiate and to stimulate our desires for more medievalist productions.

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<sup>7</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw’s “Chaucer’s Queer Touches/A Queer Touches Chaucer” immediately comes to mind as an exemplar. Dinshaw opens the article by recalling a provocative 1990s *Vanity Fair* magazine cover featuring Cindy Crawford shaving k.d. lang. Dinshaw goes on to discuss how this present-day juxtaposition of “femaleness” reminded/spurred her inquiry into Chaucer’s gender constructions of the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner in *Canterbury Tales*.

The study of medievalisms then has much to offer, but even amidst its growing popularity within the last thirty years,<sup>8</sup> many scholars still seem to be arguing their case for legitimacy. Bettina Bildhauer, who has written widely on both medieval studies and medievalism studies, notes that “medievalism is unfairly seen as derivative and as less noteworthy than the ‘original’ medieval tales or artworks,” even though “many medieval tales and artifacts themselves come from a long tradition of rewritings and variations rather than being ‘original’” (14). Unsurprisingly, the notion that medievalism is “derivative” reinforces canonical assumptions in other areas of literary studies because, as some have argued, at least one facet of a medievalist project is deemed “legitimate.” One might see Clare Broome Saunders’s *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism* or Jennifer A. Palmgren and Loretta M. Holloway’s *Beyond Arthurian Romances: the Reach of Victorian Medievalism* as underscoring a distinct division between acceptable objects of academic interest—those objects that are of interest in their own right to academics beyond any medievalist inclinations—and those belonging to a “lower” status. Projects examining medievalist undercurrents in the likes of Tennyson or Scott allow for the analysis of these romanticizations of the past while researching within the comfortable space of canonical tradition.<sup>9</sup> The fear of academic legitimacy (and perhaps funding) seems to have hindered the growth and acceptance of medievalism studies. Yet restricting the study of medievalism to a few highbrow authors would effectively ignore one of the most exciting and illuminating area of study: popular culture medievalisms.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For example, The International Society for the Study of Medievalism, established by Leslie J. Workman in 1979, publishes a journal (*Studies in Medievalism*) and an annual bibliography (*The Year’s Work in Medievalism*), holds The International Conference on Medievalism, and sponsors sessions at both the International Congresses on Medieval Studies (Kalamazoo) and the International Medieval Congress (Leeds).

<sup>9</sup> These studies do, of course, have immense scholarly value in and of themselves because they analyze earlier forms of medievalism. At the same time, they only emphasize the high culture-low culture divide.

<sup>10</sup> The term popular culture is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “designating forms of art, music, or culture with general appeal; intended primarily to entertain, please, or amuse.” Thus, popular culture medievalisms include forms of culture that both incorporate medieval materials and appeal to general populations.

As Marshall explains in *Mass Market Medieval*, academia tends to look down its nose at these popular concatenations because they are often deemed “inappropriate” for scholarly inquiry:

Under this stigma, examining pop cultural appropriations of the medieval is reduced to analysis of simulacra, which in Frederic Jameson’s thinking leaves the scholar studying a pastiche, a hodge-podge representation that has neither a real connection to the past nor any clear bearing on the present. In this way, the high-culture/low-culture divide becomes redefined in terms of chronology . . . the Middle Ages stands in for high culture, while pop cultural uses of it are positioned as low, and hence unworthy of serious examination on an academic level. (5)

Although many pop culture medievalisms could be accurately described as simulacra, this does not mean they should be ignored as Marshall believes Jameson is suggesting; rather, the unique position of pop culture medievalisms—beyond academic, highbrow appropriations of medieval culture—allows for fresh investigations of past/present relationships. While conceding the necessary separation from observing subject (scholar) and object of observation (cultural artifact), medieval studies scholar Marcus Bull decries extreme scholarly detachment from “low-status” popular culture because it misrepresents the influence popular culture has in the transmission and dissemination of the representations of history within the general population. Further, Bull posits that “popular culture accounts for some of the instinctive curiosity that makes us interested in history,” and “it is one of the ways in which we practice thinking about the past and how we stand in relation to it” (7). For Marshall, Bull, and other proponents of the academic study of pop culture medievalisms, one of the most obvious reservoirs of medievalist appropriations in present-day popular culture can be found in the study of media like cinema,



print media like magazines, the Internet, and television. Since scholars have been predominantly preoccupied with cinematic iterations of pop culture medievalisms a brief discussion of it will provide a foundation for the forthcoming explorations of medievalisms on television.

## MEDIEVALISM AND CINEMA

Eco astutely asserts that “the Middle Ages preserved in its way the heritage of the past” not through “hibernation,” but rather through a “constant retranslation and reuse . . . balanced among nostalgia, hope, and despair” (84). As perhaps the most obvious and readily accessible pop culture productions available to scholarly inquiry outside of literature, cinema’s retranslations and reuses of the Middle Ages have become a growing area of academic interest.<sup>11</sup> Because this project’s focus lies beyond cinematic medievalisms, tracing a few popular veins in recent medievalist cinema studies will provide a helpful theoretical framework for the considerations of medievalist television to follow.

While studies of medievalist cinema have been cropping up since the 1970s, perhaps in conjunction with the increasing interest in cinema in general, the last ten years have been a particularly fruitful period. Of recent publications, most studies fall within two general categories: those concerned with the historical accuracy of cinematic medievalisms and those concerned with the relationship between cinema theory and medievalisms. This first area of cinematic medievalist scholarship focuses not only on “what sets apart the Middle Ages from ancient Rome, say, or Shakespeare’s time, or the Victorian era,” (Pugh 4) but also on how medievalist cinema “can make us think long and hard about our lives in comparison to those of our predecessors” (Aberth x). Nickolas Haydock, a specialist in medievalist cinema, suggests

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<sup>11</sup> As evidence of the “trickle-down effect” where academic findings become repackaged for mainstream audiences, interest in medievalist cinema has become so pervasive that Wikipedia even boasts a “Middle Ages in Film” page.

that cinematic medievalisms are “history in a hurry . . . which fetishizes the alterity of the Middle Ages as a temporal Other while compulsively retooling imagined continuities to fit the rapidly changing priorities of the contemporary world” (*Movie Medievalism* 5). In this sense, tracing the historical accuracy of medievalist representations in cinema attempts to locate the medieval edifice underneath the present-day cinematic embellishments to demonstrate how the present has remade the past. Works like Martha Driver and Sid Ray’s *The Medieval Hero on Screen* or John Aberth’s *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film* evaluate the relationships between medieval culture and medievalist cinema in effort to theorize how popular culture has (often badly) reinvented the past.

While this brand of medievalism scholarship certainly makes some exciting connections between pop culture recreations and medieval culture, it typically treats the medieval past as static while the emphasizing the transformative power of the modern (re)interpretations. But this sort of scholarship often fails to recognize the “creative tension” that the present shares with the past; the Middle Ages should not be treated as decaying remnants of times gone by, but rather as living history that continues to impact the present and the future. Indeed, as Bildhauer argues, “the point of engaging with history is precisely not to reduce it to an allegory for the present, as either ‘like us’ or ‘not like us’, but to deal with it on its own terms” (7). In other words, rather than focusing on how the present uses the past for its own ends, we should also evaluate how kernels of medievalness necessarily continue to affect the ways they are reimagined through cultural memory. What is it, for example, about the medieval notion of a knight that continuously draws presentist attention and catalyzes its recycling in medievalist reproductions?

One way to deal with the Middle Ages and reproductions of it “on its own terms” is by supplementing the comparison of medievalist cinema to their supposed medieval sources with “a

more consistent use of the tools of film theory and formal film analysis” (Haydock, “Arthurian Melodrama” 7). Just as incorporating an engagement with theory into medieval studies can reveal the presence of ideological undercurrents in scholarship, using the tools of film theory can refocus the scholarly interest of cinematic medievalism onto the relationship between form and function in these medievalist productions. A medievalist film, just like medieval scholarship, (re)constructs the medieval past, but it does so in a uniquely audio-visual way. Medievalist cinema specialist William Paden explains in “I Learned It at the Movies: Teaching Medieval Film” how these audio-visual reconstructions expose the cultural value of medievalism and its creative temporal tension:

Nothing medieval in a movie is an aesthetic given, passive, inert; everything is constructed, if only by the decision to point the camera at it. Therefore everything medieval about a movie can be useful in understanding how, through cultural memory, we construct our view of the Middle Ages. It is not necessary to ferret out particular anachronisms in a medieval movie in order to demonstrate that it is not faultlessly authentic, because by definition the entire film is an anachronism.

(92)

Because medievalist cinema is necessarily anachronistic, authenticity should be of little importance. The Middle Ages ended hundreds of years ago, so any (re)creation of them is necessarily anachronistic. At the same time, this does not mean that the medieval sources that perhaps inspired these audio-visual reimaginings should be ignored for, after all, these markers of “authentic” medieval culture are recreated by medievalist cinema. Instead, kernels of authentic medievalness as well as anachronisms should both be evaluated within the cinematic context so that a fuller sense of the film’s creative temporal tension might be gauged.

This second strain of medievalist cinema studies is perhaps best represented by Andrew Elliott's *Remaking the Middle Ages: The Methods of Cinema and History in Portraying the Medieval World*. By applying some innovative ideas regarding cultural reproductions of the Middle Ages put forth by François Amy de la Bretèque in *L'Imaginaire médiéval dans le cinéma occidental*, Elliott presents some of the most refreshing scholarship regarding medievalist cinema in recent memory. Elliott extends de la Bretèque's notion that the distance between the past and the present is bridged by two modes of representation: iconic and paradigmatic. Broadly, each mode of representation looks to what Elliott describes as a "medieval referent," or a material source of medieval culture (the kernel of medievalness) into which a film can tap to (re)create a perspective on the Middle Ages.<sup>12</sup> In iconic recreation, the film uses "iconographic images from statues, museum pieces . . . to anchor the character in the appropriate milieu" (Elliott 3). In this mode of representation, the audience viewing Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* understands that William (Heath Ledger) is a knight because he wears armor, rides a horse, and competes in jousting tournaments (just as knights depicted in other medieval settings).

Conversely, paradigmatic representation "aims to reproduce the Middle Ages horizontally, by assimilating its form to other, more recognizable and familiar models" (Elliott 3). Whereas iconic representations of the Middle Ages are necessarily conservative in nature because they look back to older representations of medieval culture, paradigmatic representations provide more leeway for new medievalist interpretations. They provide present-day audiences with metaphoric connections between the past and the present. As Elliott puts it, paradigmatic representation "seeks to draw a comparison with a modern equivalent (or, at best, an

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<sup>12</sup> Medieval referents might include medieval literature, art, architecture, historical chronicles, or other remnants of medieval culture. This notion does somewhat problematically collapse boundaries between the reality of the Middle Ages and medieval imaginings of that reality, but given the "always-already" inability to represent reality holistically, whether in words or images, this collapsing has little effect on the reimagining of medievalness in medievalisms.

approximation)” so that “the structural relationships of the Middle Ages are brought forward into the present, and re-imagined as modern relationships” (3-4). In *A Knight’s Tale*, for example, paradigmatic representations of the Middle Ages reach their peak during the anachronistic jousting tournament scenes. Although the tournaments in which William competes appear to be more of a Renaissance festival/modern football game hybrid than an accurate representation of a historical joust, present-day audiences can perhaps more easily understand what the atmosphere of such a joust was *like* by including present-day attributes such as a “jock jams” soundtrack and vendors hawking turkey legs in the jousting stadium than if the director had consulted a hoard of historians to painstakingly recreate an “authentic” jousting tournament. Even though both modes of representation work toward bringing the past and present into creative tension with one another, the examples from *A Knight’s Tale* underscore crucial differences. Ultimately, iconic representations are concerned more with historical continuity—cinematic elements that spark the memory of “authentic” medieval culture—while paradigmatic representations allow for creative anachronism—cinematic elements that directly yet metaphorically link the past to the present and vice versa.

Even though de la Bretèque/Elliott’s representational schema deals with medievalist cinema specifically, extending this taxonomy to other medievalist cultural productions proves valuable in beginning to locate the ideological underpinnings that drive pop culture medievalisms. In particular, I would like to use de la Bretèque/Elliott’s representational schema as an evaluative tool for exploring the fertile yet heretofore unharvested medievalist territory of television programming. Like medievalist cinema, medievalist television incorporates a host of iconic and paradigmatic representations of the Middle Ages that suggest a cultural obsession with the past and provide an audio-visual platform for a range of present-day ideological

negotiations. Unlike medievalist cinema, the prevalence and popularity of serialized television programs offers a unique opportunity to evaluate how these audio-visual medievalisms play out in different narrative forms.

## MEDIEVALISM AND TELEVISION

Although many scholars have analyzed medievalism and cinema, medievalism and television remains virtually untouched by academia. Nancy F. Partner's foreword to *Cultural Studies of the Modern Middle Ages* is one of a rare few publications to focus on the academic potentiality found within television's repository of medievalist appropriations and reproductions:

The deep connections between medieval cultural artifacts and TV's complex reality are not so whimsical or overstrained as the idea may at first appear. All technologies serve basic and permanent human needs, and technologies of communication serve our needs for expression, connection, influence, and meaning. From this perspective, TV stands in an intelligible sequence with writing, visual iconography and public art, heraldry, printed books, and regularized postal systems. The startling juxtaposition of televised narrative with hand-copied and read aloud medieval narrative can direct our attention even more sharply to the permanent needs and capacities of the human mind to channel its desires by retaining and reassembling images and information. Technologies only serve to play out, but never resolve, the tension between reality and desire. (xiii)

Borrowing from Partner's apt juxtaposition between "televised narrative" and "hand-copied and read aloud medieval narrative," this project aims to explore what happens when medievalisms meet television. I will argue that medievalist television, like medievalist cinema, should be paid

more scholarly attention because it can reveal how cultural desires for the past are mapped onto present-day media productions. Rather than present some all-encompassing (and unnecessarily essentializing) theoretical framework onto which one could map all of television's various medievalisms, I have chosen instead to provide three case studies of television's programs to emphasize television's narrative diversity within the serialized program format and the variety of medievalisms these programs (re)construct.

Much like arguments made in favor of the value of studying medievalisms thirty years ago, the potential fruitfulness in tracing interconnectivity between theory and medievalism twenty years ago, or the seemingly endless possibilities in exploring medievalist cinema ten years ago, the study of medievalism and television is a worthwhile endeavor because it can further reveal present-day ideologies. In the present case, the longstanding belief that television belongs to the "low" (read: "bad") culture has relegated it, like cinema before it, to the realm of part-time, armchair scholarship. Even today with the growth of cultural studies as a serious academic discipline that has effectively widened the scope of scholarly interests, television has yet to receive the serious scholarly explorations it deserves. As television critic Jason Mittell suggests, "unlike literature or film, television rarely has pretensions toward high aesthetic value, [thus] making it problematic to consider television using the same aesthetic tools designed for high literature or visual arts" (xiii). Television, despite its lack of "pretensions," can and should be evaluated. In fact, Mimi White, a scholar interested in the ideological analysis of television, suggests that because television occupies such a prominent position in contemporary social life with its ever-present and far-reaching influence, scholars need to evaluate it:

It is thus clearly important to subject [television] to ideological investigation.

This is especially the case as the expansion of cable and other alternative choices

to network and broadcast programming proliferate and fragment the audience, offering a wider range of programming but also reduplicating much of what already exists. (196)

Like White, I am arguing for an ideological investigation of television, specifically how and why the medieval past is (re)created and perhaps “reduplicated” as simulacra on television programs. Yet, how does such an investigation differ from similar medievalist cinema projects? To answer this question, one first needs to assess the major difference between cinema and television.

In *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today’s Pop Culture is Making Us Smarter*, Steven Johnson persuasively argues that while “for decades, we’ve worked under the assumption that mass culture follows a steadily declining path toward lowest-common-denominator standards, . . . the exact opposite is happening: the culture is getting more intellectually demanding, not less” (9). Even though television has long been touted as a medium that would “rot your brain,” Johnson demonstrates how TV’s increasingly complex narrative structure popularized by daytime soap opera programming actually requires progressively demanding cognitive functioning because a viewer must work at “keeping often densely interwoven plotlines distinct in [her] head as [she] watch[es] . . . [while] making sense of information that has been either deliberately withheld or deliberately left obscure” (64). Similarly suggesting a progressively complex mode of narrative on television, Alan Kirby notes in *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* that TV program formatting has increasingly become oriented toward serialization<sup>13</sup> because “just as nobody cares that the *Canterbury Tales* are actually unfinished,” the importance of serial TV

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<sup>13</sup> Both Johnson and Kirby note that serialization, or the continuance of a narrative from one episode to the next, was originally developed by the daytime soap opera. Serialization is a distinct mode of TV narrative different from the popular sitcom format, which has historically been more popular during primetime programming. John and Kirby also suggest that serialization has become more popular in current television programming as a result of reality TV’s influence.



programming is that the narrative continues into the next episode (163). Kirby's metaphor is most apropos for the present considerations of the relationships between medievalism and television because just as readers of *Canterbury Tales* become absorbed in and somewhat disoriented by Chaucer's frame-within-frame narrative structure, so too do viewers of serialized television. As the old saying goes, it is not the destination, but the journey that really matters. Serialized television provides an extended journey more or less for the sake of simply taking a trip (or pilgrimage).<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the major difference in terms of format between cinema and most television programming is the serialization of TV, and consequently, this serialization affects television medievalisms. Unlike the "closed narratives" of most films and novels in which all major narrative questions are answered by the resolution to provide a sense of closure for the audience, the "open narratives" that populate television programming remain just that: open; "questions, problems, mysteries might remain unsettled or resolutions might provoke still further questions, problems, and complications" so that the pleasure the audience derives from the open narrative lies in its possibilities (Allen 107). Similar to a serialized Victorian novel, serial television programs face particular genre dilemmas. As television scholar Sarah Kozloff argues in "Narrative Theory and Television," serials "must bring up to date viewers who do not usually watch the show or who have missed an episode" while also generating "enough viewer interest and involvement to survive their hiatus" until the next show (91). Serial television programs can mediate these situations in a number ways, which include but are not limited to cliffhanger endings, interconnected subplots, flashbacks, and dreams. In theory, the open narratives of serial

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<sup>14</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I have chosen to limit my inquiry of medievalist television to serialized television programs. However, this does not mean that other forms of television do not exhibit medievalism. Joy, Seaman, Bell and Ramsey's *Cultural Studies of the Modern Middle Ages* actually features two chapters that briefly explore medievalism in reality TV shows like *Survivor*. Hopefully, more scholarship dealing with medievalist television will appear within the next few years to continue to fill this gap.

television could continue infinitely, creating exponentially interwoven storylines and character relationships. This potentiality for openness positions medievalist television in particular as a unique cultural production within the field of medievalism because it inherently calls into question the continuity, accuracy, and functionality of a TV program's iconic and paradigmatic representations in ways that the closed narratives of medievalist cinema cannot. A feature-length medievalist film might provide audiences with two hours of iconic and paradigmatic representations whereas one season of a serial medievalist television program might provide twelve hours of such representations. The extended narrative format of serial television offers those interested in the study of medievalism with an opportunity to investigate how representations of the medieval past function over a period of time as these representations unfurl over weeks, months and even years of programming.

Although the complexity and breadth of serial television narratives provides a wealth of research possibilities for the field of medievalism studies, analyzing these narratives can become complicated. The "Scene Function Model" put forth by television scholars Michael Porter, Deborah Larson, Allison Harthcock, and Kelly Berg Nellis in "Re(de)fining Narrative Events: Examining Television Narrative Structure," offers an exciting opportunity for limiting the scope of serial television narratives in a useable way so that the narrative function of a scene becomes the unit of analysis applicable to the program as a whole. Porter, Larson, Harthcock and Berg Nellis's Scene Function Model "identifies specific, discrete narrative functions within a scene that show how those scenes advance or enhance the narrative" by asking "What is the function/purpose of this scene for the telling of the story?" (25). They further delineate the function of a television scene into two categories: the kernel scene, which "presents a major event in the progression of the story," or the satellite scene, which "presents interesting but not

necessarily vital information for the story to move forward” (25). The primary distinction between a kernel scene and a satellite scene lies in their respective importance to the logic of the program’s narrative. If one removed a kernel scene from the program’s narrative, the narrative would recognizably change because the scene’s important event would no longer bear weight on the story; the removal of a satellite scene would not cause such a change because its functions on the levels of background information and character development. Although it provides this helpful distinction, the Scene Function Model also allows the exploration of multiple layers of meaning in a single scene—how a scene can function as both a kernel *and* a satellite. Depending on the characters within a given scene, their relationships to one another, and their relationships to the story arc in general, the function of one scene can differ drastically from another in terms of both character development and/or narrative development.<sup>15</sup>

In terms of analyzing a serial television program’s medievalist representations, the Scene Function Model provides tools that, in combination with Elliott’s iconic/paradigmatic representational schema, enable us to explore the complex relationships between the narrative content and form, and the audio-visual content and form of a program’s medievalisms. Within medievalist television programming, these narrative tools further accentuate medievalist representations (iconic and/or paradigmatic) and their relationships with their medieval referents and their presentist contexts because serialization requires a consistent recreation of the medievalist representations over the course of the program. Further, because each serial television program uses different narrative strategies to maintain an open, continuative narrative, the continuity of the medievalist representations of each program fluctuate. Unlike most medievalist cinema, the form of medievalist television greatly impacts its medievalisms and their

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<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Porter, Larson, Harthcock, and Berg Nellis outline six essential functions of a kernel scene and twelve functions of a satellite scene. Using this model of scene functionality allows for greater flexibility when analyzing relational patterns of representation, characterization, and plot.

functions within the narrative. Thus, the interplay between medievalist representations and modes of serialization is the key toward theorizing television medievalisms.

In effort to consider these two important evaluative components of serialized television, the following chapters examine three of the most recent popular medievalist television programs in two distinct ways. First, I am interested in the relationship between the program's medievalist recreations and its medieval referent(s). In order to define the program's relationship with the medieval past, I turn to Elliott's helpful iconic/paradigmatic representational schema. Comparative analysis between these medievalist programs and medieval referents like medieval literary and historical texts provide a more complex perspective on these representations. Ultimately, questions of medievalist representations present in these television programs ask what kind of "Middle Ages" is being created. Historical? Literary? Fantastical? Or something different?

Second, by mapping the interplay between iconic and/or paradigmatic medievalist representations and what I shall call "modes of serialization" in television programs, or the ways that a television program's narrative form affects its content by using the Scene Function Model's kernel/satellite scene distinction, I hope to offer a more complex picture of medievalist television and its purposes. Specifically, I am interested in how narrative strategies in a miniseries, a serialized program with a limited medievalist storyline that waxes and wanes yet is always present, and an entirely medievalist serialized program respectively affect representations of the Middle Ages. I argue that the mode of serialization—how "open" the narrative is—directly bears on both the functionality of the scene and the medievalisms contained by it.

Chapter 1 focuses on the 2010 Starz eight-part miniseries *The Pillars of the Earth*, based on the Ken Follett novel of the same name. I have decided to begin with this miniseries for two

reasons. First, *The Pillars of the Earth* is the most-historically rooted of the three television programs that I evaluate; as such, the iconic medieval referents are easy to discern. Because the miniseries plays with representations of the medieval church and clergy, chapter 1 will explore similarities between the miniseries and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to flesh out prominent medieval referents like cathedrals, relics, and clerical garb. Second, because I am proposing a theory of evaluative criteria that differs from medievalist cinema studies, I have chosen to begin with a miniseries because it is the form of television most closely related to the closed narrative structure of cinema. This medievalist miniseries will provide the point of differentiation between medievalist cinema and medievalist television through its closed narrative structure from which the remaining chapters will develop their explorations of serialized television narratives. In ideological terms, the iconic medievalisms of *The Pillars of the Earth* suggests a cultural desire for the (re)affirmation of Christian morality over canonical traditionalism.

Chapter 2 focuses on HBO's *True Blood*. Even though the series, which deals primarily with the relationships between supernatural beings like vampires, shape shifters, and werewolves in present-day Louisiana, is not as overtly medievalist as *The Pillars of the Earth*, I have selected this program for the very reason that its medievalisms are serialized in the form of a limited medievalist narrative. Rather than presenting audiences with an entirely medievalist narrative, a program with a limited medievalist narrative features concentrated pockets of medievalist representations that then cause us to think of the past resurrected in the program as a whole. Although *True Blood* does feature several medievalist storylines worth evaluating, chapter 2 explores the interplay between iconic and paradigmatic medieval representations in the form of flashbacks that provide background for the suggestively named vampire Viking Eric Northman. These flashbacks, which occur over several episodes, attempt to historicize Eric by obviously

and repeatedly rooting his character in the Norse tradition of the blood feud. At the same time, homoerotic paradigmatic representations queer the traditional notion of the blood feud and reveal *True Blood*'s presentist "pro-gay" ideologies at work.

Lastly, chapter 3 provides an extension of the first two chapters by evaluating HBO's *Game of Thrones*, a series that pushes medievalist television into new territory. Unlike *The Pillars of the Earth* and *True Blood*, *Game of Thrones* reimagines a fantastical medieval world full of ambiguously medieval characters. Because the entire series combines vague visual references to other medievalisms with faintly recognizable medieval referents, chapter 3 explores the series' wholly paradigmatic representations of medieval culture. Further, I argue that because this parallel universe appears to be based on medieval culture yet does not showcase its medieval referents as do *The Pillars of the Earth* or *True Blood*, *Game of Thrones* should be categorized as a "neomedievalist" television series. I propose that because neomedievalism reinterprets other medievalist interpretations of the past to create a new mythical Middle Ages, it belongs within the postmodern notion of bricolage. This hodge-podge effect permeates many neomedievalist productions, and thus represents a new and exciting area for scholarly investigation of pop culture medievalisms.

This project's efforts to explore the relationships between medievalism and television represent one more attempt at trying to understand why people continue to return to and (re)imagine the Middle Ages. As Eco wisely asserts, our reference point for the Middle Ages reveals "who we are and what we dream of" (72). The serialized (re)production of pop culture medievalisms on television reveals that we may just dream of a never-ending Middle Ages full of narrative possibilities.

## II. “NOTHING IS SACRED”: THE (DE)CONSTRUCTION OF ICONIC REPRESENTATIONS OF MEDIEVAL PIETY IN *THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH*

The tagline for the 2010 Starz medievalist miniseries *The Pillars of the Earth*—“Nothing is Sacred”—capitalizes on what Stephen Harris and Bryon Grigsby’s *Misconceptions about the Middle Ages* describes as one of the most popular misconceptions about medieval Christianity:

In the popular imagination, the medieval church was populated by fat monks given to luxurious living, sinister popes who sought to control a superstitious laity by keeping them ignorant of the true tenets of Christianity, and a corrupted clergy who enriched themselves by exacting tithes from impoverished peasants and extorting indulgence money from misguided believers. (31)

The persistent myth of medieval religion as “corrupt” and “superstitious” is perhaps rooted in the Protestant Reformation’s antiestablishment rhetoric and the “enlightened” thinking of the Renaissance that figured medieval Christians (and the Catholic Church) as uneducated, ingenuous, and ideologically suspect. Although numerous scholarly projects have successfully argued that medieval piety and religious institutions cannot be described accurately in such homogenous and stereotypical terms,<sup>16</sup> the popular stereotype of monolithic medieval religious practice continues to be exploited by popular medievalisms like *The Pillars of the Earth*.<sup>17</sup> In

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<sup>16</sup> Works like Eamon Duffy’s *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* or almost any of the texts in John Shinner’s *Medieval Popular Religion: A Reader* can attest to the heterodoxy of medieval Christianity.

<sup>17</sup> Misconception and skepticism exists within the academy as well. As medieval studies scholar Helen Cooper reasons, “it remains almost part of our scholarly credentials not to treat religious conviction seriously,” so academic studies of medieval religion tend to focus on its “shock-value religion” that can be poked and prodded under the lens of scholarly skepticism (xi). This skepticism appears to be aimed particularly pointedly at the less tangible aspects of medieval piety—miracles, visions, saint cults, and mystics. For example, scholarly projects like Kroll and

particular, this miniseries focuses on the construction of the false monolithic icons of medieval piety—the cathedral, the relic, and the symbolic vestments of the clergy—so that it can deconstruct them during the course of the narrative. While inaccurate in terms of historical reality, the deconstruction of these iconic representations ironically mirrors the heterodoxy that medieval religious scholarship has uncovered. The scenes featuring these iconic representations of the cathedral, the relic, and the symbolism of clerical vestments notably serve singular narrative functions as kernel scenes to reinscribe *The Pillars of the Earth*'s deconstruction of its own medievalisms. The program's containment of these scenes within the extended yet still closed narrative form of the miniseries highlights the narrative's finite nature, and, by extension, its dependence on iconic representations of medieval piety. Because the miniseries only has eight episodes to develop this construction/deconstruction, it does not have the same narrative luxuries as open-ended serial programs like *True Blood* and *Game of Thrones* to develop paradigmatic representations over a longer story arc through the potentiality of satellite scenes becoming kernel scenes over time. The miniseries demands that each scene further its narrative. Ultimately, the program's iconic representations of medieval piety serve as straw men that it can knock down both through representation and narrative in order to bring the past to bear on present-day notions of religion.

#### *THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH: A MEDIEVALIST MINISERIES*

By beginning with the miniseries *The Pillars of the Earth*, this project will continue to discuss increasingly open, serialized narrative structures in two other medievalist television programs, *True Blood* and *Game of Thrones*, to explore the ways that different modes of

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Bachrach's *The Mystic Mind: The Psychology of Medieval Mystics and Ascetics* attempt to use rationality and mental illness to explain such phenomena.



serialization impact medievalist representations on television. Within the context of the open/closed narrative theory, the miniseries provides a bridge in form from a feature-length film, which presumably presents a beginning, middle and end in traditional closed narrative style,<sup>21</sup> and the open narrative represented by the serial television program, which in theory, may never end. Although medievalist television differs from medievalist film primarily because the miniseries develops episodically, both medievalist films and miniseries are closed narratives by nature. Accordingly, the miniseries' narrative essentially begins with the conclusion in mind; the action and characterization of the narrative embodied in each scene must be contained within the narrative and logically gesture toward closure. At the same time, as its name suggests, the miniseries does have more narrative space to develop its story. Because each iconic scene serves a narratively important role as a kernel scene from which some future narrative consequences will develop, the narrative structure of the miniseries reinforces the notion that these icons themselves are crucial to the story. Moreover, the predominance of the iconic representation-as-kernel-scene model within the finite narrative space of the miniseries' further (de)constructs these icons of medieval piety. Within a closed narrative, each iconic representation must construct the icons as static (orthodoxy—what the audience might expect to see, even if anachronistic) while also planting the seeds of the icons' deconstruction (heterodoxy—what the audience wants to see, which is ironically often more “authentic”) so that the narrative fully develops within its given space and comes to a conclusion. By incorporating the Scene Function Model's kernel/satellite distinction into the analysis of *The Pillars of the Earth's* iconic medievalisms, we can more easily locate the presentist religious ideological negotiations that

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<sup>21</sup> Obviously, not all films are closed narratives, but film narratology is beyond the scope of this project.

ostensibly motivate the program's (de)constructions of medieval piety. The following summary of the miniseries, which this chapter will discuss in detail later, demonstrates how *The Pillars of the Earth* functions as a closed narrative.

*The Pillars of the Earth* follows the story of Tom Builder, a master mason whose ambition is to design and build a cathedral grander than any seen before. Unable to find work, Tom moves his family to Kingsbridge, where the priory's cathedral surreptitiously (and fortuitously) burns the night before they are to move on to the next town. Tom seizes the opportunity to present his designs for a new cathedral to the newly appointed prior, Philip, who also wishes to build a cathedral that will glorify God and bring more worshippers by creating a new, grander shrine for the reliquary of St. Adolphus, their adopted local saint.<sup>22</sup> Tom, along with his son Alfred and adopted son, Jack Jackson, begin work on the new cathedral. All of this is set within the ahistorical period known to historians as "The Anarchy" of the mid-twelfth century.<sup>23</sup> Henry I dies leaving no legitimate male heir and civil war begins once Stephen's allies force Empress Maud<sup>24</sup> and her supporters to France. Because Stephen has the support of the Church, namely the Archbishop of Canterbury and the scheming, ambitious Archdeacon of Shiring, Waleran Bigod,<sup>25</sup> he ultimately controls England as king. During the course of the story, the political unrest combined with Waleran's personal vendettas aimed at Tom, Prior Philip, and Jack Jackson interfere with the construction of the new Kingsbridge Cathedral. Ultimately, Jack

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<sup>22</sup> No explanation is offered as to why St. Adolphus is the adopted local saint of Kingsbridge other than the fact that his skull is in the priory's possession.

<sup>23</sup> The Anarchy (1135-1153) is a term commonly attributed to the period of civil war over the succession of Henry I. After Henry's only legitimate (male) heir died in a mysterious shipwreck (*White Ship*), Henry's daughter Matilda was ousted by Stephen of Blois, a grandson of William I. The Anarchy ended when Stephen agreed to recognize Matilda's son, the future Henry II, as his successor. Robert Bartlett's *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225* provides a helpful timeline for this period.

<sup>24</sup> Historically, Empress Matilda is named as Henry I's daughter, but some sources also call her Maud.

<sup>25</sup> While Waleran Bigod is a fictitious character, his name certainly recalls Hugh Bigod, an English nobleman of the same period who continually changed allegiances over the course of the conflict between Stephen and Matilda. Marc Morris's *The Bigod Earls of Norfolk in the Thirteenth Century* traces the Bigod family's political interventions through later English history.

is able to bring back a miraculous relic from France—a statue of the Virgin Mary that weeps real tears—so that the priory can raise enough money to pay for the remaining construction costs through the offerings brought in by pilgrims. As Waleran tries one final time to halt the construction of the cathedral with an erroneous heresy and murder trial of Jack, now master builder, Waleran is exposed as the orchestrator of the *White Ship* disaster, which plunged England into civil war. As the mob of angry citizens challenge Waleran, he desperately climbs the near-complete Kingsbridge Cathedral, ultimately choosing to fall from the height of the cathedral than to accept Jack’s outstretched hand and the punishment that surely awaits him.

This brief synopsis suggests a wealth of possible points of inquiry, but an exhaustive evaluation of all medieval referents and medievalist *topi* within the miniseries exceeds the boundaries of this project. Thus, the following discussion focuses on the program’s (de)construction of the three religious icons prominently positioned within the narrative of *The Pillars of the Earth*: the cathedral itself and the economics surrounding cathedral building, the role of saintly relics within the cathedral community, and the divergent characterization of the clergy through their sartorial representations. These elements play important roles in the closed narrative of the miniseries because they work to bring the program’s story to a definitive conclusion by functioning specifically a kernel scenes within the narrative. Each iconic-representation-as-kernel-scene directly affects, or at least as the potential to affect, the broader narrative. Furthermore, as the following discussion will demonstrate, these iconic representations allow *The Pillars of the Earth* to tear down its own constructions of monolithic medieval piety and questions distribution of power, spiritual practice, and sincerity of belief within present-day religion.

## CATHEDRALS, SAINTLY RELICS, AND CLERICAL COSTUMING: THE (DE)CONSTRUCTION OF ICONIC REPRESENTATIONS OF MEDIEVAL PIETY

The (de)construction of *The Pillars of the Earth*'s most prominent icon of medieval piety—the cathedral—appropriately centers on its literal construction. The material development of Kingsbridge Cathedral drives much of the narrative, providing both the backdrop for many scenes and the motivation for many of the characters. Even though it may be tempting to label these construction scenes as satellites because they appear to function as setting, in reality their importance to the narrative's development and the (de)construction of monolithic medieval piety secures them as kernel scenes. Thus, the scene functionality directly influences both the miniseries' efforts to represent the medieval cathedral as superficially static in its meaning and its attempts to reclaim the cathedral as a site of social conflict. But how does such (de)construction actually work within the miniseries?

Once again, the narrative operationalizes the literal construction of the Kingsbridge Cathedral in order to question distributions of power within the church community. First, *The Pillars of the Earth* uses the iconic representations of the cathedral as a literal monolith to suggest its symbolism of orthodox medieval piety that the narrative later works to undermine. Specifically, *The Pillars of the Earth* presents the fictional Kingsbridge Cathedral as architecturally reminiscent of Salisbury Cathedral and Wells Cathedral, two of England's most famous great churches (see Figs. 1 and 2).<sup>28</sup> Importantly, Kingsbridge Cathedral's architectural reference to Salisbury and Wells reads as an attempt to historicize the fictional construction because the miniseries sets its church building during the same period that witnessed the overhaul of the both real cathedrals. The iconic representation of such architectural similarity

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<sup>28</sup> Tom Builder repeatedly emphasizes his wish to make the Kingsbridge Cathedral "lighter" by building a higher structure with larger windows. Like the architecture of the Salisbury Cathedral, such a construction would have required "Gothic arches and rows of narrow, pointed 'lancet' windows" ("The Salisbury Link to *The Pillars of the Earth*" webpage).

serves to legitimize the other “historical” details of the narrative like the advent of gargoyles, flying buttresses, and stained glass windows wrapped up within the narrative.<sup>29</sup> By locating the architectural facet of *The Pillars of the Earth* within real historical developments and authentic medieval cathedrals, these medievalist representations align the fiction of the narrative with the “truth” of the medieval past. Just as one could go see Wells Cathedral or Salisbury Cathedral today, *The Pillars of the Earth* seems to suggest that Kingsbridge Cathedral, if it were real, would also remain standing as a testament of the structure’s durability and the lasting influence of the Church.



Figures 1 and 2: Opening Credits for *The Pillars of the Earth* and Wells Cathedral, Somerset, England. A comparison between the opening credits of *The Pillars of the Earth* featuring the fictional Kingsbridge Cathedral and Wells Cathedral reveals striking architectural similarities. Also, note the emphasis the credit’s upward-looking perspective places on the magnitude of the Kingsbridge Cathedral.

In addition to the architectural references linking Kingsbridge to real cathedrals, the frequent low camera angles used to depict the Kingsbridge Cathedral direct the audience’s eyes up to the seemingly impossible heights of the cathedral’s spires, just as an observer of a real cathedral would experience (see Fig. 1). These visual cues tap into the notion of cathedral-as-monolith because they emphasize the observer’s smallness when juxtaposed with the cathedral’s

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<sup>29</sup> *The Pillars of the Earth* does reimagine architectural history, claiming that fictional Jack Jackson “invents” perhaps the two most prominent elements of Gothic cathedrals: the flying buttress and the gargoyle. Even though this obvious falsification of history may remind viewers that the miniseries they are watch is fictional, it nonetheless incorporates important developments in cathedral architecture during the Middle Ages. Toward the end of the miniseries, Kingsbridge Cathedral also displays stained glass windows.

(read: the Church's) impressive stature. To the present-day observer, the medieval cathedral stands as a testament to perdurability. Not only do many of these structures provide Europe with a physical reminder of its medieval past but they also stand as monuments of the medieval Church's power and influence. Speaking to the overwhelming presence of the cathedral, architectural historian Arnold Hauser notes that "from no quarter does it present a complete, restful view, disclosing the structure of the whole. On the contrary, it compels the spectator to be constantly changing his viewpoint and permits him to gain a picture of the whole only through his own movement, action, and power of reconstruction" (Howes 193). As Hauser suggests, the observer's inability to take in the entire cathedral at once reveals how the cathedral can function as an icon of monolithic medieval piety. Because cathedrals are so physically impressive, they loom largely in the popular imagination as symbols of the unified authority of the Church that cannot be overcome. By referencing the symbolic physicality and the lasting historical impact of cathedrals, *The Pillars of the Earth* constructs the iconic cathedral as representative of a unified, authoritarian medieval church that the rest of the narrative attempts to deconstruct.

The deconstruction of medieval church authority, like its symbolic construction, hinges upon the building of the Kingsbridge Cathedral. Importantly, the fictional cathedral remains unfinished until the end of the narrative, suggesting that it has yet to become an iconic symbol of the authoritarian church. Essentially, by emphasizing the unfinished nature of the cathedral, the narrative provides a liminal space in which it can disrupt the notion that all cathedrals stand as monuments to some long-entrenched religious institution. Obviously, cathedrals have long represented a variety of things to diverse communities of people beyond the power of the Church including God's power and glory, eternal salvation (or ruin), cultural domination, and economic prowess (or excess). According to historian Christopher Brooke, the majority of cathedral

construction in England resulted from the settling of Normans after 1066: “In Norman times the twin symbols of Norman domination [were the] castle and cathedral; the castle to reveal the force of the Normans, the cathedral God’s blessing on that force” (95). For generations following the Norman conquest, the (re)construction of cathedrals not only represented glorifying God but also was a constant reminder of who was in power and who controlled the country’s purse strings.<sup>32</sup> Brooke’s account demonstrates that, contrary to the master narrative *The Pillars of the Earth* constructs, the medieval cathedral building boom was more complex than just the Church flexing its muscles.

The cathedral of Kingsbridge too evokes more complexity in *The Pillars of the Earth* than the monolithic notion of Church authority the miniseries constructs through its visual architectural references.<sup>33</sup> The ebbs and flows in the construction of the Kingsbridge cathedral due to political intrusions of the civil war unite all of the different narrative threads and effectively reinforce the notion that cathedral construction was a long and sometimes erratic process. Most notably, the actual process of the cathedral’s construction undermines the notion of an all-powerful medieval church because the narrative repeatedly develops scenes during which the laity band together against stereotypical corrupt clergyman (Waleran) or evil nobility (the Hamlieghs) to keep construction on the cathedral going.<sup>34</sup> The obstacles that stand in the way of the cathedral’s completion provide narrative interest, but more importantly, they allow the resultant (successful) community involvement to deconstruct the notion of Church authority

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<sup>32</sup> This notion of cathedrals representing secular power sanctified by God takes on further significance during the reign of Henry VIII, for in establishing the Church of England, he authorized the defacing and (in some cases) destruction of a number of cathedrals across England.

<sup>33</sup> The cathedral here provides a nice material connection back to Marshall’s castle-as-medievalism metaphor I discussed in the introduction. Like the castle, cathedrals too represent the ways that culture augments the medieval past often by significantly changing it or covering it up.

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Waleran’s continual interference further suggests a common stereotype that the medieval clergy was corrupt and self-serving. At first, he wants to keep Kingsbridge from being rebuilt so as to keep funds for a new palace for his bishopric, but his personal vendettas against several characters involved in the construction of the cathedral eventually becomes the sole reason for interloping.

by suggesting that cathedral construction was a (proto) grassroots movement that developed from some community desire for a cathedral rather than from top-down clerical command. For example, in episode 4, the townspeople of Kingsbridge and neighboring Shiring band together because King Stephen is planning a visit, and based on the progress, he will decide whether to give the priory access to the local quarry for the stones they will need to keep building. Hundreds of people arrive at the construction site to make it look like the building is coming along faster than anticipated. In another example from episode 7, the townspeople work together to construct a wall to keep invading noblemen from attacking their market at the behest of Bishop Waleran. The priory's profits from the market feed the continual construction of the cathedral, so Waleran figures a fire will halt construction. Instead, the townspeople repel the noblemen, allowing the market to continue.

Even though modern audiences might find such solidarity to be quaint or fantastical and certainly inspired by economic or security issues, historical evidence suggests that lay people were occasionally and spontaneously inspired to arduous divine labor. In a letter dating from 1145, Haimon, the abbot of St. Pierre-sur-Dives in Normandy describes “the remarkable movement of lay people hauling stones from the quarries of Bercheres-l’Eveque to the building-site of Chartres Cathedral five miles away” (Shinners 411). Whether one believes that such people were inspired to work by their extreme piety, or as in the case of *The Pillars of the Earth*, lured by the promise of indulgences and monies from the market, stories like Haimon’s remind present-day observers that the cathedrals still standing today were not only built by the laity but also desired by them. By using the cathedral as an iconic medievalist representation, *The Pillars of the Earth* (de)constructs the notion of monolithic Church authority in the Middle Ages. Somewhat ironically, this (de)construction connects *The Pillars of the Earth* more closely



with the actuality of the diverse distribution of power within medieval religious communities as the abbot's letter above testifies, although most audiences might not recognize this connection. Instead, present-day audiences might read the emphasis on community in opposition to clerical divisions of authority as reclamation of the Middle Ages for post-Reformation, post-Renaissance, post-Revolution religious democracy.

Like the complex iconic representations of the cathedral that position the Church against the community, the ambiguous position of the saintly relic within the popular imagination makes it another prominent element of medieval piety that *The Pillars of the Earth* attempts to (de)construct during the course of the narrative to suit its presentist ideological negotiations. Within the medievalist context, few other medieval religious icons evoke such a mixed response for current-day observers as the saintly relic. As John Shinner, a scholar of medieval popular piety, astutely reasons, "religious belief is an act of faith in things usually unseen; faith, by its nature, wavers between the poles of doubt and certainty. But popular belief craves certainty. It seeks to render concrete what must remain mysterious" (xviii). Perhaps because relics are so often related to miracles allegedly performed by touching or simply being in the presence of the body parts of saints, a long history of skepticism surrounds these "miracles." Even though he writes in a medieval world saturated with relic worship, Guibert of Nogent describes in 1125 how the cults of saints and relics are detrimental to one's salvation because they distract from the worship of God and border on idol worship (Whalen 95). Nonetheless, relics remained an important component of medieval Christianity especially for both pilgrims seeking a greater spiritual connection (among other things) as well as cathedrals and churches whose reliquaries provided a source of income.<sup>36</sup> If the position of the relic in Middle Ages was ambiguous, why

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<sup>36</sup>As England's most important site of pilgrimage, Canterbury Cathedral provides a contemporary example regarding both the habits of pilgrims and the revenue they could bring into a church like Kingsbridge. Because feast days were

does this icon continue to be represented in medievalist production as a site of uniform superstitious belief? By once again (de)constructing the iconic representations of the relic and its worshippers, *The Pillars of the Earth* reinforces the ambiguous role of the relic through visual and narrative cues. In this case, the relic—the physical embodiment of miracle and belief in what cannot be seen—serves as a stand-in for questions about spiritual belief in general. Unlike the ideologies behind the (de)construction of the cathedral, the ideologies behind the (de)construction of the relic within the miniseries narrative are less pointed in their ambivalence and ambiguous treatment.

The relics featured in *The Pillars of the Earth* make us question not only relics' power but relative medieval belief in them. In true iconic representational form, both relics—the skull of St. Adolphus and the weeping statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary (see Fig. 3)—demonstrate a visual authenticity that immediately recalls for the present-day viewer the popular notion that medieval piety was universally superstitious because they are featured prominently within kernel scenes. Both are respectively positioned on the altar for all worshippers to revere. These relic scenes construct what medieval studies scholar Steven Justice describes as “an idealizing Catholic medievalism” because the central role of the relics in both the cathedral (and its building) and the narrative of the miniseries operationalizes the “medieval” belief in the miraculous that cannot be quantified by present-day people (9). These relics may represent the relics popular during the Middle Ages, but they do not accurately portray them. Instead, the representations of the skull and the statue transform the relic as medieval icon into a paradigmatic medievalist representation because it exaggerates the physicality of the relic's

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a particular draw for pilgrims, the feast celebrating the martyrdom of Thomas Becket was actually moved from its original date of December 29 to July 7 in hopes that better weather would draw more pilgrims; this move was so successful that Canterbury authorities sought indulgences from the pope every fifty years to keep pilgrims coming back to worship (Webb 66). Although this current discussion focuses on medieval relics and pilgrimages, many cathedrals continue to draw pilgrims with their relics. Chartres, Salisbury, Canterbury and Santiago de Compostela are just a few sites of medieval pilgrimage that continue to remain popular destinations today.

position within medieval piety.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the medievalist representations of these relics extend into the narrative structure of the miniseries. Each relic plays an important role in the miniseries' ambivalent skepticism toward the authenticity of miracle-performing medieval relics.



Figure 3: Weeping Statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary from *The Pillars of the Earth*. Jack Jackson (Eddie Redmayne) and Aliena (Hayley Atwell) transport their “relic” of the weeping Virgin Mary from France to Kingsbridge Cathedral in hopes that it will bring pilgrims and their money to town.

During the first fire that destroyed the original Kingsbridge Cathedral, Prior Philip is unable to rescue the skull of St. Adolphus; yet, because the relic means so much to the priory in economic terms because it draws pilgrims, he secretly replaces the destroyed skull with another skull (presumably from a deceased monk at the priory). This action, which representatively reflects a popular strain of thought regarding relics—that is, that they are not miraculous, and therefore no one will know if the skull is St. Adolphus's or Brother Cuthbert's—also provides one of the monks with information to blackmail Prior Philip out of his position as prior. Interestingly, one of the hallmarks of sainthood is the perdurability of the saint's body; the fact that the skull does not “survive” the fire further underscores the miniseries' take on the

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<sup>37</sup> Saintly relics were (and are still) often small pieces of the saint's body, rather than an either body part.

authenticity of relics.<sup>44</sup> Once the monks discover Prior Phillip's secret, Kingsbridge Cathedral has no reliquary with which to attract pilgrims and their money because they decide it is better to be poor than to be dishonest.

The kernel scenes surrounding the destruction of St. Adolphus's skull and the subsequent discovery of Prior Phillip's secret directly contribute to ideological questioning behind *The Pillars of the Earth's* construction of medieval relics. In these scenes, the role of the relic in medieval piety is emphasized through the skull's unusual size yet at the same time the motivations of relic worship (and ownership) are called into question during Phillip's confession. Audiences might assume that Prior Phillip acts out of good intentions when he replaces the skull because the narrative depicts him in all other scenes as an honest and trustworthy man, but he ultimately replaces the skull so that the priory can continue to profit from the pilgrims attracted by the relic. Although these scenes do leave space for a moral message—the monks do decide to reject the inauthentic relic—they nonetheless cast the familiar skeptical shadow onto the position of relics within medieval piety.

*The Pillars of the Earth's* second, perhaps more dubious relic builds on top of the present-day skepticism established by the St. Adolphus skull storyline. After being exiled to France for fathering a child out of marriage (and while a novice monk!), Jack Jackson seeks out work as a stonemason at Chartes Cathedral. After encountering a strange stone that will produce condensation once the sun sets, Jack comes up with the idea to create a statue of the Virgin Mary that will “miraculously” weep to replace the lost relics at Kingsbridge and attract pilgrims. Indeed, this is an effective strategy, at when viewed in light of the history of Marian iconography, because, by the twelfth century, the cult of Mary as “a universal saint,” took away

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<sup>44</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum's *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* discusses this pervasive notion in much detail.

from the “importance of corporeal remains of local saints” (Kaelber 58). Even though many local saints were revered well into the later Middle Ages, this period marks a significant shift in the saintly cults, during which the Virgin Mary became the preeminent, universally-known saint.<sup>45</sup> While the audience watches, Jack creates this statue. Clearly, it is not a relic in the traditional sense, and, because of the economic imperative that encouraged its creation, one doubts that Jack’s motivation is divinely inspired.

The type of iconography implied in this scene, surprisingly or not, calls to mind Christian doctrine about pagan worship alluded to in Chaucer’s *Second Nun’s Tale*, in which the devout Cecilia refuses to worship manmade idols “for they been dombe, and therto they been deve” (lines 284-7). Even though Jack’s relic is clearly manmade, its “tears” recall the notion that saintly relics, because they are made by God, are living entities. Manmade “relics” and/or pagan idols in the eyes of Christians therefore are often described as “deaf and dumb” because they lack the innate living spirit that only God can provide. As the sun slowly sets on the cathedral full of hopeful worshippers, the statue “weeps,” which causes all present to begin fervently praying because the statue appears to be living.<sup>46</sup> Even Jack, the creator of the statue appears moved by the miracle—manmade or divine—that brought the pilgrims back to Kingsbridge. Whether the relic is “real,” the ardent prayers of the worshippers forces doubters to reconsider whether a real miracle has actually transpired and reminds viewers of the important role that relics played in medieval piety. This (de)construction of the relic as a uniform medieval icon questions the belief in the miraculous through the destruction of St. Adolphus’s skull, yet it also suggests that belief in something—even a manmade statue—can result in palpable miracles.

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<sup>45</sup> This marks another connection between Salisbury Cathedral and Kingsbridge; Salisbury is known conventionally as The Cathedral Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary locally.

<sup>46</sup> In another sense, the parishioners are literally worshipping a rock. This recalls the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* when a greedy priest falsely worships stones he believes an alchemist can turn into gold.

Like the (de)constructions of the cathedral and the relic that tap into popular misconceptions about medieval piety in order to inject heterodoxy into the supposed monolithic master narrative of western Christianity, the iconic representations of clerical morality via sartorial characterizations also figure prominently in *The Pillars of the Earth*'s ideological interrogations of spiritual sincerity. In particular, the miniseries pits its two iconic clergymen—scheming careerist Waleran and earnest pragmatist Phillip—against one another in order to deconstruct the popular misconception that all medieval clergy were corrupt. Moreover, the iconic representations of clerical vestments as indicators of piety are the most “medieval” of the iconic representations in the miniseries because they directly recall the sartorial probing operationalized by the Investiture Controversy and the Estate Satire genre epitomized by Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The “costume rhetoric” of Waleran and Phillip not only marks the narrative's progression toward closure but also suggests that a more complex reading of clerical morality and careerism is necessary to represent the medieval church accurately.

Although the charge of clerical corruption has probably existed since the advent of religion, the association between clerical corruption and careerism and outward appearance demonstrates strong historical ties to the Investiture Controversy of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. To vastly oversimplify a complex conflict, the Investiture Controversy led to church reform and ultimately drew a line in the sand that challenged a king's “divine right” to rule, positioning him and his government squarely in secular territory. One of the primary points of contention between royalty and the clergy was whether the king could appoint someone of nobility to ecclesiastical office just as he would with a secular office. For the clergy, such appointments undermined their religious authority and relegated them to pawns of the king. In her study of this period, medieval historian Uta-Renate Blumenthal describes the prolonged

conflict between church and state over the appointment of church officials, noting that ostentatious clerical regalia was often a sign of a man appointed to the position by the king, rather than a man devoted to God. After the Investiture Controversy, clerical vestments became even more symbolic of spiritual and moral intentions of the person wearing them, rather than just referents to religious ritual. Interestingly, *The Pillars of the Earth* takes place during this same period, leading the informed viewer to connect the iconic representations of Waleran and Phillip's clerical costuming back to this obvious historical referent. Of course, not all viewers (or perhaps even most) would make such a connection. More likely, the construction of the moral/spiritual binary represented by Waleran and Phillip's respective outward appearances recalls the sartorial coding of the vastly popular estate satire genre epitomized in popular memory by Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

As perhaps the best-known portion of *Canterbury Tales*, the General Prologue, like *The Pillars of the Earth*, uses costuming<sup>47</sup> to signify character. Almost all of Chaucer's characters—especially his clerical pilgrims—exhibit some external symbol of their internal characters. Take, for example, Chaucer's description of the Prioress. As a nun, we might expect the Prioress to exhibit her vow of poverty externally through plain clothing, yet she wears jewelry—"smaI coral aboute hire arm she bar" and "A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene"—and "Ful fetys was hir cloke" (l. 157-9). Clearly, Chaucer's Prioress is a well-dressed woman, who while ostensibly pious, leads what appears to be a comfortable and stylish life. In her work on clerical clothing in *Canterbury Tales*, Laura Hodges delineates a helpful taxonomy of "costume rhetoric" used throughout the General Prologue that can be extended to the iconic representations of clerical clothing used in *The Pillars of the Earth*. In particular, Hodges outlines the costume rhetoric

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<sup>47</sup> Indeed, costuming is perhaps the most obvious tool used by medievalist productions to signify that a person is a) medieval and b) good or bad. The next two chapters of this project also discuss costuming's role in (re) creating the Middle Ages on television for the viewing public

known as “False Vestment,” or when a garment or accessory functions in a symbolic capacity that misrepresents a character’s inner nature (6). The primary example Hodges provides is that of *The Romance of the Rose*’s False Seeming, the monk “with the rotten heart who has betrayed many a region with his religious habit” (de Lorriss and de Meun 161). False Seeming, as his name obvious suggests, deceives others by appearing outwardly as a pious monk through his wearing of an honest monk’s habit. Hodges further argues that the costume rhetoric of False Vestment is ultimately employed to criticize those who only appear to be holy servants. No other character in *The Pillars of the Earth* would fit this definition more appropriately than Bishop Waleran.

Throughout the miniseries, Waleran’s costume rhetoric tells the story of his double life. He is always dressed appropriately for his station, be it that of archdeacon, cardinal, Archbishop of Canterbury or even as the priest confessor depicted in the flashback that ultimately reveals his involvement with the *White Ship* disaster that spurred the next twenty years of civil war. Although Waleran’s clothing is most certainly sumptuous throughout the miniseries, the frequent jabs taken at him—most notably by his predecessor the Archbishop of Canterbury—underscore a need to look the part of a priest who is comfortable within a royal circle.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, as the miniseries progresses, the viewers can chart Waleran’s success by his costume changes, as each different clerical position he holds requires different clothing. In order to carry out his plans, he, like False Seeming, must always look the part. Waleran, with the help of the Hamleigh family, is responsible for instigating the overthrow of Maud, the murders of countless innocents during raids on Kingsbridge, and the murder of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Perhaps most egregiously, at least in terms of the political and personal ramifications within *The Pillars of the Earth*, Waleran himself kills Henry I’s heir and further condemns the only witness to his crime—

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<sup>48</sup> Waleran’s ambition to become Archbishop of Canterbury ultimately drives his efforts to reroute money from the Kingsbridge Cathedral to his palace so that he can better entertain important visitors and gain their favor (or information to blackmail them).



Jack Jackson's French father—to death by burning at the stake. Of course, Waleran plots and kills all while appearing to be the good, pious priest by dressing appropriately for his position.

Certainly, the costume rhetoric of Waleran's False Vestment masks something truly sinful underneath that suggests clerical criticism of hypocritical priests. A bishop may "need" finery as a marker of his station and a nod to church ritual, but his lavish accoutrement also imply his social climbing and thus his manipulation and dishonesty. The hypocrisy of his clothing—that he appears to be a pious clergyman specifically to further his own megalomania—serves as an indictment of his ruthless ambition in the place of what should be his devotion to God and church. Perhaps due in part to cultural memory of the rhetoric of the Investiture Controversy, the estate satire genre, and the Protestant Reformation, audiences expect to find a corrupt clergyman like Waleran with a medievalist narrative. This charge of clerical corruption via False Vestment translates easily from the Middle Ages to the present-day perhaps because it has always depended upon visual representation for its criticism. In this sense, *The Pillars of the Earth* works within and ultimately upholds the notion of clerical corruption via Waleran's costume rhetoric yet it also constructs the counterpart to False Vestment—what Hodges terms "Spiritual Mirror"—through Phillip's iconic monk's habit to suggest a wider variety within the medieval clergy than perhaps exists within the popular imagination.

*The Pillars of the Earth*, like *Canterbury Tales*, does not condemn all medieval clergy through its clerical costume rhetoric. Linda Georgianna argues that Chaucer "typically singles out for attack clerics who abuse their offices and their orders" like the Pardoner rather than "the clerical authority itself" because such abuse has the "power to harm the community at large" (160). Indeed, while Waleran certainly threatens the community, *The Pillars of the Earth* does not attack the earnest clerical authority of the Kingsbridge monks, most notably including Prior

Phillip. Unlike Waleran's continuously changing yet always appropriate False Vestment, Prior Philip wears a humble and often dirty monk's habit throughout the miniseries that clothes him in settings as diverse as Kingsbridge Priory and Empress Maud's court. Although both are ambitious, the great difference between Waleran and Prior Philip is that each man's careerism is directed toward different ends; Waleran wants political power for himself, while Prior Philip becomes a politician only to ensure that someone continues to fight for Kingsbridge priory and her townspeople. As Henry Mayr-Harting, historian of western medieval religion, explains, "careerism" had always been in the church, but that it wasn't always an issue if ambition could be harnessed for the good of the church: "Pope Gregory the Great in his *Pastoral Care* of the 590s had contrasted laudable ambition, where the motive to do a good job for one's neighbour's sake outstripped the love of prestige, with laudable lack of ambition or desire to lead a secluded and contemplative life" (17). Prior Phillip's humble monk's habit underscores his desire to use his ambition for the good of the church.

In terms of iconic representations, Hodges describes costume rhetoric that reflects inward character through outward appearance as the "Spiritual Mirror." In clerical costuming representative of the Spiritual Mirror, "the idea behind sartorial regulations for holy habits is that the humility expressed by the garments will be a reflection of the wearer's inner spirit and that these habits will visually reflect a withdrawal from all worldly interests" (Hodges 6). Prior Phillip's humble monk's habit reflects—at times embarrassingly so<sup>50</sup>—his inner core of honest Christian virtue. The iconic representation of Prior Phillip's humble monk's habit does problematize itself during the course of the narrative because, according to a monk's vows, he was to seclude himself from the material world. By traveling around, his vows become

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<sup>50</sup> During one scene in particular, King Stephen pokes fun at Prior Phillip's dirty habit saying that he surely cannot know what is expected of him in a royal court before denying Prior Phillip's request for access to Shiring quarry for stone for the cathedral.

cheapened and the impact of the poverty represented by the habit lessens. Of course, for the narrative to work, viewers must see Phillip travel in order to have points of comparison between the habit and what other “medieval” people are wearing to reinscribe Prior Phillip as truly pious. Although this facet of the iconic representation of the pious monk marks itself as anachronistic, it nonetheless works within the narrative to further distinguish Waleran from Phillip.



Figures 4 and 5: Bishop Waleran Bigod and Prior Phillip from *The Pillars of the Earth*. Bishop Waleran (Ian McShane) and Prior Philip (Matthew Macfadyen) respectively demonstrate Laura Hodges’s notion of False Vestment and the Spiritual Mirror because each man’s clothing outwardly represents a relationship to his inward character. In this sense, they recall several infamous medieval characters, including *The Romance of the Rose’s* False Seeming and Chaucer’s Parson, respectively.

During *The Pillars of the Earth*, the iconic representations of clerical costume rhetoric distance the narrative from the prevalent assumption that all medieval clergy were corrupt. Even though the narrative certainly does not deny this possibility by figuring clergyman Waleran as its primary antagonist, the miniseries reaffirms the sincerity and earnestness of the clergy in general through the characterization and costume rhetoric of Prior Phillip and his fellow monks. In terms of present-day ideology, the iconic medievalist representations of clerical vestments as indicators of morality and piety further the miniseries’ efforts to question orthodoxy and uniformity in religious practice, both medieval and modern.

## CONCLUSION

Within the closed narrative format of the miniseries, *The Pillars of the Earth's* (de)construction of icons of medieval piety, even when fictitious or inaccurate, recall the heterodoxy of medieval Christianity. The Kingsbridge Cathedral, inspired by the likes of Salisbury and Wells, represents the economic power that was both needed and created by the construction of a medieval cathedral, not to mention the religious devotion it could inspire. The relics of St. Adolphus and the Blessed Virgin Mary serve as reminders of relics throughout medieval Christendom that inspired pilgrimages—devout in intention or not—and perpetuated cathedral economics. Most prominently, the costume rhetoric of Bishop Waleran and Prior Philip incorporate medieval notions of clerical ambivalence, as demonstrated by the costume rhetoric of *Canterbury Tales*.

Perhaps most importantly within the context of the closed narrative of the miniseries, *The Pillars of the Earth* ties together all of these convergent strands of medievalist representation in the program's conclusion. The cathedral building resumes as the new relic of the Virgin Mary continues to draw in visitors. Obsessed with controlling the priory's funding for this construction, Archbishop Waleran—in all his finery—holds a trial condemning Jack Jackson to death. Prior Philip, in his habit, publicly demands proof of the murder. The community of Kingsbridge comes together to challenge the Archbishop, who in turn flees to the top of the cathedral. Instead of accepting Jack's hand, like the Pardoner accepting the Host's kiss, Waleran chooses once again to act on his own accord and plummets to his death. Thus, each of the medieval icons, the cathedral, the relic, and the clerical clothing, play an integral part in the conclusion of this closed narrative and the (de)construction of the master narrative of orthodox medieval piety. Of course, these icons were never stable to begin with. Indeed, the cathedral, the

relic, and clerical vestment invite yet resist translation because they are multivalent in their originary nature. Like the modern-day cathedrals that have been added onto over the centuries, the icons of medieval piety represented in *The Pillars of the Earth* may not look exactly as they did once in the medieval past, yet they stand tall as reminders in modern cultural memory of the reimagined and (de)constructed religious practices of the Middle Ages.

### III. “SO THAT’S WHY HE WENT MEDIEVAL ON TV”: VIKINGS, VAMPIRES, AND QUEER VENGEANCE IN *TRUE BLOOD*’S MEDIEVALIST NARRATIVE

At first glance, HBO’s *True Blood* may not seem like an obvious choice for a project that intends to evaluate medievalist representations on TV. Based on Charlaine Harris’s bestselling *Southern Vampire Mysteries* novels, *True Blood* follows telepath waitress Sookie Stackhouse as she negotiates relationships with family, friends and, as the series continues, an increasingly wider circle of supernatural beings like vampires, werewolves, shapeshifters, and witches in the backwoods of Bon Temps, Louisiana. Of course, as an HBO series, *True Blood* satisfies its audience’s appetite for sex and violence. J.M. Tyree wittily notes that “the show often has the flavor of a pole-dancing kit bought at a ‘sex positive’ boutique for private, monogamous use, like the tame, bisexual S&M of *Interview with the Vampire*” (33).<sup>51</sup> Although provocative visual pleasures like “fangbanging” and bloodsucking may initially bring viewers in, the program’s unique narrative content and campy dialogue are what keep them coming back for more.<sup>52</sup>

Sookie’s relationship with her on-again off-again vampire boyfriend Bill Compton may drive the series, but fan favorites like Viking vampire Eric Northman occupy an increasingly important position within *True Blood*’s larger narrative structure. Even though *True Blood*’s focus lies beyond the Middle Ages, this ostensible distance from immediately recognizable

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<sup>51</sup> *True Blood*’s executive producer Alan Ball has worked on similarly provocative productions like *Six Feet Under* and *American Beauty*.

<sup>52</sup> In regard to giving viewers what they want, Ball told *Rolling Stone* that *True Blood* is “popcorn television for smart people” (Hardy 9). Apparently, audiences like this formula because its second season regularly attracted 10-12 million viewers a week (Hardy 12). While viewer rates for the last two seasons are as of yet unavailable, one might surmise from the series’ upcoming fifth season in the coveted Sunday night lineup that it remains one of HBO’s most watched shows. *True Blood*’s popularity makes it an even more interesting case study for medievalist evaluations.

medievalist content like that found in *The Pillars of the Earth* makes it a perfect series to demonstrate how these medievalisms become hybridized—containing both iconic and paradigmatic representations—as the mode of serialization changes. In particular, Eric’s dual, interwoven roles as historical Viking and fantastical vampire play an integral part not only in his development as a more dynamic character, but also in the present-day extensions and (re)imaginings of “medieval” revenge. By examining the narrative function and serialization of Eric’s medieval flashback and its sequential narrative strands, this chapter will analyze how *True Blood*’s iconic medievalist representations of the Old Norse feud prevalent in the Icelandic family sagas become hybridized with its paradigmatic medievalist representations of the roles sex and gender play creating a postmodern revenge narrative.

Because the narrative complexity of *True Blood*’s medievalist storyline extends beyond the scope of *The Pillars of the Earth*’s closed narrative model discussed in chapter 1, a brief discussion regarding the viewer experience of an open television narrative will be necessary. Even though it may seem obvious that new or infrequent viewers tend to focus on the plot of a television program whereas frequent viewers become more invested in the program’s characters, the importance of such a notion with regard to theorizing representations of medievalist television on a program like *True Blood* cannot be overstated. Essentially, the frequency of viewing impacts how a viewer will receive and comprehend representations as they appear in different scenes and on different narrative layers. Because *True Blood* is not obviously medieval—it set in “present-day” Louisiana, after all—the frequency of viewing dramatically affects the audience’s perceptions of the program’s medievalist representations.<sup>53</sup> In other words, the frequency of viewing and the knowledge of multiple narrative layers corresponds to a greater

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<sup>53</sup> Of course, the Scene Function Model has wider applications than just medievalist TV. In effect, it suggests that frequency of viewing affects not only the comprehension of plot and the investment in characters but also the ways in which a viewer perceives levels of continuity throughout the television narrative by way of each scene.

malleability in a viewer's perception of the medievalist representations; those invested in a narrative are more likely to work to make connections between multiple narrative layers and medievalist representations (and their referents) within that narrative.<sup>54</sup> To provide an extended example of how the ramifications of viewing frequency relate to the Scene Function Model, the following discussion will explore how the transformation of an important medievalist scene during season 3 of *True Blood* from a satellite scene into a kernel scene over the course of the narrative corresponds to the transformation of its medievalist representations from iconic to paradigmatic. Unlike the somewhat static narrative structure and corresponding iconic representations of *The Pillars of the Earth*, this scene from *True Blood* provides a case study in TV hybridization; both the scene's function(s) (kernel/satellite) and medievalist representation(s) (iconic/paradigmatic) accentuate how the mode of serialization in an open narrative like *True Blood* has varying effects on its medievalism.

### TRUE BLOOD'S MEDIEVALIST NARRATIVE

In episode 5 of the third season of *True Blood* entitled "Trouble," Viking vampire Eric Northman remembers his past for the second time in the series, yet this medievalist scene in particular provides a more complex mix of representations and narrative layers than his first flashback because it revolves around Eric's nine-hundred year thirst for vengeance.<sup>55</sup> The scene begins with Eric being given a tour of the estate of Russell Edgington, the vampire king of Mississippi, by Talbot, the king's "royal consort" for the last seven hundred years. Russell's

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<sup>54</sup> Perhaps this explains why so many medievalist media productions (film, television, games, etc.) have corresponding fan fiction. Frequent consumers of medievalist narrative desire more complexity in these narratives, so it makes sense that a market for character backstories or alternative endings would exist. See [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net) for numerous examples.

<sup>55</sup> Eric's first flashback occurs in season 2, episode 5 "Never Let Me Go." This scene details Eric's relationship with his "maker" Godric, the vampire who "turned" him after Eric suffered a fatal wound in battle. Although important in terms of character development, this scene is much briefer and has fewer narrative implications as a whole. As such, I have chosen to focus the attentions of this chapter on the longer medievalist scene in season 3.



official occupation is an antique dealer, so one can imagine the kinds of antiques he has collected over his three thousand year “life.” As the two men enter the special collections room, Talbot waves his hand dismissively over the priceless antiques, saying that Russell is a “greedy little boy . . . he wants what he wants and takes it.” The camera follows Eric as his eyes lock on one piece in particular: a gold crown with a distinctive filigree pattern (see Fig. 6). Seeing Eric’s interest in the item and wanting to get Eric’s attention back on himself, Talbot offers some made-up origin for what he describes as some “random tribal crown,” but Eric corrects him about the crown’s origins: “Viking.”

Suddenly, the show suggests that the historical materiality of the crown causes an involuntary reaction in Eric to impulsively remember a foregone moment. The viewer experiences a flashback (from a third-person perspective) by following the camera first into and then out of Eric’s eye. The setting that emerges is superficially and stereotypically medieval; it appears that a Nordic noble family (“Viking” as Eric has already informed the audience) is enjoying a dinner inside a dark mead hall lit by torches. Eric, dressed in dark robes and furs with longer blond hair, sits at the table joined by a man wearing the crown that first caused Eric’s flashback, a woman, also wearing a crown, and her baby. After the group have a conversation about marriage, responsibility, and obligation to one’s family in Swedish (with subtitles), one can surmise that this is Eric’s human family.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Serial viewers of *True Blood* will recognize that Eric speaks the same language in this scene as he speaks with both Godric, his “maker,” and Pam, his “progeny,” thus further connecting the language in this scene with Eric’s familial past. The foreignness of the language, even though complaints regarding anachronism could be made, also add to the sense that, at least for the average American viewer, that this flashback happened long ago (even though informed viewers might expect an older language like Old Norse).



Figures 6 and 7: Eric Northman and the Viking Crown and Eric's Medieval Flashback from *True Blood*. Viking Eric Northman (Alexander Skarsgård) mourns the loss of his human family at the hand (or paws) of werewolves in medieval Scandinavia. After becoming vampire, he is able to enact vengeance and reclaim his father's honor (and crown) nearly one thousand years after the murders took place.

Eric does not appear to be in the mood to discuss such things, so he excuses himself for a romp in the hay with a farm girl. As the camera settles in on the couple's wandering hands, screams are heard from the other room. The camera follows Eric as he discovers that a pack of wolves has broken down the door and slaughtered the guards, his mother, and her baby. Eric's father, meanwhile, valiantly tries to fight off the wolves with a huge broadsword. Eric joins him in the fight, managing to kill a wolf that shockingly transforms into a branded naked man before his eyes. Distracted by this surprise, Eric is unable to save his father from the rest of the pack. As one wolf rips out Eric's father's throat, another curiously grabs the crown from Eric's father in his mouth and takes it to a mysterious figure cloaked in an ominous hooded robe standing just beyond the light's reach. Once the figure receives the crown, the pack and their master leave as quickly as they arrived. The scene ends with Eric's father naming Eric king (see Fig. 7). Tellingly, his last garbled word to Eric is "Vengeance!" The flashback ends as the camera again enters and exits Eric's eye, returning the viewer back to Talbot and Russell's red-walled, special collections room, adding a startlingly authenticating moment for the other items in Russell's "special collection."

Viewers of this scene will notice several prominent features by using the Scene Function Model to ask, “What is the function/purpose of this scene for the telling of the story?” Because the story arc of season 3 follows Sookie’s search for Bill, whom she believes has been kidnapped and taken to Mississippi against his will, the narrative strand that is begun by Eric’s flashback seems at first to function as a satellite scene; the information presented is “interesting, but not necessarily vital information for the story to move forward” (Porter et al. 24). Indeed, Eric’s flashback functions on a plot-driven level by providing background information regarding his past and his motivations for what one might imagine to be some future act of vengeance; however, viewers cannot know how vital the information is to *True Blood*’s story arc unless they continue to watch the remainder of season 3 to see how this storyline plays out. The development of *True Blood*’s medievalist and narrative hybridity depends on the audience’s consistent viewing because this transformation occurs in the secondary layer of narrative meaning. Even though this scene only lasts a few minutes, Eric’s flashback is the most important kernel scene in season 3 because it provides a uniting storyline to tie together the season’s secondary narrative strands.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, relevant to a medievalist reading, the narrative function and effectiveness of this flashback hinges upon Eric’s dual position as both Viking and vampire; without a nine-hundred year reserve of hate directed toward the murderers of his family afforded to him by being a member of the living dead, this scene would lack its resonance of multiple narrative layers. Thus, at the heart of this crucial scene is the interplay between iconic and paradigmatic medievalisms. Iconically, there is no question that Eric as Viking must avenge his family and take back their stolen crown and honor. This sort of revenge narrative, epitomized by the feud in

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<sup>57</sup> For example, Eric’s revenge killing of Talbot coincides with the precise moment that Russell and his wolves are trying to capture Sookie at her house. Russell returns to his house in Mississippi immediately, leaving Sookie to reunite with Bill. This storyline also impacts Tara’s escape from Russell’s house and Bill’s attempted entombing of Eric at the end of the season.

Norse law and literature, figures largely in the unfolding narrative of season 3. At the same time, Eric's position as a vampire—famous for their erotic (and eroticized) bloodlust—"queers" this feud's relationship to its medieval referents, taking *True Blood's* medievalisms into the realm of paradigmatic representation.

#### "THE OLD WAY OF VENGEANCE": ERIC NORTHMAN'S VIKING FEUD AS ICONIC MEDIEVALIST REPRESENTATION

Whether viewers of Eric's flashback watch *True Blood* regularly or are seeing the program for the first time, no one doubts that he must avenge the death of his family. Indeed, the average audience member might even predict the basic plot structure for this developing storyline: Eric will first seek vengeance on Russell, and Russell will retaliate in a manner involving the werewolves again. How can one make such a prediction without prior knowledge regarding the narrative? In his introduction to *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm offers one explanation by suggesting that the prevalence of the "injury, revenge, counterrevenge" pattern depicted in *True Blood* became so pervasive during the Middle Ages that it should be no surprise that it remains a part of the cultural memory of western society (41). Netterstrøm argues that because medieval societies across Europe saw an increase in the "competition for survival and power" resulting from land grabbing, invasions, and political unrest, "attacks on or retaliation against competing individuals or groups" correspondingly increased (54-5). In a society where desire necessitated force, the advent of physical violence amongst competitors does not seem unbelievable. The feud begun by Russell wanting what he wants—a Viking crown—and taking it—through injuries inflicted on Eric's family—exaggerates this medieval model and underscores (what modern audiences might see as) the senseless

violence associated with such competition.<sup>58</sup> Russell, an outsider, has transgressed the honor code dictated by Norse culture.

Eric's position as a *Viking* seeking vengeance is an example of an iconic medievalist representation because Norse society, perhaps more so other medieval societies, demonstrates what appears to be a cultural obsession with the feud in both law and literature.<sup>59</sup> In "Social Institutions and Belief Systems of Medieval Iceland (c. 870-1400) and Their Relations to Literary Production," Preben Meulengracht Sørensen describes how social conditions in medieval Northern Europe, especially among settlers in Iceland who broke away from mainland Scandinavian control during the thirteenth century, created a fertile atmosphere for feuds to flourish:

Where there is no strong responsible power to enforce social norms, the peace of society depends on free men and women behaving in accordance with them, under pressure from the collectivity's esteem and the desire of the individual to gain the collectivity's recognition to the highest degree possible. From an ideal perspective, this is how a society functions in which honour is the dominant ethical principle. (23)

Medieval Scandinavia and Iceland generally lacked centralized government unlike other areas of Europe during the same period, instead being governed by councils of chieftains and localized

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<sup>58</sup> The notion of the feud also has resonances within the American South that figures so prominently in *True Blood's* narrative. As an honor-based society like the medieval North, the American South of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed violence as a result of both competition and insult. The dueling tradition serves as one such example.

<sup>59</sup> In the following discussion of the feud within the Norse world, I used the term "Norse" to loosely include medieval Scandinavia and Iceland because, as Meulengracht Sørensen explains, the similarities between the language and culture of Scandinavia and Iceland at this time vastly overshadow their difference ("Social Institutions" 18-19). One should also note that much of the extant Norse literature comes to us through the Icelanders, who were thought of as the historians of the North (Meulengracht Sørensen "Social Institutions" 11).

representatives from family groups who met to make decisions regarding their communities.<sup>60</sup> As such, the corresponding notions of honor and disgrace, especially within the context of community opinion of an individual or family, effectively regulated behavior. However, in such an honor-based society, consequently, order “breaks down and turns into conflict if the members of society ignore the social contract,” or if the individual is “involved in a collision of duty between conflicting bonds of loyalty” (Meulengracht Sørensen, “Social Institutions” 23). Contingent upon the importance of honor, the feud filled a position within Norse culture that acted as a social control in much the same fashion that law imposed by a government would. As a form of conflict resolution that coexisted with the law, parties involved in a feud understood that there would be ramifications from that feud that would affect their positions with society as either honored or disgraced. Netterstrøm notes that “feuds were an ordering principle around the year 1100,” whereas feuding as social control fell out of favor as church-backed centralized governments replaced earlier models (13). Further, “sustained peace legislation during the thirteenth-fifteenth centuries” in Sweden provides one example suggesting the pervasiveness of revenge killings and feuding (19). Indeed, the iconic Viking is often distilled into present-day reimaginings as the embodiment of this lawlessness. However, little documentation regarding actual feuds and feud practices in Norse society remains. Why, then, is the feud so strongly connected to the medieval North?

An analysis of Norse mythology—a popular export from its written transcription in the thirteenth century onwards—reveals that feuding was “fundamental to their beliefs about the creation of the world by the god-king Odin’s slaying of the giant Ymir, about the ensuing

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<sup>60</sup> This is not to say the lack or abbreviated reach of centralized governments in the medieval North corresponded to lawlessness. In Iceland, for example, the chieftains appointed a “lawspeaker” to annually recite the laws of the area to the community. These laws often included limitations on actions of revenge including honor killings, monetary retributions (*wergild*) and the punishment of outlawry for an individual who acted against the good of the community.

mythological battle between gods (*æsir*) and giants (*jotnar*), and about the end of the world in Ragnarok” (19).<sup>62</sup> Similarly in “Conservatism and Reinterpretation of Myth in Medieval Icelandic Writings,” Margaret Clunies Ross sees comparability between the “often-repeated stand-offs between gods and giants and the behavior offending factions of chieftains and their supporters in thirteenth-century Iceland” (123). In addition to Norse mythology, the *Íslendingasögur*, or the sagas of the Icelandic families, also provide readers with a canon of feuding.<sup>63</sup> Jesse L. Byock, in “Modern Nationalism and the Medieval Sagas,” explains that because the stories describe “quarrels erupting in violence and of feuds being mediated through arbitration,” as well as the “‘little’ people of history [farmers, women, etc.],” one gets a sense from the *Íslendingasögur* that these saga “portray the normative codes and illuminate the choices faced by individuals . . . unmatched by any body of medieval charters or cartularies” (168-9). In light of the prevalence of revenge tropes in a variety of texts from the mythological *Edda* to the *Íslendingasögur*, vengeance does indeed play a crucial role in Norse literature, and by extension, in (medieval and post-medieval) perceptions of Norse culture.

One can begin to see how *True Blood*’s medievalist narrative demonstrates an iconic representation of vengeance. During Eric’s flashback, the discussion of obligations to one’s family serves as a lynchpin for the unfolding storyline; it is no coincidence that this conversation and Eric’s father’s charge of “Vengeance!” bookend this flashback. After Eric witnesses the

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<sup>62</sup> The Norse literary boom of the thirteenth century, which occurred in conjunction with the influences of Christianity (the introduction of written literature), might be considered a medievalist institution because many of the stories written down during the period were actually composed orally during earlier time. Many scholars have noted romanticized flourishes in these narratives that idealize Norse forbearers.

<sup>63</sup> Netterstrøm offers a helpful historical view of the *Íslendingasögur* from a post-medieval Scandinavian perspective:

The famous family sagas written in the thirteenth century, which protagonise the authors’ ancestors of the ninth-twelfth centuries, centre revenge killing and feuding as the most important literary motifs. No one who reads the sagas doubts that they are all about feud. But for long, Icelandic historians were generally reluctant to accept the sagas as reliable sources and therefore distrusted or simply ignored the revenge narratives in them as valid evidence of the social behavior of the Icelanders of the Land-Taking and Free State period (870-1262). (16)

death of his family at the hands of the mysterious hooded figure and his pack of werewolves, Eric is bound by societal mores to avenge their deaths with a revenge killing of his own. Viewers of this scene are led to believe that Eric has only just now (with Talbot in Russell's antique room) realized who was responsible.

For this iconic feud to play out in *True Blood's* open narrative there is only one suitable target: Talbot. As Russell's lover for seven hundred years, Talbot is the only family Russell has; killing him would make Eric and Russell even. Once again, because even the casual viewer of *True Blood* is more than likely to be familiar with how a revenge/feud narrative will play out, especially one that demonstrates such premeditated ties to its medieval referent, the general narrative structure of this storyline is perhaps unsurprising. Nonetheless, the actual moment of Eric's revenge (episode 8, "A Night on the Sun") proves to be somewhat unexpected, even to the regular viewer. Because Russell apparently does not remember or recognize Eric as one of the many humans he has brutalized over the centuries, Eric is able to gain Russell's trust by denouncing his loyalty to Louisiana and claiming fealty to Mississippi and Russell.<sup>64</sup> When Russell's decision to go to Jackson to investigate Sookie's true identity<sup>65</sup> leaves Talbot frustrated, Eric offers to keep him company. Throughout their interactions, Talbot has obviously been sexually interested in Eric, and it appears that Eric uses this to his advantage to gain revenge. After returning to the special collections room to play chess, Talbot declares that he is

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<sup>64</sup> The vampire hierarchy presented throughout *True Blood* is strikingly reminiscent of a medieval feudal system. While "The Authority" is frequently mentioned as a secret vampire organization that enforces codes of conduct throughout the world, American vampires reside within territories (usually states) ruled by kings and queens. Each king or queen has sheriffs that act as law enforcement in small areas within each territory. Eric, for example, has held the position of vampire sheriff of Area 5, Louisiana under Queen Sophie Ann. Unlike serfs, however, vampires are more or less free to come and go as they please as long as they report their movement to The Authority.

<sup>65</sup> As a telepath, Sookie's identity remained the source of much interest throughout the series. Bill reveals that she is part fairy at the end of season 3. According to legend, if a vampire drinks fairy blood, he can once again walk in the sun. Consequently, Russell feels the need to investigate.



bored and demands that Eric take his clothes off. Until this point, Eric has been depicted as blatantly heterosexual. In a twist, Eric obliges Talbot's request:

Eric: "It's been a long time since I've done this."

Talbot: "A man?"

Eric: "A vampire."

The two begin to kiss passionately as the scene cuts away to the storyline involving Russell's search for Sookie. Once the camera cuts back to Talbot and Eric, the two men are nude on the floor of the special collections room and about to have sex. As Eric instructs Talbot to "turn over," he speaks as if to the world at large: "Russell took my family. Now I take his!" In a moment of visual double entendre, Eric penetrates Talbot in the back with a potent wooden stake (see Fig. 8). Russell immediately feels that Talbot has been murdered, thus leaving Sookie's house mid-abduction to return to bloody mess that was once his beloved partner. The feud has become official. The next move is Russell's to make.



Figure 8: Eric Northman's Revenge from *True Blood*. In episode 8 entitled "Night on the Sun," Eric takes revenge by killing Talbot (Theo Alexander), Russell Edgington's long-time companion, in a moment of campy, vampy double entendre.

Interestingly, Eric's surprising method of enacting a revenge killing appears to have a medieval antecedent. *Gísli Saga* tells the story of Gísli, a man caught between brothers-in-law, and highlights the importance placed upon the notion of vengeance and honor within Norse

culture. Gísli finds himself in the middle of a feud between his relatives. Þorgrímr, his bother-in-law, has killed his other brother-in-law, Vestein. Even though Gísli does not like Þorgrímr, he recognizes that another murder will not only cause further family turmoil but also make him a wanted man. Nonetheless, Gísli is bound by honor—or what David Clark calls “the old way of vengeance”—to kill Þorgrímr (“Gísla Saga” 492). In an often-analyzed passage, Gísli sneaks into the bedroom of Þorgrímr and his sister, Þórdís, to enact his vengeance in a somewhat surprising way:

He goes in there and gropes along and touches her breast, and she was sleeping towards the outer bedboard. Then Þórdís said: ‘Why is your hand so cold, Þorgrímr?’ and wakes him. Þorgrímr said: ‘Do you want me to turn to you?’ She thought that he had laid his hand on her. Gísli waits then a while and warms the hand in his shirt, and they both fall asleep. Now he touches Þorgrímr gently, so that he awakened. He thought that Þórdís had roused him, and turned toward her. Gísli then takes the bedclothes with one hand, and with the other he thrusts through Þorgrímr with Grásíða [his sword]. So it stuck in the bed. Now Þórdís calls out and said: “Wake up, men in the hall! Þorgrímr is slain, my husband!” (Clark, “Gísla Saga” 504)<sup>66</sup>

As in *True Blood*'s revenge narrative, no one is surprised when Gísli kills Þorgrímr with his trusty sword, Grásíða. Nonetheless, this passage does feature some unexpected details related to

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<sup>66</sup> Clark translates the passage below:

Gengur hann þangað og þreifast fyrir og tekur á brjósti henni og hvíldi hún nær stokki. Síðan mælti hún Þórdís: “Hví er svo köld hönd þín, Þorgrímur?” og vekur hann. Þorgrímur mælti: “Viltu að eg snúist að þér?” Hún hugði að hann legði höndina fyrir hana. Gísli bíður þá enn um stund og vermir höndina á serk sér en þau sofna bæði. Nú tekur hann á Þorgrími kyrrt svo að hann vaknaði. Hann hugði að hún Þórdís veki hann og snerist þá að henni. Gísli tekur þá klæðin af þeim annarri hendi en með annarri leggur hann í gegnum Þorgrím með Grásíðu svo að í beðnum nam stað. Nú kallar hún Þórdís og mælti: “Vaki menn í skálanum, Þorgrímur er veginn, bóndi minn.”

Gísli's revenge. After groping his own sister's breast, Gísli then appears to instigate some sort of intimate moment between Þorgrímr and a hand that Þorgrímr assumes belongs to his wife. Like Eric's revenge murder of Talbot, it is at this moment of feigned intimacy that Gísli reclaims the honor of his brother-in-law by penetrating Þorgrímr with his sword.

In an inspired reading of this scene, Clark argues that Gísli's uncharacteristic (homo)erotic behavior toward his enemy, in conjunction with the literal spearing of Þorgrímr, "clearly carries a sexual resonance" as a symbolic penetration designed to shame his enemy ("Gisla Saga" 513). Clark connects Gísli's gesture—that appears to be saying to Þorgrímr "I am penetrating you, because I am a real man, and you are taking it from me like a woman, and indeed you are enjoying it"—to the Norse notion of the *níð* insult tradition, which paradoxically positions itself between homophobia and homoeroticism. Like Gísli's killing of Þorgrímr, Eric's killing of Talbot can also be read within the context of the medieval *níð* because it hinges between effective and affective homosexuality. At the same time, given the frequency and depth of the explorations of homosexuality and bisexuality in *True Blood*, Eric's *níð* both recalls the paradoxical sexuality of the *níð* tradition and takes on paradigmatic implications that effectively queer his act of vengeance. If the feud reveals (de)constructions of power relationships, then the *níð* is its sexualized and sexualizing counterpart.

#### QUEER VENEGENCE AS A PARADIGMATIC MEDIEVALIST REPRESENTATION

Like the feud, the Norse conception of *níð* and its actual/perceived position within Norse culture has received much scholarly investigation within the past decade. Nonetheless, a conclusive definition has proven elusive. In an example provided by Carol J. Clover in

“Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,” the Norwegian *Gulaping* Code offers a legal, if ambiguous discussion of *níð* and its various forms:

Nobody is to make *tungu níð* [verbal *níð*] about another person, nor a *tréníð* [wooden *níð*]. no one is to make an *yki* [exaggeration] about another or a libel. It is called *yki* if someone says something about another man which cannot be, nor come to be, nor have been: declares he is a woman every ninth night or has born a child or calls him *gylfin* [a werewolf or unnatural monster?]. He is outlawed if he is found guilty of that. Let him deny it with a six-man oath. Outlawry is the outcome if the oath fails. (373-4)<sup>67</sup>

One can see from this excerpt that the *níð* (or “making *níð*”) was obviously a serious offense punishable by banishment or death.<sup>68</sup> Yet, the example above also indicates the unique sexual politics behind the *níð* that have made it a prominent point of interest in recent Norse scholarship. Perhaps the most obvious feature of the *níð* is that in the implication (verbal or otherwise) that one man has been sexually penetrated by another man, yet only the one penetrated is seen as shameful. Clark, in *Between Medieval Men*, argues that the stigma of the *níð*—“that men who show themselves to be ‘unmanly’ by taking on the inappropriate gender role”—is demonstrated in the language: “The noun *erg*, verb *ergjask*, and the adjective *argr* and its metathesized form *ragr* represent the ultimate insult to a man, implying that he is not merely effeminate but the adjective *sannjordsdmn* ‘(truly) buggered’” (41-2). In other words, when a Norse man (active) acted as a woman (passive) during a sex act by receiving the penetration of another man, it was seen as being shameful because the penetrator gave up his masculine power.

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<sup>67</sup> Clover translates this excerpt from the passage below:

Engi maðr seal gera tungu nið um annan. ne trenið. . . . Engi seal gera yki um annan. Æða fiolmæle. þat heiter yki ef maðr mælir um annan þat er eigi ma væra. ne verða oc eigi hever verit. kveðr hann væra kono niundu nott hveria. oc hever barn boret. oc kallar gylvin. þa er hann utlagr. ef han verðr at því sannr.

<sup>68</sup> Clark discusses the ramifications for a *níð* in *Between Medieval Men* p. 41.

Furthermore, Clover points out that while these insults, whether verbal or physical,<sup>69</sup> are directly linked with sexual practices deemed to be inappropriate for an ‘honorable’ man, they are ultimately “preoccupied with power more to the point, with powerlessness under threat of physical force” (377). In the Norse ideology behind the *níð*, male same-sex relations<sup>70</sup> were not shameful in and of themselves, but rather only when one gave up his sexual power as a man in being the willing recipient of the sexual action, or was forced to give it up in an act of male rape.

Returning again to *Gisla Saga*, the homoerotics (and incestuous behavior) seem to stem from the desire to both assert power over another man and to shame him. Clark contends that the link between the scene of Gísli’s strange sexual provocation and what he calls the “practice of phallic aggression,” or the asserting of one’s masculinity (and power) over another, lies in “attempting to destroy the masculinity of the victim—a perception which, as feminists point out, rests on the misogynistic assumption that the passive role is female and that the male-female binary corresponds to the positive-negative one” (509). For Gísli, killing Þorgrímr is not enough to avenge the honor of his fallen brother-in-law; Gísli must attempt to destroy his masculinity so that he is shamed as powerless even in death. Thus, the iconic *níð* tradition represented by Gísli’s symbolically sexualized murder of Þorgrímr conflates physical power and revenge with the most literal act of phallic aggression—rape. The *níð* tradition necessitated one man’s control over another through the assertion of both physical and sexual force.

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<sup>69</sup> The curious wooden *níð* (*níðstang*, *tréníð* or “níð pole”) appears most famously in *Egil’s Saga* when Egil takes a horse’s head and places it atop a wooden pole to shame his enemy. This too seems to have a negative sexual connotation, as the act of symbolically penetrating the horse with the wooden pole was thought to be reminiscent of anally penetrating a man. See Meulengracht Sørensen’s *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society* for a detailed discussion.

<sup>70</sup> Perhaps this ambivalence regarding the penetrator of same-sex male relations derives from the long standing homosocial bond between a chieftain and his men in both Germanic and Norse societies; it seems difficult to believe that a relationship with such strong homosocial bond wouldn’t necessarily become sexual on occasion (Jochens 388).

In the larger context of the *níð* in Norse culture, Eric's revenge on Russell seems somewhat fitting yet also queer. Like Gísli, Eric is bound by the importance of the honor code and enacts a revenge killing for the death of family. Furthermore, both Gisli and Eric take their revenge through some incorporation of a sexual act with another man. Yet unlike Gisli's act of symbolic phallic aggression, the scene during which Eric kills Talbot does not demonstrate the same effort to shame his target. If one returns to the above discussion regarding Talbot's imitation of sexual activity with Eric, one can find no evidence to suggest that Eric sees Talbot—the receiver of his penetration—as anything less than a man. Eric may use sex with Talbot to lure him into the best position in which to dispatch him and get back at Russell. Instead of an iconic translation of the medieval *níð* to *True Blood's* medieval revenge narrative, the medievalist representation of Eric's vengeance as a queer act both in terms of sexuality (same-sex) and expectation (as a Viking, one would expect him to adopt similar attitudes toward same-sex relations as those exhibited by Gísli or the *níð* literature) functions paradigmatically.

In terms of narrative, the scene focusing on Eric's killing of Talbot reimagines both the Norse conception of the feud begun during Eric's medievalist flashback (kernel scene) and same-sex relations that ultimately begin the feud's third phase of counterrevenge (satellite scene). Additionally, the mixture of narrative layers (depending on the frequency of viewing) positions Eric's medievalist flashback and its unfolding storyline as pivotal to the plot of the next two and a half seasons<sup>72</sup> as well as the character development of Eric that carried over into season 4. Even more prominently, as a regular viewer of *True Blood* would quickly recognize based on the proportionally large number of "normal" same-sex relationships featured in several different storylines, Eric's employment of the traditional *níð* would greatly limit his ability to function

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<sup>72</sup> Ultimately, Eric lures Russell into a cement tomb instead of killing him out at the end of season 3. At the end of season 4, which concluded in September 2011, Russell reappears ready to continue his blood feud with Eric. Season 5 will begin in June 2012.

widely with *True Blood*'s cast of diverse characters after such an incident.<sup>73</sup> Further, the homophobic shaming of Talbot and Russell via Eric's act of phallic aggression would rub against the grain of *True Blood*'s "pro-gay" ideologies. For this scene to work within the *True Blood* world Eric's phallic aggression may remain as camp (gay vampire being penetrated by both stake and penis) or even a nod to the *níð* tradition's emphasis on regaining power through sexual means, but the shaming of Talbot as receiver of Eric's sexual penetration must be removed through the paradigmatic transformation of these iconic representations.

## CONCLUSION

Although this chapter has argued that Norse culture is represented in both obvious and subtle ways through the series, isn't *True Blood* really about vampires? In *Vampire God: The Allure of the Undead in Western Culture*, Mary Y. Hallab explains why the answer to that question is more complicated than it first appears. Citing the long tradition of vampire stories in western society, Hallab suggests that vampires remain a popular cultural symbol because "as living embodiments of history, [they] can offer a sense of continuity with a very ancient past as well as with an expanded, international community" (33). The majority of the vampires in *True Blood* are depicted as tangible representatives of the period in which they lived as human; often a vampire's personality, appearance, and name indicate a tie to his or her past life.<sup>74</sup> Eric's dual role as vampire and Viking not only allows a unique narrative of queer vengeance to unfold via

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<sup>73</sup> In a DVD commentary for season 3 of *True Blood*, series creator Alan Ball celebrated the fact the several publications cited *True Blood* as "the gayest show on TV." While this chapter just skims the surface of the understudied area of queer medievalisms, Steven F. Kruger's "Gay Internet Medievalism: Erotic Story Archives, the Middle Ages, and Contemporary Gay Identity" provides a rich and nuanced study of how and why medievalisms are produced for a gay male audience.

<sup>74</sup> For example, vampire Bill Compton was made just after the Civil War. To force his link to nineteenth-century Southern-ness, Bill is depicted as exceedingly courteous in his initial courtship with Sookie during season 1; he insists that he call on Sookie at her house where her grandmother and brother can chaperone the visit. This politesse provides a striking contrast with his vampiric thirst for human blood, which is often fetishized throughout *True Blood* in graphic detail.

actual queer sex, but it is specifically his “living embodiment of history” as a vampire that makes such a narrative possible. His temporal uncanniness as a vampire mirrors the queerness of his sexualized revenge.

Yet vampires are not content to simply populate a long distant past. In this sense, the figure of the vampire is always already queer because it represents a figure that occupies several temporalities at once—something that humans obvious cannot do. As a human living in medieval Scandinavia and an undead vampire “living” in the (fantastical) present, Eric provides *True Blood* with a window into both a real and imagined past that operates in a creative dialectic with the series’ alternative present. Hallab, in an argument that strikes remarkably resonant chords within the world of medievalism, explains how the creative temporal function of vampires like Eric provides a way to fulfill the desire of communing with the past:

As living dead, [vampires] stand for both the loss of all that is past and its paradoxical aliveness in the present. As readers or viewers, we are free to identify with their histories and take them up as our own. Through the living dead, we acquire a sense of the past that we did not have before. (43)

Thus, it is the irrepressible figure of the vampire that unremittingly stands in as a representative of the “living dead” past—time that has both passed, yet continues to bear on the present. When Russell, a vampire for more than three millennia, appears on the cable news station and proceeds to rip out the heart of the anchor on live television (see Fig. 9), Bill describes his actions as “getting medieval on TV” (episode 9 “Everything Is Broken”). On one hand, Bill seems to mean that Russell was exceedingly brutal and violent (as “medieval” has often come to mean in present-day parlance); on the other hand, couldn’t “getting medieval on TV” also refer, in a more metaphoric sense, to the ways that vampires embody a queer sense of history, not alive, yet still



undead? In *True Blood*, the temporal dialectic at the heart of Viking vampire Eric's medieval flashback becomes a palpable component that complicates and queers the program's medievalist representations and affects the functionality of this crucial scene within the program's larger narrative structure. Even Russell's "medieval" act suggests a metacommentary of *True Blood's* own medievalist representations. Like Russell's violent, public, and possibly sexualized "penetration" of a news anchor on live television, *True Blood's* medievalisms are difficult to watch and mesmerizing at the same time. With regard to *True Blood's* medievalist content and its popularity among viewers, one might revise Eco's sentiment that people seem to like the Middle Ages *and* vampires getting medieval on TV.



Figure 9: Russell Edgington "Gets Medieval on TV" from *True Blood*. In an act of crazed despair in response to Talbot's murder, Russell (Denis O'Hare) "gets medieval on TV" before seeking counterrevenge on Eric (and Bill and Sookie) (episode 9, "Everything Is Broken").

#### IV. “A WORLD WE HAVEN’T SEEN BEFORE”: THE FANTASTIC NEOMEDIEVALISM OF *GAME OF THRONES*

The previous two chapters have explored the uses and implications of medievalist representations in a historically-minded miniseries and a series with a limited yet impactful medievalist narrative respectively. This chapter uses HBO’s *Game of Thrones* as an example to show how medievalism can function within a series devoted entirely to the paradigmatic representations of the Middle Ages. Because *Game of Thrones* depicts a nonhistorical yet vaguely medieval world, this chapter will attempt to re(de)fine what Umberto Eco has called “fantastic neomedievalism” as the interpretation of previous medievalisms within an alternate universe. I will argue that neomedievalism, and fantastic neomedievalism in particular, is a product of postmodern society because it reproduces other medievalisms and presents a bricolage of medieval cultures that often lack wholly discernible referents. Ultimately, when seen as an extension of medievalism studies that intersects with postmodern studies, the fantastic neomedievalism represented by the following discussion of *Game of Thrones* will demonstrate the possibilities of delineating the ways that the Middle Ages continue to serve as a reservoir for present-day desires for recreating “history as it should have been” (Cramer xi).

#### NEOMEDIEVALISM, FANTASY, AND BRICOLAGE

Before examining the ways that fantasy and neomedievalism converge in the representations of the Middle Ages in *Game of Thrones*, a theoretical framework will attempt to define these often elusive but nonetheless important terms. As the previous two chapters have

demonstrated, the notion of medievalism is a complex one that depends on form, content, and cultural context; adding the prefix “neo” to an already slippery idea complicates matters even more so. Therefore, one should return to the first mentions of neomedievalism in order to examine its use and relationship to medievalism.<sup>75</sup> According to Eco’s “Dreaming of the Middle Ages,”

We are at present witnessing, both in Europe and America, a period of renewed interest in the Middle Ages, with a curious oscillation between fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination. Undoubtedly what counts is the second aspect of the phenomenon, and one must wonder why Americans are more or less experiencing the same obsession as Europeans. (63)

Eco, while failing to specify exactly what he means by “fantastic neomedievalism,” positions it clearly in opposition to “responsible philological examination,” thereby suggesting (and reinforcing) the notion that scholars of medieval studies should focus primarily on acceptable subjects like philology. At the same time, the “oscillation” between proper and popular medievalisms Eco mentions seems to advocate investigation of both popular manifestations and scholarly practice in relation to one another. Eco positions fantastic neomedievalism as a phenomenon experienced in both Europe and America (and by extension, other non-European parts of the world); proximity to real medieval geography appears to have little effect on such developments. Even though this definition by opposition—that fantastic neomedievalism is neither ‘responsible philology’ nor specifically English incarnations of medievalism—can

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<sup>75</sup> To avoid a confusion of terms, the neomedievalism discussed within this chapter is not the same neomedievalism used by International Relations theorists to describe the ways that post-9/11 policy trends suggest a return to what is seen as a return to the feudal system and state-building that occurred during the Middle Ages. Although the use of such a term and the rhetoric associated with it does provide interest to medievalists as Bruce Holsinger expertly argues in *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism and the War on Terror*, the neomedievalism of International Relations would only muddy the waters of current considerations regarding fantastic neomedievalism and representations of the Middle Ages on television series.

illuminate some aspects of neomedievalism, the term remains ambiguous. Thus, one must turn to the wider field of pop culture medievalisms to further uncover the broader implications for Eco's intriguing phrase.

In "Neomedievalism, Identification and the Haze of Medievalisms," David W. Marshall offers perhaps the most direct definition of neomedievalism building upon Eco's original usage: "In short, neomedievalism is a self-conscious, ahistorical . . . reuse of the historical Middle Ages that selectively appropriates iconic images, often from other medievalisms, to construct a presentist space that disrupts traditional depictions of the medieval" (22). Importantly, as Marshall argues, neomedievalism thus develops traditional iconography of the Middle Ages but twists it back on itself to create something remotely medieval yet not wholly recognizable as the original historical artifact.

One could argue that this is the process occurs during the (re)creation of all medievalisms, so how then is *neomedievalism* distinct? In addition to incorporating icons of both medieval culture and other *medievalist* (re)creations, neomedievalism is marked by images of the past that are "divorced from any chronology . . . detached from history" by appropriating "iconic images and/or ideas as signifiers largely emptied of associations" ("Neomedievalism" 24). In other words, the iconic representations that derive from material artifacts of medieval culture become wholly paradigmatic because they can only be understood as presentist metaphors that attempt to describe relationships between other representations. The crux of "neomedievalism" presented by Marshall resides in how far removed the (re)creation of medieval culture becomes in the process of translation from past to present; whereas medievalism concerns itself with history either through reimagining historical events, people or places, neomedievalism takes hold of the medieval cultural capital and patches it together to create something new.

Kim Selling appears to take up this very issue in “‘Fantastic Neomedievalism’: The Image of the Middle Ages in Popular Fantasy” by focusing even more specifically on Eco’s terminology of *fantastic* neomedievalism. Arguing against Eco’s opinion that the neomedievalism of “sword-and-sorcery” fantasy literature is “hardly worthy of serious academic consideration,” Selling suggests that fantastic neomedievalism “is a fascinating field, which offers the chance of compelling ‘sociological profile’ of twentieth-century Western culture” (211).<sup>76</sup> Selling also aptly notes the consistent setting of fantasies within a vaguely Western European Middle Ages and successfully argues that the popularity of such settings relies on “the familiarity and coherence” of stories “in environments where the characters wear medieval dress, fight with swords, and live in hierarchical, vaguely feudal, semi-pastoral societies with low levels of technology” (212).<sup>77</sup> Because, as Selling suggests, the study of fantastic neomedievalism can reveal the ways that the Middle Ages and its medieval and medievalist iconography are appropriated and reused over and over as a site for popular constructions of fantasy, further questions regarding fantasy’s role in how the Middle Ages are reimagined in fantastic neomedievalism require scholarly attention.

According to Flo Keyes’s *The Literature of Hope in the Middle Ages and Today: Connections in Medieval Romance, Modern Fantasy, and Science Fiction*, fantasy can generally be defined as a narrative

in which a set of rules unlike the rules of the real world is established or in which the rules of the real world are modified to allow for objects or actions impossible

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<sup>76</sup> One might question Selling’s interpretation of Eco’s tone in “Dreaming the Middle Ages” as wholly dismissive of fantastic neomedievalism. After all Eco did, write the wildly popular *The Name of the Rose*, which became an equally popular film. At the same time, there are certainly others who would dismiss ‘sword-and-sorcery’ fantasy as unworthy of academic study, so Selling’s defense does not go unfounded.

<sup>77</sup> I use “vaguely” here to reference the neomedievalist tendency of using various aspects of medieval iconography—castles, knights, feudalism, “period dress,” or the elements of medieval piety I outlined in chapter 2—in exotic or strange temporal or geographic contexts. “Vaguely medieval” means that we can recognize elements that appear to be medieval(ist), but the whole image of disparate elements casts an uncanny shadow onto the scene.

in the world as we know it. Once these alternate rules are in place, however, the writer [or creator] makes the action in the created world abide by those rules throughout the rest of the novel, or series. (16)

From Keyes's definition, one might surmise that if the uniting characteristic of all fantasy is an adherence to these "alternate rules," then the successfulness of fantasy both as a genre and as individual narratives within the genre depends on this epitomizing attribute.<sup>78</sup> One can simply create a world where the existence of vampires may be unlikely, but not wholly unrealistic, or some distant spatiotemporal universe where dragons flying overhead might be seen as distressing by its inhabitants (or viewers), but normal nevertheless according to the reality established within the fantasy world.<sup>79</sup> Traditional fantasy depends entirely upon the reformation of and adherence to the "alternate rules" of the new fantasy world.

In cobbling together these discussions of neomedievalism and fantasy, one begins to get a handle on this slippery term, "fantastic neomedievalism." If medievalism depends on the interpretation of medieval culture in a time and place beyond the period of the Middle Ages in, for example, the flourish of Victorian and academic medievalisms of the nineteenth century, then neomedievalism marks a return to or a reconsideration of such medievalisms and their representations of medieval culture. In other words, in addition to engaging with aspects of medieval culture directly, that is to say by secondarily reimagining medieval literature, history, and

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<sup>78</sup> Although 'success' is a problematic term in its own right because so many factors can go into deciding if something is 'successful,' I have decided to limit the discussion here to gross earnings because that is reasonable indicator regarding world-wide popularity. Essentially, what are people willing to buy or spend money on? As one of the most successful fantasy series of all time, the eight *Harry Potter* films have grossed to date \$7.7 billion worldwide (<http://www.thenumbers.com/movies/series/HarryPotter.php>). This figure does not include book sales or merchandising. One might also think of other wildly successful fantasies like *Star Wars*, Marvel Comics' superhero franchises, and, of course, *The Lord of the Rings*, which I will return to later in this chapter.

<sup>79</sup> Within the context of the definition of fantasy, one might also see connections back to the discussion of *True Blood* in chapter 2. It is my position that even though *True Blood* overall is certainly an example of fantasy television, it is not an example of fantastic neomedievalism because its medievalist narrative, as I have argued, is rooted fairly obviously within medieval culture. Even though the paradigmatic representations that queer Eric's revenge on Russell add a presentist element to the program's medievalism, it nonetheless fits within the parameters of medievalism because the medieval referents are still somewhat discernible and are not emptied of their signifiers.

iconography, neomedievalism primarily engages other forms of medievalism that already exist within cultural memory. Neomedievalism thus serves as a metacommentary on medievalist impulses because it borrows both medievalist representations and the functions of the representations within the narrative. Fantastic neomedievalism, then, transports these representations of representations and layers of medievalia to a world different from our own with rules that establishes an alternate reality. These seemingly unfettered medieval simulacra become even more exaggerated in fantasy worlds because the emphasis on reimagined reality is doubled: the present, and especially the past, exist solely for the producer and the consumer.<sup>80</sup> Because neomedievalism knowingly interprets interpretations, essentially producing simulacra of medieval culture, the iconic images often emptied of their original meanings places neomedievalism, and fantastic neomedievalism by extension, within the postmodern tendency toward bricolage.

As a notoriously abstruse term in and of itself, defining postmodernism deserves a much larger platform than can be provided here. As such, this discussion will focus on a prominent postmodern notion imbricated in the production of neomedievalisms. Bricolage, as Claude Levi-Strauss defines this action of cobbling together materials through the organizer, the “bricoleur,” deals specifically with creation from a sum of parts:

Consider [the “bricoleur”] at work and excited by his project. His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it and, before choosing between

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<sup>80</sup> In one of the most provocative studies of fantastic neomedievalism, *Medieval Fantasy as Performance The Society for Creative Anachronism and the Current Middle Ages*, Michael A. Cramer suggests that members of the neomedievalist subculture movement known as the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) become at times obsessed with (re)creating a fantastic New Middle Ages because they are dissatisfied with their current realities and see the Middle Ages as a reservoir of iconography with which to reimagine the present as various forms of the past (ix-xi). Cramer himself has been involved with the SCA for a number of years.

them, to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer to his problem. He interrogates all the heterogeneous objects of which his treasury is composed to discover what each of them could 'signify' and so contribute to the definition of a set which has yet to materialize but which will ultimately differ from the instrumental set only in the internal disposition of its parts. (18-19)

Even though Levi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* defines bricolage and the bricoleur in relation to the creation of myth and legend from a variety of lived experiences, the notion of mythology created from disparate parts also seems appropriate within the context of neomedievalism, for what is neomedievalism but a compounding of multivalent medieval and medievalist pasts into a mélange of myth?

In terms of postmodernism, the notion of pastiche is also alluring within the context of neomedievalism. Even though pastiche might be defined somewhat similarly as a hodge-podge of materials used to construct a new product, I have chosen to use the term bricolage in referring to neomedievalism in this chapter because its association with the creation of mythology is more suited to the discussion that follows. As I will argue, *Game of Thrones* uses some specific aspects of fantastic neomedievalism that, through their prevalent use in other (neo)medievalisms, have become a mythology of sorts for the genre. Indeed, neomedievalism, as Selling puts it, consists of the ways "the historical Middle Ages . . . becomes mythologized as 'the olden days,' or fairy tale 'Once upon a time,' where history flows into one mythical continuum" (213). These neomedievalist myths created from the bricolage of medievalisms lose their referential bearings to the medieval past by linking to one another as opposed to referring only to the medieval cultures repeated therein. Ultimately, neomedievalisms reveal medievalist desires for bringing disparate icons of medievalness into paradigmatic tension with one another through narrative.



Because the process of bricolage that allows for the creation of fantastic neomedievalism depends so heavily upon the appropriation and refashioning of medieval and medievalist iconic and paradigmatic representations, fantastic neomedievalism on television provides an especially pertinent subject because its medievalisms are obviously visual. In a fantastic neomedievalist program like HBO's *Game of Thrones*, the visual (re)imaginings of some vague and distant Middle Ages allows viewers to attempt to 'connect the dots' between medieval, medievalist, and neomedievalist incarnations of iconic representations. Furthermore, within the open narrative serial structure, an explosion of scene hybridity—a scene that begins as a satellite but becomes a kernel over the course of the narrative—in *Game of Thrones* works with its bricolage of neomedievalist myth-making by incorporating the medieval and the medievalist while also cannibalizing its own narrative. In other words, the program's neomedievalist representations are operationalized by the serial's open narrative so that narrative strands that originate in satellite scenes become increasingly interwoven as the storylines stretch over episodes and even seasons. The open narrative enhances the program's fantastic neomedievalism because, as a genre, its "alternate rule" of infinite narrative leaves room for the possibility of ever-continual neomedievalist reimaginings that become increasingly intertextual. An analysis of the visual and narrative constructions of three popular fantastic neomedievalist tropes—political strategy as a chess match, the existence of dragons, and the reimagining of the Tolkienian universe—demonstrates a few of the ways that medieval and medievalist representations of the Middle Ages are forced into contact with one another in the alternate reality of the fantasy television series.

## *GAME OF THRONES* AND FANTASTIC NEOMEDIEVALIST BRICOLAGE

As this brief synopsis of the first season will attest, HBO's *Game of Thrones* is a fantastic neomedievalist television program *par excellence*. Set in the fictional realm of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, *Game of Thrones* follows multiple interwoven narratives revolving around the political wrangling of the leading noble families for the Iron Throne. Under the distracted and detached rule of one-time warlord and usurper, now drunken womanizer King Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy), the Seven Kingdoms have flourished. But with the sudden death of the Hand of the King, the de facto ruler appointed by King Robert, threats to the throne and the peace of the Kingdoms lurk in the shadows. Sensing the need for a fair and honest replacement, King Robert appoints his long-time friend, Lord Eddard "Ned" Stark (Sean Bean), Warden of the North, as the new Hand. Although Ned does not wish to leave his family or land for the politics of King's Landing, the capital of Westeros, Ned's honor and sense of responsibility to both his king and his people forces him to reluctantly accept the position. Just before Ned leaves with the king and his retinue for the South, one of Ned's sons, Bran, mysteriously falls from a high window. Unbeknownst to all but the three involved, Bran (Isaac Hempstead Wright) is pushed from the window after seeing Queen Cersei (Lena Headey) having sex with her twin brother, Ser Jaime Lannister (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau). Even though almost no one knows exactly what happened, many suspect foul play at the hands of the richest and most powerful family in Westeros: the Lannisters.<sup>81</sup> War between the Starks and the Lannisters begins after Lady Catelyn Stark (Michelle Fairley) takes Tyrion Lannister (Peter Dinklage) prisoner under the suspicion that he is directly involved in the attempted murder of her son. The bad blood between the two houses escalates once King Robert mysteriously dies in a hunting

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<sup>81</sup> As an unofficial, yet oft-repeated motto, the Lannisters remind those around them that "a Lannister always pays his debts" as a precursor to a request, pardon or favor.

accident and Ned is imprisoned as a traitor at the behest of Queen Cersei via her son and new king, Joffrey Baratheon (Jack Gleeson). The Seven Kingdoms plunges into civil war.

Meanwhile, threats to Westeros lie not only within its walls but also beyond them. Across the Narrow Sea, the last remaining children of the Targaryen dynasty have lived in exile for the past seventeen years after their father was deposed and killed by Robert. According to legend, the Targaryens used tamed dragons to take control of Westeros some thousand years ago, but once the dragons began dying out, so did the Targaryen power. Viserys (Harry Lloyd), the self-proclaimed “Dragon,” hopes to take back the Iron Throne by marrying off his younger sister Daenerys (Emilia Clarke) to the heathen warlord of the Dothraki Hoard, Khal Drogo (Jason Momoa), who has promised to lend Viserys his army. After a rocky period of assimilation into the nomadic culture of the Dothraki, Daenerys comes into her own as queen, or “Khaleesi.” Even after the deaths of her brother, her husband, and her unborn son, Daenerys poses a great threat to the powers that be in Westeros because she has in her command both a number of Dothraki warriors and, as the season 1 finale reveals, creatures long thought to be extinct: dragons.

In the North, beyond the Stark stronghold of Winterfell, lies the Wall. The Wall was built thousands of years before and has been manned since by the men of the Night’s Watch, including Ned Stark’s bastard John Snow, to keep the threats of the Wilding people and the supernatural White Walkers at bay. Like dragons, the White Walkers and their winters that last decades have become myth to most citizens of Westeros, but recent disquieting reports from beyond the Wall suggest something dangerous is moving closer.

The above synopsis does not do justice to even half of the program’s storylines, yet elements of fantasy and neomedievalism permeate the series through its visual and narrative reimaginings of medievalisms. *Game of Thrones* obviously exemplifies fantasy because the

series establishes the “alternate rules” that Keyes describes as being the lynchpin of the fantasy genre. According to creator/writer/producer George R.R. Martin, “the entire series is fused with a sense of magic, but there is very little on stage magic . . . I think too much magic can ruin a fantasy” (“The Making of *Game of Thrones*”). The first season is bookended by ‘magic;’ episode 1 begins with a supernaturally charged scene north of the Wall where members of the Night’s Watch encounter ghostly, violent figures explained later to be the White Walkers, and episode 10 ends with the revelation that the Targaryen dragons have risen once more from the fires in the East. The audience is reminded of magic and invited to watch *Game of Thrones* through these initial instances. More importantly for this project, the series’ outstanding visual recycling of medieval and medievalist representations plays directly into the narrative evolution of the series. Because *Game of Thrones* is set entirely within an alternate fantasy reality, its neomedievalisms are stretched across the entire narrative and affect the viewers’ experience of the series exponentially with each additional episode. What’s more, HBO has made an unprecedented deal with Martin to buy the rights to his novel series, *A Song of Fire and Ice*, as he is still writing the books. With no ostensible end in sight,<sup>82</sup> *Game of Thrones*’ neomedievalisms appear to have a long and winding road ahead of them as the series’ open narrative continues to unfold.<sup>83</sup> In the discussion that follows, I will explore three important neomedievalist tropes featured in both *Game of Thrones* and a number of other neomedievalist fantasies that demonstrate how the process of bricolage paradoxically intensifies the intertextualities between these fantasies and

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<sup>82</sup> In a recent interview, Martin revealed that he has planned at least two more novels in his series, putting the total at seven novels (<http://collider.com/george-r-r-martin-interview-game-of-thrones/86337/>). With each novel weighing in at over 750 pages, the series will not run out of material anytime soon.

<sup>83</sup> Of course, the interplay between Martin’s novels and HBO’s television series is a problematic one because it brings up the issue of adaptation, which extends far beyond the scope of this project. Yet, Martin’s involvement as both a producer and a screenwriter for the show, in addition to comments he has publically made about the “accuracy” of the program’s adherence to his books, suggests that the executive producers are more than slightly interested in staying the course with Martin’s written narrative. Time will tell if this agreement lasts.

distances them from the ‘original’ medieval referents. The point of this discussion is not to provide a source study of *Game of Thrones* but rather to investigate some of the ways that medieval and medievalist representations meld together in a fantastic neomedievalist television series.

### THE GAME IN *GAME OF THRONES*

As perhaps the most obvious and narratively important trope, the notion of politics as a chess match permeates *Game of Thrones*—the series even references it in its title. According to Ian Riddler, a specialist in medieval games, even though a form of chess originated in India during the sixth century A.D. and became very popular in the East almost immediately, chess did not become popular in Western Europe until figure pieces tied to members of the medieval estate system were introduced around the end of the twelfth century (10-11). Similarly, in her preface to William Caxton’s fifteenth-century edition of *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*, Jenny Adams notes how important the symbolism of these pieces was to the medieval imagination by delineating the ways that this treatise “uses the chessboard and its pieces to allegorize a political community whose citizens contribute to the common good” (2).<sup>84</sup> One can see, for example, how the queen piece transforms from a figure used in the game to a real medieval queen:

Thus ought the queue be maad. She ought to be a fayr lady sitt yng in a chayer and crowned with a corone on her heed and cladde with a cloth of geold and a mantel above furrid wyth ermynes . . . In that she is sette on his lifi syde is by grace gevyn to the kyng by nature and of right. For better is to have a kyng by succession thenne by eleccion. For often tymes the electours and chosers cannot

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<sup>84</sup> Caxton’s edition is a translation of an older treatise composed by Jacobus De Cessolis sometime during the thirteenth century.

ne wylle not accorde, and so is the eleccion left. And otherwhyle they chese not the beste and most able and convenient, but hym that they best love or is for them most proffitable. But whan the kyng is by lignage and by trewe succession, he is taught, enseyned, and norisshyd in hys yougth all good and virtuous thatches and maners of his fader. And also, the prynces of the royame dar not so hardly meve warre against a kyng having a sone for to reigne after hym. (lines 123-35)

Clearly, the queen chess piece here functions as an inroad to a more important (and timely) discussion of the queen's political significance regarding the succession of the throne from father to son. Adams notes that Caxton's printing of this volume in 1483 coincides with the same year that Richard III seized the throne and "thus reflects the complex state of royal authority and shifting political climate" in a country torn apart by the War of the Roses (11). For Caxton and other medieval thinkers, the game of chess provided an excellent allegory in the making because its figure pieces and strategies already contained political overtones. In a time of national turmoil, chess figure pieces seemed to epitomize the importance of individual 'pieces' working together to reestablish order. This historical context for *The Game and Playe of Chesse* sounds remarkably similar to the political strife bubbling up in Westeros. At the end of the first season, war between no fewer than five noble families has overtaken the Seven Kingdoms when, upon the sudden death of King Robert, incest rumors surround the queen, her brother, and the king's son and heir.

Moreover, as Caxton's passage suggests, Queen Cersei not only looks the part of the fair queen sitting next to the king but also holds perhaps the most political power in *Game of Thrones* because she determines who will succeed King Robert by choosing to reproduce with her brother rather than her husband. Yet, in neomedievalist style, the television series does not present a

simple iconic representation of queenly power from a medieval text like Caxton's to the fantasy world of Westeros. As if to play with this notion of the queen's reproductive impact upon the realm, *Game of Thrones* perversely inverts and reemphasizes Queen Cersei's power when Ned discovers that Prince Joffrey could only be the son of Queen Cersei and her twin brother, Ser Jamie, because he has inherited the Lannister blond hair instead of the dark hair of his Baratheon father Robert.<sup>85</sup> Instead of producing a legitimate heir, Queen Cersei deceives the king and the citizens of the realm by wanting to keep the political power within her family. Paradigmatically, the Lannister incest grossly literalizes the importance placed on lineage in the Middle Ages as the brother-sister relationship casts a larger and larger shadow over Westeros. As queen, like Caxton's text suggests, Cersei's illegitimizing actions directly cause the outbreak of war in Westeros because once others find out about the Lannister "incestual" secret, there appears to be no legitimate heir to the Iron Throne. Like the War of the Roses, the civil war surrounding the succession of the throne in Westeros is sure to last years.

Of course, *Game of Thrones* uses the chess trope in a wider array of contexts than just to reimagine the importance of the queen's power or to symbolize political strategy. As a neomedievalist television series, *Game of Thrones* also incorporates other medievalisms that use the chess trope. As perhaps one of the best-known medievalist films dealing with the allegorical power of chess, Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* follows the journey of a knight (Max von Sydow) and a game of chess he plays with Death to delay his own mortality and to accomplish "one meaningful deed." In *The Seventh Seal*, chess becomes the vehicle through which Antonius Block rediscovers that life has purpose, and is epitomized during the scene when he knocks the

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<sup>85</sup> In another common (neo)medievalist trope, Ned discovers the truth about Joffrey's genetics by turning to an ancient genealogy manuscript that details the appearances and personality of all the royal Westeros families. Bettina Bildhauer argues in *Filming the Middle Ages* that handwriting and manuscripts often hold an authenticating and authorizing power in films about the Middle Ages (101).

chess pieces off the board to distract Death as his friends slip away. This use of chess is strategic, but more importantly, it has moral implications for its characters and audience.

With the popularity and wide-reaching influence of *The Seventh Seal* and its historically-minded allegorical medievalisms, elements of the film's treatment of chess influence neomedievalist television. Yet unlike *The Seventh Seal*, which positions its story within the context of the post-Crusade era Middle Ages, *Game of Thrones* lacks those historical referents because it exists within a fantastic reality of its own. The 'game' in *Game of Thrones* lacks the post-apocalyptic atmosphere that *The Seventh Seal* exudes thanks to the historical ties to the bloodshed of the Crusades and the threat of the plague. Further, while *The Seventh Seal* uses the chess game between the knight and Death to symbolize more than just the mapping of the game's strategies on to the reality of the film or its characters' relations to one another, *Game of Thrones* limits the chess trope to such a function. As Queen Cersei aptly puts it, "when you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground." Within the reality of *Game of Thrones*, the chess trope does not hold the same historical and moral significance it carries in *The Seventh Seal*. Instead, the vague allusions to chess in the series' title and in Queen Cersei's warning to Ned paradigmatically underscore the political strategies and furtive scheming that occupy much of the series but do not attempt to link the chess game trope back to any specific medieval signifier.<sup>86</sup> The queen chess piece may be translated, if somewhat bizarrely, from medieval to medievalism to neomedievalism but the game itself and its potentiality for allegory gets lost in the shuffle.

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<sup>86</sup> Other connections could be made to films that represent the interplay between chess and political strategy. Kenneth Branagh's turn as Iago in Oliver Parker's film adaptation of *Othello* would be another potent example to explore.





Figures 10 and 11: Queen Cersei and Prince Joffrey Baratheon from *Game of Thrones* and The Game of Chess from *The Seventh Seal*. Queen Cersei understands the importance of family loyalty in Westeros as she advises her son (and heir to the Iron Throne) Joffrey Baratheon in political strategy so that the Lannisters will always be the most powerful family in the Seven Kingdoms. *Game of Thrones*, unlike *The Seventh Seal* (right) and Caxton's *The Game and Playe of Chesse*, lacks allegorical impact.

## POSTMODERN DRAGONS AND THE MONSTROUS FEMININE

Another popular trope in *Game of Thrones* that reveals the mythmaking bricolage process of neomedievalism is the existence of dragons. Like chess, the dragon's complex position within the cultural imagination makes it a difficult symbol to pin down because it has been and continues to be reincarnated to suit a variety of purposes. In "Encountering the Monstrous: Medieval Saints and Dragons in Medieval Thought," Samantha J. E. Riches notes that dragons are so "enmeshed in the fabric of Western Europe" that they make regular appearances in folklore like the battle between St. George and the dragon, exist in visual culture like sculpted and painted art, and loom threateningly in heraldic devices and battle standards in a number of medieval cultures including Anglo-Saxon and Viking (198).<sup>87</sup> Obviously, the medieval dragon itself is a complex conglomeration of myths, but it is such a common symbol that it has often come to represent many different aspects of the Middle Ages to present-day viewers. In the world of fantasy, the existence of dragons often functions as the hallmark of the fantasy world's "alternate rules;" because the supernatural dragon is part of the fantasy's reality, the dragon

<sup>87</sup> Riches also suggests that the cultural uses of the dragon of the medieval West reimaged the lore surrounding Asiatic and Arab dragons.

underscores the division between fantasy and non-fantasy. Thus, as an important component to both medieval culture and the fantasy genre, the dragon provides an excellent vehicle through which to trace simulacra in a fantastic neomedievalist text like *Game of Thrones*.

Noting this same intersection between medieval culture and fantasy represented by the dragon that I have suggested above, Bettina Bildhauer argues in *Filming the Middle Ages* that fantasies set within the Middle Ages have a higher tolerance for supernatural elements like dragons for two primary reasons. First, Bildhauer contends that the Middle Ages are often constructed as “mythical prehistory rather than a part of our history,” so it does not seem strange for exotic creatures and magic to exist in such a far off time (19). In this case, temporal distance from medieval events allows both present-day creators of fantasy and its consumers to imagine a time when a reality different from our own existed. Second, because the tradition of the medieval epic established a “precedent” for refashioning historical events into legend, (neo)medievalist fantasies appear to follow the suit, confusing and layering history with literature and myth (19).<sup>88</sup> *Mandeville’s Travels* provides one example of medieval fantasy that epitomizes both the monstrous alterity of the female body and, importantly, the ever-shifting function of the mythic dragon.

Although it is more fantastic travel narrative than epic, the fourteenth-century text of *Mandeville’s Travels* details Sir John Mandeville’s plausible exploration of the medieval Holy Land and the East but augments this travel log with fantastic accounts of the marvelous peoples and creatures Sir John meets along the way. Given the widespread presence of dragons in medieval culture, the inclusion of Sir John’s account of the dragon woman of Lango is not surprising. The narrator recounts a second-hand story about the daughter of Hippocrates of

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<sup>88</sup> One might think of the many cinematic attempts to expose the real/reel King Arthur, and compare them to cinematic portrayals of a historical figure like Richard I.

Lango who has been transformed into a dragon by the goddess Diana. In what sounds like the premise to a fairytale, Sir John adds that “men seyn þat sche schal so endure in þat forme of a dragoun vnto tyme þat a knyght come þat is so hardy þat dar come to hire ⁊ kisse hire on þe mouth and þan schall sche turne aȝen to hire owne kynde ⁊ ben a woman aȝen but after þat sche schall not lyuen longe” (Seymour 14-15). In what present-day audiences might see as a gender reversal of the beauty and the beast story, Sir John’s description of the dragon woman of Lango centers on monstrosity’s transformation into humanity via a kiss. Unlike beauty and the beast, however, once the dragon woman has been kissed by her charming knight, she “schall not lyuen longe” (Seymour 15). Essentially, the dragon woman can choose between remaining a dragon on the outskirts of her community and dying by doing what is expected of her. The brief story of the dragon woman ends after Sir John recounts the failed attempts by knights to transform her back into her appropriate shape; the dragon woman is left waiting in her cave for the right man to “save” her.

A medieval text like *Mandeville’s Travels*, which features elements of myth and fantasy interwoven with geographical and historical fact, provides a complex medieval fantasy for modern fantastical reimaginings especially within its constructions of the monstrous female. More specifically to both *Mandeville’s Travel* and *Game of Thrones*, the tale of the dragon woman of Lango reveals how the dragon of fantasy can function as a site for cultural anxieties, both medieval and modern. As medieval studies scholar Dana Oswald aptly notes in *Monsters, Gender, and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*, Sir John’s description of the dragon woman hinges upon the “division between the monstrous form [the dragon] and the human [woman] trapped inside” primarily because she is a noble woman bound by tradition to produce an heir to her father’s throne (133). If she continues to exist as a dragon, she cannot reproduce

heirs with a human man. As both human and dragon, her monstrous body “removes her from the social role she ought to occupy – it interrupts the processes of both reproduction and inheritance” (Oswald 137). Of course, the text also reveals that “sche schall not lyuen longe” after the curse is lifted; if a return to humanity and the reproductive life that is expected of her requires her death, why would the dragon woman want to be human at all? Perhaps Diana (the virgin goddess) has not cursed this woman, but in actuality set her free from the societal constraints placed upon her. The monstrous, (perhaps willfully) “unreproductive” body of the dragon woman not only provides *Mandeville’s Travels* with the Orientalist spectacle that one encounters throughout the text but also hints at anxieties surrounding uncontrollable female sexuality. The dragon woman can choose to scare off her suitors if she so desires, protecting her human body with the body of the dragon. With a fantastical medieval antecedent like the dragon women of Lango that presents the conflagration of the dragon as a threatening symbol of the East with the monstrous and “unreproductive” feminine body.

*Game of Thrones* adds to the already complex myth of the dragon by paradigmatically inverting the anxieties embodied by the dragon woman of Lango. Instead of functioning as a site for anxieties about women refusing to reproduce and having the means to make their own sexual decisions, the body of the dragon woman of *Game of Thrones*, Daenerys Targaryen, reveals anxieties about “overreproductive” monstrous female body that begin as satellite scenes but retroactively develop into kernel scenes to permeate the program’s narrative.

The entire first season of *Game of Thrones* hints at the existence of dragons,<sup>89</sup> but it is not until the final scene of “Fire and Blood,” the season finale, that the myth of the dragons becomes a fantastic reality (see Fig. 12). In this final scene, Daenerys Targaryen enters the flames of her

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<sup>89</sup> The series presents fossilized dragon eggs, tales of the Targaryen conquest of Westeros aided by dragons, and dragons’ skulls as evidence to their once-prolific existence.

husband's funeral pyre with three fossilized dragon eggs in what appears to be a last attempt at forcing the Dothraki people to recognize that she is the rightful heir to the distant Iron Throne even though they have only traditionally recognized male leaders. As the flames engulf her body, the camera cuts away to suggest the fading of night into morning. The camera then follows the astonished eyes of the waking Dothraki to a startling sight. In the middle of the ashes from the previous night's fires sits a nude but completely unscathed Daenerys. Even more miraculously, she holds three dragon hatchlings—material proof the legends are true and that she literally been proven by fire. The episode ends with this dramatic scene suggesting that these dragons will once again aid in a Targaryen conquest of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros.



Figure 12: Daenerys Targaryen and Her Dragon Hatchling from *Game of Thrones*. After spending a night inside her husband's funeral pyre with three dragon eggs long thought to be petrified, Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke) becomes both the "Dragon Mother" of the dragon hatchlings and the Dragon herself, or true heir to the Targaryen dynasty (Episode 10, "Fire and Blood"). The kneeling Dothraki can be seen in the background of the shot.

Once again, *Game of Thrones* emphasizes the power that mothers have over inheritance and succession through Daenerys's miraculous "birth" of the dragons. Having just lost her unborn son—who would have been a Dothraki Khal and was prophesied to be "the Stallion to mount the world"—in an accident, Daenerys becomes mother to the dragons that will aid her in her quest to regain the Iron Throne when her son cannot. Ironically, even though Daenerys's production of a human child, who would have been heir to both the Targaryens and Dothraki and

who would have also had a claim to the Iron Throne, was a major source of concern to King Robert and Ned Stark,<sup>90</sup> it is her “birth” of dragons—thought to be long extinct—that should be the source of real concern in Westeros. At the same time, her literal self-imposed trial by fire has revealed that it is she, not her weak, power hungry (and now dead) brother, Viserys, that should be called the Dragon; after all, the legends hold that fire cannot kill the Dragon.<sup>91</sup> Paradoxically, the existence of real dragons legitimizes their master’s claim to be a dragon herself. Even though *Game of Thrones* reimagines the dragon women of Lango in Daenerys, paradigmatically transforming a dragon-woman hybrid into a woman associated with the physical power and fire of dragons, the series maintains the dragon woman’s anxiety-producing reproductive body.

Yet unlike the cultural anxieties one might see in the dragon woman of *Mandeville’s Travels*, the dragon woman of *Game of Thrones* only proves anxious to other nobles in the Seven Kingdoms. Importantly, the intertwining of the dragon with the female body becomes inverted as it is reproduced within a neomedievalist text like *Game of Thrones*. Because she is portrayed as one of the few wholly sympathetic characters in *Game of Thrones*, Daenerys’s reproductive body is not monstrous even though it ‘produces’ monsters. The fertility of her body represents her legitimate claim to the Iron Throne; indeed, at the end of season 1, Daenerys appears to be one of the most, if not the most, suitable person to rule Westeros. I would like to argue that such a portrayal depends on the unfettering of the dragon/female body from its (albeit complex) medieval context; the transformation of the dragon into a positive and assertive portrayal of a vaguely medieval woman could only occur within the postmodern context of fantastic neomedievalism.

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<sup>90</sup> King Robert, concerned that “soon enough that child will spread her legs and start breeding,” develops a plan to have Daenerys and her unborn child killed even though Ned finds it to be a dishonorable act.

<sup>91</sup> To further emphasize that fact that Daenerys is the Dragon and Viserys is not, the series drops several clues throughout the first season. Daenerys is unharmed by scalding bathwater and burning flames of a candle, while Viserys is burned by a prostitute with a candle, and most dramatically, is killed by Khal Drogo, Daenerys’s husband, when the Khal pours molten gold on Viserys’s head after Viserys threatens to kill Daenerys.

In her introduction to *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*, feminist television scholar Elyce Rae Helford argues that science fiction and fantasy programming “with strong central female characters” like *Game of Thrones* is one of the most important media results from the cultural “arbitrations” regarding gender that occurred in the ‘70s, ‘80s and ‘90s (7).<sup>92</sup> As a fantasy, and a neomedievalist fantasy in particular, *Game of Thrones*’ portrayal of Daenerys plays with the popular medievalist view that all medieval women were second-class citizens and/or that female sexuality was seen as uniformly dangerous. One might see the sexualization of Grendel’s mother (Angelina Jolie) in Robert Zemeckis’s 2007 adaptation of *Beowulf* as an example of the old-guard medievalist notion of the femme fatale. Unlike Jolie-as-Grendel’s-Mother, who uses her “feminine charms” to lure Beowulf into her cave, Daenerys’s power notably develops after her role as sexualized object has ended with the death of her husband. The series begins with Daenerys acting as an object of exchange between her brother and Khal Drogo, but by the end of season 1, she has lost all of the men in her life and claimed her own agency.<sup>93</sup> By becoming mother of the dragons, Daenerys transforms herself into the Dragon and *Game of Thrones* uses its neomedievalisms to reinvent the fantasy dragon trope not as a metaphor for the dangers of female sexuality but rather as paradoxically transgressive yet traditional take on feminist agency.

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<sup>92</sup> At the same time, Dawn Heinecken’s *The Warrior Women of Television: a Feminist Cultural Analysis of the New Female Body in Popular Media* warns against assuming that the strong central female characters always demonstrate pro-feminist attitudes in the media. By focusing on the uses of the “woman warrior” body in television series like *Xena*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *La Femme Nikita*, Heinecken argues that it is “possible that the media industry may be adopting a ‘feminist face’ by the inclusion of female heroes—giving a nod to the many feminists in the land—while constructing these shows in such a way as to diffuse their feminist potential” (5).

<sup>93</sup> Of course, Daenerys’s “birth” of the dragons as a claim to power does still position her agency within the appropriate traditional role of mother. Essentially, she derives her agency from her children rather than from her own body in and of itself like the dragon woman of Lango.

## REIMAGINING TOLKIENIAN FANTASY

As perhaps the most ubiquitous and postmodern trope prevalent among fantastic neomedievalist productions like *Game of Thrones*, the reimagining and translation of J.R.R. Tolkien's medievalist masterpiece *The Lord of the Rings* has had a lasting influence on the fantasy genre. As Brian Aldiss puts it, the 1956 publication of *The Lord of the Rings* "opened the floodgates to a tidal wave of fantasy worlds, where a single idea could be stretched to six or more or more novels of a series . . . Someone let in the dragons, the fairies, the wizards" (510). This influence has been magnified in recent years with the massive success of Peter Jackson's cinematic adaptations by the same name.<sup>94</sup> The following discussion will attempt to draw a few connections between the good/evil binary in Jackson's film *The Fellowship of the Ring* and the postmodern blurring of that binary division in *Game of Thrones* by focusing what I shall call the "Sean Bean Effect," or what film theorists refer to as "star theory." Interestingly, actor Sean Bean provides a window into *Game of Thrones*' postmodern take on Tolkienian morality because he plays flawed yet honorable men in both film and TV series. Sorting out the visual intertextuality provided by the Sean Bean Effect not only emphasizes the visual similarities between these two texts but also demonstrates how the bricolage of fantastic neomedievalism allows for the reimagining of perhaps the most popular medievalist productions of all time.

In *The Rise of Tolkienian Fantasy*, Jared Lobdell pinpoints one of the reasons why so many (neo)medievalist fantasies resemble the world Tolkien created. By noting the way Tolkien's Middle Earth appears to be itself a cobbled together structure of "broken bits of the past [used] to build his new reality" Lobdell argues that present-day creators of neomedievalist

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<sup>94</sup> The three films grossed close to \$3 billion dollars at box offices worldwide. This figure does not include merchandizing, DVD sales or rentals (<http://www.imdb.com/boxoffice/alltimegross?region=world-wide>).



fantasies have “largely accepted [Tolkien’s] breaking and re-making” (153).<sup>95</sup> Yet, as Lobdell claims, “rather than entering into his world, they have entered into the world of Celtic mythology, or Celtic feigned history, or feigned Celtic feigned history. Or else sub-created their own realms from other bits and pieces” (153). I would like to argue that the bit of Tolkienian fantasy that is reincorporated into fantastic medievalisms most often is the definite binary between good and evil. Although Jackson’s films are just as complex as Tolkien’s novels, all are “deeply imbued with a Manichaeist worldview” that clearly delineates good characters from evil ones (Haydock, *Movie Medievalism* 178).<sup>96</sup> As Selling points out, “the reassuring predictability of the familiar medieval atmosphere fulfills the need to depart from the everyday world, and contributes to the lure of fantasy through the creation of realms where good and evil are clearly delineated” (213). Similarly, Cramer suggests that “a major part of the appeal of medievalism [is] the oversimplification that in the medieval world you knew who your enemies were” (Cramer 20). The viewers of *The Lord of the Rings* films know if a character is evil because he is usually physically deformed (Orcs) or clothed in black (Sauron), just as they know a character is good because he is attractive (Aragorn), good-spirited (Sam), or wears white (Gandalf).

At the same time, clear delineations between good and evil do not rule out the choice of individuals, nor does this mean that good characters are infallible. In this respect, Tolkien’s position as a medieval scholar bears prominently on his fiction, for his incorporation of this obviously Boethian philosophic trope of free will recalls the philosopher’s popularity within the

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<sup>95</sup> That Tolkien was a professional scholar of medieval philology and literature at Oxford has been a jumping off point for many source studies of his fictional works, as well as Jackson’s films, like Allen Turner’s *Translating Tolkien: Philological Elements in The Lord of the Rings* or *Tolkien the Medievalist* edited by Jane Chance.

<sup>96</sup> Once again, this discussion of the Tolkienian medievalism imbricated in the neomedievalism of *Game of Thrones* borders on concerns of adaptation. Although a comparison of Jackson’s film to Tolkien’s novel would further emphasize medievalism at work, it would also unnecessarily complicate things. Instead, the focus here is how the visual intertextualities between Bean’s two characters reveals an intertextuality between the most popular cinematic Tolkien texts and *Game of Thrones*. Perhaps future works will extend my initial discussions here to include the way adaptation affects neomedievalist bricolage and intertextuality.

Middle Ages and lends his fantasy a distinct medieval morality. Indeed, in “Providence, Fate and Chance: Boethian Philosophy in *The Lord of the Rings*” Kathleen E. Dubs argues that a Boethian view of the universe—that fate, chance and free will exist as part of the order and harmony of the universe—permeates *The Lord of the Rings*, particularly in several crucial events in the narrative regarding choices made by the characters and their consequences (37). One such example occurs when Sean Bean’s character Boromir is tempted by the ring (see Fig. 13). As the oldest son of the Steward of Gondor, Boromir is instructed by his father to bring the One Ring back to Gondor so it can be used to defend his people from Sauron’s armies. While at the council of Rivendell, however, it is decided that the One Ring is too powerful to be used for good and must be destroyed by the fires of Mordor; Boromir instead joins the Fellowship of the Ring to protect Frodo, the ring bearer, on his treacherous journey. Boromir proves himself several times on the journey by honorably defending the hobbits from the harsh elements of the mountains and from attack by the Orcs, but soon he succumbs to the power of the Ring. Boromir tries to take the Ring from Frodo by force, but Frodo escapes by becoming invisible after putting on the Ring. Realizing his mistake, Boromir dies trying to defend their camp and the hobbits from another Orc attack. Even though Boromir’s transgression has broken the bond of the Fellowship of the Ring, he is still motivated by good, and because of this he is allowed to regain his honor in dying to further the Fellowship’s cause.

If *The Lord of the Rings*’s good/evil binary allows the viewer “to see sharply what he had before sensed dimly, to understand comprehensively and afresh what he thought he already knew,” then a postmodern interpretation of such a world blurs the lines between good and evil while still emphasizing the individuality and agency of its characters (Crossley 287). *Game of Thrones* provides one such example of a neomedievalist interpretation of Tolkien’s universe.

Writer/executive producer D.B. Weiss describes the series as “a story where everybody is following their own interests and everybody is following their own code [sic] and this provides a much richer story than the guys in white beating the guys in black” (“The Making of *Game of Thrones*”). As if to emphasize the fact that *Game of Thrones* does not wholly incorporate *The Lord of the Rings*’ moral universe, the fate of the most honorable character in Westeros, Sean Bean’s Ned Stark, flies in the face of the Tolkienian model of moral certitude and repentance (see Fig. 14). Narratively, this paradigmatic transformation of medieval morality into neomedievalism has startling implications for *Game of Thrones*’ story trajectory and television serials in general because it pushes screenwriting into new territory through its ability to create new narrative possibilities.



Figures 13 and 14: Sean Bean as Boromir from *The Fellowship of the Ring* and Sean Bean as Lord Eddard Stark from *Game of Thrones*. Actor Sean Bean as *The Lord of the Rings*’ Boromir contemplates the power of the ring (*The Fellowship of the Ring*) while his *Game of Thrones*’ Lord Eddard Stark tries to honorably serve his realm as Hand of the King (Episode 1, “Winter is Coming”). The visual similarities between Bean’s two characters underscores the cinematographic and narrative debt *Game of Thrones* owes to Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* films.

After becoming the Hand of the King, Ned continuously battles corruption at court in King’s Landing. He is an honest, straightforward man who is not used to scheming—precisely why King Robert selected him. Of course, this combination of honor and morality ultimately lead to Ned’s shocking death. After trying to do what is best for the Seven Kingdoms by exposing Prince Joffrey’s true origins, Ned attempts to enforce King Robert’s dying command

that Ned become Joffrey's regent until the prince comes of age. Instead, Ned is double-crossed by several members of the court whom he believed were his friends and is thrown in jail for treason. In a Tolkienian fantasy, order would eventually be restored, or, in the very least, as is with the case of Boromir, a good man is allowed a chance to repent for his transgression by dying honorably. In Middle Earth, characters have agency yet good routinely triumphs over evil. *Game of Thrones* skews the delineation between good and evil by having King Joffrey publicly execute Ned even after Ned has formally apologized for his "crime" and humbled himself before the teenage king. With Ned's death and outbreak of civil war in Westeros, any semblance of a Tolkienian world order has been obliterated; the surviving characters, even Ned's own family, appear only to want to further their own ambitions. Instead of the optimistic (and perhaps naïve or escapist) Tolkienian fantasy where good eventually conquers evil, *Game of Thrones'* postmodern worldview reinforces the old adage that 'might makes right' and suggests that it is the desire for power, not morality, that motivates the citizens of Westeros and perhaps those of us watching from home, too.

In this neomedievalist fantasy, "goodness" is replaced with political savvy and main characters are not safe from death. With Ned's shocking execution, *Game of Thrones* rewrites traditional narrative assumptions, even within the open narrative form of the serial. This narrative intrigue turns audience expectations on their heads because, by extension, the "alternate rules" of most medievalist fantasies have been thrown out the window. In particular, the postmodern emphasis on the lack of goodness in Westeros directly affects the narrative and vice versa; by creating a neomedievalist representation that reimagines the moral assumptions at the very heart many medievalisms, *Game of Thrones* (re)creates fantasy, narrative, and our imaginings of the Middle Ages with one swing of the executioner's sword.

## CONCLUSION

In “The Making of *Game of Thrones*,” Art Director Paul Inglis curiously recounts how the Art Department, under the leadership of Production Director Gemma Jackson, paid special attention to imbuing the visual economy of the first season of *Game of Thrones* with, of all things, *authenticity*:

Gemma was very clear that she wanted to give each world its own feel. Something like Castle Black was very grim and very bare—a very rude existence—and Himalayan and Eskimo influences come into play there. Somewhere like Winterfell is very Presbyterian and very stoic, but there is some beauty to it. As we get further south, we are definitely becoming more Mediterranean. King’s Landing is a hot country. It’s Southern Europe, and so the cue from how to design it come from there. As you go east and you get over the sea and you get to the Dothraki world, there it’s a much more temporary culture, so barring a few bits of permanent architecture, we’ve been looking at various itinerate tribes and . . . the kind of tent structures they have.

Within the context of the preceding discussion regarding the bricolage of fantastic neomedievalisms with the series, Inglis’s description of the mission of the Art Department is clear: beg, borrow, or steal from a wide array of cultures to create something that feels familiar, but as Sean Bean puts it, exists within a “world we haven’t seen before.”<sup>98</sup>

As I have argued, the same concept of bricolage applies to the series as a whole.

Although certainly not a comprehensive examination of *Game of Thrones*’ neomedievalist bricolage, the previous discussions of chess, dragons, and *The Lord of the Rings* demonstrate

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<sup>98</sup> Bean’s comment is especially interesting given his work in *The Lord of the Rings*. Clearly, he too sees Middle Earth and Westeros as being vastly different.

how complicated tropes and representations become when they are taken from their contexts and placed within new ones. Instead of attempting to recreate the Middle Ages in a historically responsible way, fantastic neomedievalism aims for the exact opposite—the visual referents without context used to create a new mythic Middle Ages via bricolage. At the same time, it is this postmodern reinvention of medieval and medievalist representations that allows fantastic neomedievalism like *Game of Thrones* to reimagine the Middle Ages, no matter how distant they may seem, for new generations.

Of course, this chapter represents just a small sampling of the ways neomedievalism functions on television; hopefully future projects will tease out additional connections and developed more nuanced theories detailing the ways that the past and representations of the past function in the present. Consequently, making any grand statements here seem premature. Instead, I would like to provide one final example that speaks not only to the ways that neomedievalism can repeatedly reproduce images of the Middle Ages but also to the widespread popularity of neomedievalism on television. What could be more fittingly postmodern than *The Simpsons* reimagining *Game of Thrones*' fantastic neomedievalism?<sup>99</sup>

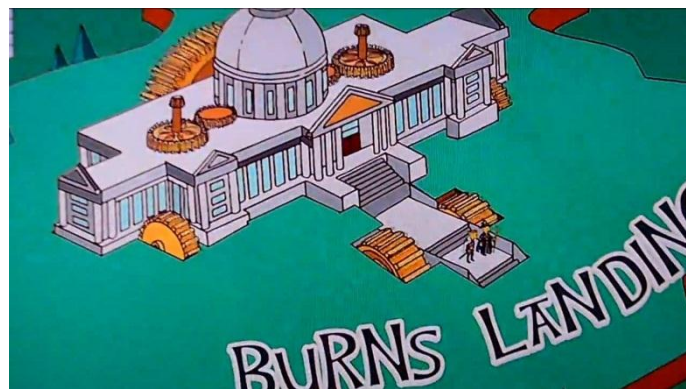


Figure 15: *The Simpsons* Parody *Game of Thrones*. Instead of Kings Landing, viewers are presented with Burns Landing—complete with Mr. Burns and Smithers reimagined as citizens of Westeros.

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<sup>99</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Deborah Barker for bringing this pertinent example to my attention.

## V. CONCLUSION: “ENJOY YOUR MIDDLE AGES!”

Even after three chapters devoted entirely to the images of the Middle Ages on TV, there is still much work to be done in this emergent field. I have had to limit my explorations here, focusing primarily on the relationships between these representations and the kernels of “medievalness” they (re)create as well as the intertextuality between (neo)medievalisms on television and in other media like cinema. To this end, I have used three narratively diverse television programs as case studies to demonstrate the variety of medievalisms on TV and to suggest that a program’s mode of serialization can affect these representations. Further, I have argued that these medievalisms underscore the ideological negotiations present in these pop culture productions.

In chapter 1, I looked at the ways *The Pillars of the Earth* (de)constructs familiar icons of medieval piety, namely the cathedral, saintly relics, and clerical vestments to position its narrative within an authenticating medieval world. These iconic representations span all eight episodes of the miniseries, occupying both background and foreground at various points during the series, but they each ultimately function as kernel scenes in the narrative. Even though these medievalist representations are not always historically accurate, their recognizably medieval iconography rejects monolithic medieval piety, choosing instead to portray the variety of heterodox religious practices.

Chapter 2 demonstrates how even an ostensibly “unmedieval” show like HBO’s *True Blood* can incorporate medievalist elements into its narrative. I was specifically interested in the way this program paradigmatically refigures the iconic blood feud and *níð* insult tradition of Old

Norse culture. Drawing a comparison between what I see as a medieval antecedent of the paradoxically homoerotic/homophobic treatment of vengeance in *Gísla Saga*, *True Blood* appears to reimagine “medieval” revenge without the homophobia. I have argued that Viking vampire Eric Northman’s revenge has been queered during the homoerotically-charged scene where he kills Talbot, the vampire lover of his enemy, creating a paradigmatic representation of both the blood feud and the *níð*. Eric’s unique position as a medieval vampire—a queer temporal embodiment of the ‘undead’ past—allows for such a paradigm shift. Moreover, even though *True Blood*’s medievalist storyline is limited in scope, it is not limited in narrative impact. I have argued that the scene of Eric’s vengeance, with its medievalist flashback serving as narrative precursor, effectively hybridizes the scene’s narrative functionality and allows it to drive the interwoven storylines throughout the program’s third season.

Finally, in chapter 3, I focused on HBO’s *Game of Thrones* and what I see as its fantastic neomedievalisms. In the course of this chapter, I have argued that neomedievalism, though perhaps an even more slippery term than medievalism, is the postmodern interpretation of medievalist interpretations of “medievalness.” As such, neomedievalisms demonstrate a bricolage of vaguely medieval icons within the paradigm of medievalist recreation that work to create a fantastical or mythic Middle Ages. To illustrate this point, I draw parallels between three neomedievalist tropes visualized in *Game of Thrones* that commonly appear in other fantastic neomedievalisms. Looking at the way chess functions as a political allegory in Caxton’s *The Game and Playe of Chesse* and is symbolically revisited in Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, I have argued that *Game of Thrones* keeps the chess iconography but discards its potential for allegorical moralizing. Secondly, I have suggested that *Game of Thrones* has transformed the monstrous dragon woman found in medieval texts like of *Mandeville’s Travels* from an



misogynistic Orientalism into an ambivalent, if not pro-feminist, character by refiguring reproduction's role in female agency. Lastly, I have traced the "Sean Bean Effect" through *Game of Thrones* as it both connects and separates the series from perhaps the most successful medievalist production, *The Lord of the Rings*. Because Bean's Boromir (*LOTR*) and Ned Stark (*GOT*) resemble one another in both appearance and manner, these characters underscore the difference between Tolkien/Jackson's universe built of the good/evil binary and *Game of Thrones*' darker, more postmodern take on fantasy.

Even though these three chapters demonstrate the variety of (neo)medievalist narratives and representations within television series, there remains much ground to cover. Future works on television medievalisms might consider other obvious medievalist serials like *Highlander*, *Merlin*, or *Ivanhoe* using models similar to the ones I have constructed here, but other projects might also move beyond the serial program. A recent surge in medievalist reality shows like *Full Metal Jousting* present new scholarly challenges for the field of television medievalism studies.

In thinking about the future of the field, we should now return to the difficult questions that began this project because they will surely continue to drive medievalism scholarship. What is it about the Middle Ages that makes it such a prevalent, and as the preceding chapters have suggested, diverse feature of pop culture? Once again, I cannot provide a definitive answer, but as Eco, along with others, have so wisely pointed out, our *enjoyment* of the Middle Ages appears to play a central role.

Indeed, the title of this conclusion, borrowed from Laurie Finke and Martin B. Shichtman's *Cinematic Illuminations: The Middle Ages on Film*, picks up on this same current of enjoying the Middle Ages through our (re)productions of them. Finke and Shichtman's phrase "enjoy your Middle Ages!" is, of course, a play on Slavoj Žižek's *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, which

(among his many other works) postulates the role that fantasy plays in existence. Finke and Schictman's reading of Žižek specifically illustrates how the medieval past operates within our fantasies: "As Žižek notes, when we perceive of a historical moment as a moment at which some quality is lost, that quality, in fact, is almost always a fantasy being created by the very act of mourning" (14). Because we have effectively "lost" the Middle Ages—the period only exists in our interpretations of the material bits of it remaining—we create a fantasy Middle Ages to help us mourn for the object that we will never be able to obtain again. We mourn the death of the Middle Ages through our fantasies of them.

Similarly, L.O. Fradenburg's "'So That We May Speak of Them': Enjoying the Middle Ages" suggests that the Middle Ages are (re)produced over and over again in hopes of impossibly getting back to the original, which for present-day mourners, has always already been lost to history:

The dead do not live on in us through our images of them, and yet they do, because the form of their living on is the form of their very unrepeatability. They live on, that is, only insofar as they are interiorized, in a mode that indicates their being as something unrepeatable which will be subjected to endlessly inventive technologies of repetition. (222)

Images then become the primary tool of the fantasy in bringing the Middle Ages back to life. Because television is such a ubiquitous presence in present-day Western culture, it, like cinema, takes up the role of creator and provider of fantasy images of our lost Middle Ages. But how does one recreate or reimagine something that has always already been lost? By incorporating the bits of extant material medieval culture like religious icons, literature or other artifacts, the process of reimagining the Middle Ages through medievalist fiction and fantasy relies heavily on

the iconic and paradigmatic representations I have discussed in this study. Ultimately, desire for a real Middle Ages that cannot never be obtained drives the repeated medievalist representations so prevalent in our media. These representations allow us to enjoy our process of mourning.

But this is just one response to the question at the heart of the (re)production of pop cultural medievalisms. Perhaps with future investigations into the many medievalisms on television and in other media like cinema and the Internet, better, more accurate answers will make themselves known. Nevertheless, if we might say one thing conclusively, it is this: people not only seem to like the Middle Ages but also *enjoy and will enjoy* watching their medievalist fantasies play out on TV.

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## VITA

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