

MEDIEVALISM IN CONTEMPORARY FANTASY: A NEW SPECIES OF ROMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary fantasists are often inspired by the texts from and with medieval context. This paper taps into Horace Walpole's principles revealed in the preface to *The Castle of Otranto* to show that the works of medieval fantasy and contemporary fantasy subgenres written in 20th and 21st centuries have a lot in common with Walpole's recipe for creating 'a new species of romance'. When considered from the present time, the Medieval period can be seen as being halfway between fantasy and reality, in a blurry area where the two overlap, and contemporary fantasists use this trait to build their fictional worlds as effective reverberators of universal themes that remain interesting, appealing and worth repeating.

KEYWORDS

Fantasy, Medievalism, Reality, Contemporary fiction.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Phantasia, Mediaevalismus, Realitas, Fictio contemporalis.

A story with medieval or medieval-like settings, locales and societies is a feature frequently encountered in epic fantasy and its sibling subgenres. However, the common ground on which the old meets the new in this kind of fantasy stretches beyond the decorative and superficial use of castles, feudal system, knighthood, chivalry, armours, weapons and other easily noticeable elements of medievalism. Contemporary fantasies incorporating elements of medievalism have a lot in common with the time in which their authors live.

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* was written as an attempt to bring together medieval and modern traditions. In addition to becoming immensely successful, so much that by the 1790s the novel came to be regarded as the originator of a new genre, it also provoked and annoyed a lot of Walpole's learned contemporaries with the word 'Gothic' added to the subtitle in its second edition thus indicating overt kinship with medieval romances and the Dark Ages. As pointed out by Clery they objected to the experiment by asking —how could a Gothic story be written by a contemporary author?¹

Should such a question be applied to contemporary writers of fantasy one could also wonder —how can a twenty or twenty-first century author write a story set in the medieval or medieval-like environment, and to what end? A sporadic occurrence of such a literary intervention would be deemed as curious. However, its extensive employment by contemporary fantasists has greatly contributed to the popularization of the sub-genres of fantasy now commonly known by a number of names that represent overlapping market categories: epic fantasy, heroic fantasy, medieval fantasy, or sword and sorcery, to name a few.

The terms used to refer to such a variety of sub-genres are applied quite interchangeably and arbitrarily by critics, general fandom and particularly by publishers. 'Epic fantasy', for example, is used "to describe Heroic Fantasies that extend over several volumes" so any attempt to rigorously distinguish one sub-genre from another has "lost its usefulness".² As is often the case, there is a tendency to group them under one commoner and easier to memorize term, so many such works "now have merely the word Fantasy on the cover, or no descriptive word at all".³ Obviously, quite a number of similarities among them serve to justify their treatment as a single lot, and one of these similarities in particular —the fact that many of them heavily rely on medieval-like settings, locales and societies— not only places them under the umbrella of the fantasy genre or, should one attempt to distinguish the nuances among them, into a variety of its sub-genres, but it also represents a curious feature only seemingly directly opposed to the 'modern' tradition, to use the term in the similar context and with similar intention as Walpole did, which brings us to the question posed in the previous paragraph.

1. Clery, Emma J. "The Genesis of 'Gothic' Fiction", *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Jerrold E. Hogle, ed. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2002: 21.

2. Clute, John; Grant, John, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. London: Orbit Books, 1997: 319.

3. Clute, John; Nicholls, Peter, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. London: Orbit Books, 1999: 562.



The origins of epic fantasy and its sibling sub-genres can be traced far back into the past. In addition to numerous myths, such as the stories about Prometheus or Gilgamesh, its examples, among others, include medieval and renaissance texts such as *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* and other examples from a rich tradition of Arthurian texts. There is a link between these and other representatives of epic tradition regarded as the 'taproot texts'.⁴ To explain this link and thus answer why fantastic worlds created by contemporary authors are not uncommonly inspired by the taproot texts from and with medieval context, so different from the age they live and work in, one can try using as an example Horace Walpole's principles revealed in the preface to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto* "to explain the grounds on which he composed it",⁵ thus defining a new mode of writing created by employing Gothic architectural style and, what is more important, a distinguished aura of medievalism.

It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former, all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. Invention has not been wanting; but the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life. But if, in the latter species, Nature has cramped imagination, she did but take her revenge, having been totally excluded from old romances. The actions, sentiments, and conversations, of the heroes and heroines of ancient days, were as unnatural as the machines employed to put them in motion. The author of the following pages thought it possible to reconcile the two kinds.⁶

The preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* presents this work of fiction as a genuine medieval romance, whereas the second edition reissued in 1765 defines it as *A Gothic Story*. The word 'Gothic' in its subtitle sets the story in the medieval era qualifying it thus as 'ancient', which Walpole related to 'imagination and improbability', a phrase one can easily apply to any piece of literature written as fantasy. In Walpole's *Otranto* there is an 'ominous casque' augmented to fantastic proportions so that it is "an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being", then the portrait that "uttered a deep sigh, and heaved its breast" and "began to move", "three drops of blood" that "fell from the nose of Alfonso's statue", and the spectre that "discovered to Frederic the fleshless jaws and empty sockets of a skeleton, wrapt in a hermit's cowl".⁷ Such fantastic occurrences are opposed to 'nature', 'rules of probability' and 'common life' or, in other words, to reason and reality. Walpole combines the present circumstances, his opposition to the rigid formality of French classicism and the prevailing realism of the novel, with the elements of reality from the past —the feudal system with its castles and

4. Stableford, Brian. *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2005: 130; Clute, John; Grant, John, eds. *The Encyclopedia...*: 319.

5. Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto, A Gothic Story*. Philadelphia: Henry Carey Baird, 1854: 47.

6. Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto...*: XVI-XVII.

7. Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto...*: 5-6, 23, 201, 223-224.



values, in which “the welfare of the state depends on your Highness having a son”, the “church is an indulgent mother”, and the people’s actions are expected to correspond to their status, gender and title, so a knight should be “gallant and courteous”, whereas a woman should follow “a filial duty and womanly modesty”, which means that she has to submit to the will of her lord and marry in accordance with the family’s best interests.⁸

As this literary pattern of combining the ‘imagination and improbability’ with the ‘rules of probability’ is also recognizable in the group of works employing medievalism that are presently marketed as a variety of sub-genres of fantasy, the second preface to Walpole’s counterfeit medieval romance, which explains why such a literary mode was reinvented, written and published long after the Middle Ages had ended, seems convenient to be used as a starting point in an attempt to explicate why and to what end contemporary heroic fantasy and its sibling sub-genres readily incorporate medievalism.

One of the first reasons to list is the already mentioned market category that sells well. Accordingly, proliferation of medieval-based fantasies is a logical answer to the market demand. This group of sub-genres typically situated in the Medieval period: high fantasy, quest fantasy, epic fantasy, and their likes is thus called commodified fantasy, which is the term used by Ursula Le Guin pejoratively; however, as Stableford pointed out “it is by no means the case that all commodified fantasy is badly written”.⁹ Without any attempts to discuss the artistic values of this literary and/or market segment, one can logically conclude that its profitability and popularity justify frequent occurrence of medievalism in fantasy. However, there are other reasons which should be taken into consideration because they are far more interesting from the literary point of view.

Walpole’s ‘new species of romance’, its imagination and its Gothic features stirred the rationalistic spirits and their strict adherence to pure reason and the principles of French classicism, who saw the incorporation of medievalism in a literary work as advocating for “re-establishing the barbarous superstitions of Gothic devilism!”, to quote one reviewer of the *Otranto*. While Walpole’s contemporaries saw romances as too improbable, he accused the then modern novel of being too probable and of damming up “the great resources of fancy [...] by a strict adherence to common life”.¹⁰

Undoubtedly, no matter how creative and imaginative the worlds of fantasy are, they all have something in common —they are all directly or indirectly rooted in the world of reality. As Tzvetan Todorov pointed out, the fantastic deserves more than a mere mention and it is to be “defined in relation to those of the real and the imaginary”.¹¹ This is reflected in numerous definitions of the ‘fantastic’ and/or ‘fantasy’ that use reality as the starting point to explain and define this quite

8. Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto...*: 85, 89, 123, 136.

9. Stableford, Brian. *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy...*: 84.

10. Clery, Emma J. “The Genesis...”: 26.

11. Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1975: 25.



an elusive literary notion, either by stressing their differences, like Kathryn Hume who defined it as “[a]ny departure from consensus reality” or Eric S. Rabkin who called it the ‘polar opposite’ of reality; literature characterized by a ‘direct reversal of ground rules’ from those of everyday existence”,¹² or by emphasizing the similarities between them and how interlaced they are. As Scottish writer George MacDonald explained in his essay *The Fantastic Imagination* laws do not only exist in the natural world, but they are also present in the work of fiction and, as in the real world, imagination must submit to the laws that are systematic and logical and consistent in an imagined world as they are in the real one.¹³

Walpole’s then hybrid combination of the supernatural associated with the romance, on the one hand, and the natural characters and dialogues of the novel, on the other hand, is the recipe similar to the one employed by the twentieth and twenty-first century writers of fantasy, such as John R. R. Tolkien, Roger Zelazny, Bernard Cornwell, George R. R. Martin or Joe Abercrombie, to name a few, who used the elements of medievalism as building blocks of their fantastic worlds, populated by characters not very different from those found in mimetic fiction or present reality, even when they wield swords, practice magic or fight unnatural creatures and opponents.

Andrew Smith noted that Walpole’s “first preface helped to situate the novel as an ancient romance, dealing in fantastical improbability, whereas the second preface emphasised that the novel can be read ‘realistically’ —as ciphers for ‘real’ psychological situations and political circumstances”.¹⁴ Omens, prophecies, ghosts, a huge piece of armour, or a mysterious helmet that crushes the villain’s heir, and other appearances that oppose the principles of mimetic fiction, represent the cyphers for ‘psychological situations’ in the plot of Walpole’s *Otranto*. According to Anna Laetitia Aikin the goal of such frightening scenes is to incite pleasure produced by “the painful sensation immediately arising from a scene of misery” and terror that make us “desirous of again being witnesses to such scenes, instead of flying from them with disgust and horror”.¹⁵ While Aikin admitted the pleasure of witnessing the horrible and the fantastic as a form of intellectual stimulus, there are others who delve deeper into the unconscious, such as Howard P. Lovecraft who claimed that the “oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown”,¹⁶ or Freud, who analysed the relationship between fear and unknown through the ambivalent relationship between the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*, which can be directly related to Walpole’s

12. Wolfe, Gary. “‘Fantasy’ from Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy”, *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, David Sandner, ed. Westport-London: Praeger Publishers, 2004: 273.

13. MacDonald, George. “The Fantastic Imagination”, *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, David Sandner, ed. Westport-London: Praeger Publishers, 2004: 64-69.

14. Smith, Andrew. *Gothic Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007: 19.

15. Aikin, Anna Laetitia. “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror”, *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, David Sandner, ed. Westport-London: Praeger Publishers, 2004: 31.

16. Lovecraft, Howard Phillips. “Supernatural Horror in Literature”, *The H. P. Lovecraft Omnibus 2: Dagon and Other Macabre Tales*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994: 423.



merger of supernatural and the real, as well as to the relationship between fantasy and mimetic fiction.

Stephen R. Donaldson, an American novelist, compared fantasy to realistic fiction while explaining what fantasy is —“a form of fiction in which the internal crises or conflicts or processes of the characters are dramatized as if they were external individuals or events”.¹⁷ According to Donaldson, in realistic fiction the characters express their worlds, while in fantasies the worlds are actually the expressions of the characters.

Even if you argue that realistic fiction is about the characters, and that the world they live in is just one tool to express them, it remains true that the details which make up their world come from a recognized body of reality —tables, chairs, jobs, stresses which we all acknowledge as being external and real, forceful on their own terms. In fantasy, however, the ultimate justification for all the external details arises from the characters themselves. The characters confer reality on their surroundings.¹⁸

Accordingly, the relationship between the world(s) of fantasy and that of reality is not based on mere closeness, or similarities between them, but also on the idea that, at least in literature, they permeate each other. The worlds of fantasy are firmly rooted in reality, be it MacDonald’s rules and principles that have to exist and work consistently within the imagined worlds as they do in the objective reality, or the feature of literature to mirror the world of reality owing to, among other things, the fact that all fictional worlds revolve around the common frame of archetypes that represent the windows into the human soul, society and the world in general. As Rosemary Jackson noticed,

Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting the elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different”. Known worlds clothed in medieval and medieval-like realities are thus reworked into the above mentioned sub-genres of fantasy.¹⁹

These sub-genres of fantasy readily use and invert the elements of medieval Europe into something strange, different and unfamiliar, recombined to produce new fantastic worlds, different from the history of the one we know as the Earth. To achieve that, authors diffuse them with elements of imagination, with unnatural and supernatural occurrences, strange yet familiar at the same time. This is a productive recipe partly because they employ archetypal forms transmuted into manifestations that the average reader can perceive and understand, such as dragons, monsters,

17. Donaldson, Stephen R. *Epic Fantasy in the Modern World: A Few Observations*. Kent-Ohio: Kent State University Libraries, 1986: 3-4.

18. Donaldson, Stephen R. *Epic Fantasy...*: 4.

19. Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London-New York: Routledge, 1981: 8.



witches, and magic, and partly because they are happening in the world built on the foundations of the past reality that is distant enough to be easily related to the fantastic and supernatural, yet sufficiently familiar to an average reader, with its castles, feudal system, knighthood and chivalry, epic battles, kings and queens, priests, armours and weapons.

This mixture of the real and the invented is not a modern invention. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a story about a knight who goes on an adventure with many fantastic experiences.

The 'Faerie' may with its strangeness and peril enlarge the adventure, making the test more tense and more potent, but Gawain is presented as a credible, living, person; and all that he thinks, or says, or does, is to be seriously considered, as of the real world.²⁰

Gawain, "the fair knight most faultless that e'er foot set on earth", goes to the tryst at the Green Chapel. This is a strange abode and "the worst wight in the world in that waste dwelleth".²¹ To make the story more credible, the author provided numerous and detailed descriptions of the court life, of "the knights most renowned after the name of Christ, / and the ladies most lovely that ever life enjoyed, / and he, king most courteous, who that court possessed", of the feasts where courses come "with fanfare of trumpets", of the clothing "with its soft lining" (...) "all fringed with white fur", of "a carpet of red silk" (...) "arrayed on the floor, / the gilded gear in plenty there glittered upon it"; of the weapons such as "a Danish axe newly dressed the dint to return, / with cruel cutting-edge curved along the handle - / filed on a whetstone, and four feet in width", and of nature that changes in accordance with the events.²²

Contrary to medieval works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or *The Canterbury Tales*, there is a conspicuous absence of descriptions in Walpole's story, to highlight the dialogues and actions, popular in the modern novel. There is one notable exception, though. It is the description of the arrival of the Knight and the cavalcade, with "harbingers with wands", "a herald, followed by two pages and two trumpets", foot-guards, "footmen, clothed in scarlet and black, the colours of the Knight", two heralds bearing banners, then

Two more pages. The Knight's confessor telling his beads. Fifty more footmen clad as before. Two Knights habited in complete armour, their beavers down, comrades to the principal Knight. The squires of the two Knights, carrying their shields and devices. The Knight's own squire. A hundred gentlemen bearing an enormous sword, and seeming to faint under the weight of it. The Knight himself on a chestnut steed, in complete armour, his lance in the rest, his face entirely

20. Tolkien, John R. R. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1975: 15.

21. Tolkien, John R. R. *Sir Gawain...*: 84, 77.

22. Tolkien, John R. R. *Sir Gawain...*: 26, 28, 39, 73, 80.



concealed by his vizor, which was surmounted by a large plume of scarlet and black feathers. Fifty foot-guards with drums and trumpets closed the procession, which wheeled off to the right and left to make room for the principal Knight.²³

Modern fantasists readily use and combine mythical and historical materials to develop stories appealing to contemporary readers. One the most notable among them is Tolkien, who “was, over time, influenced by his own personal medievalism, his profession as a medievalist, his relationships with other medievalists, and his own mythologizing in constructing his major fiction”.²⁴ In letter 131, to Milton Waldman of Collins, Tolkien wrote that he “had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic to the level of the romantic fairy-story” which he could “dedicate simply: to England”.²⁵ According to Tolkien, it should possess “the clime and quality of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe; not Italy or Aegean, still less the east”, with “the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic”. As Chance noticed, “the seeds for Tolkien’s ‘mythology for England’ sprang from those medieval literary, religious, and cultural sources and the ideas in which his life was steeped”.²⁶

Stableford noted that the borrowing of the themes and images from myth, legend and folklore in genre fantasy is frequently noticed by those aiming to define the genre fantasy and distinguish it from folktales and children’s fantasy as a genre read by adults, as well as that “the distinction between the mythical and historical pasts has never been clear and that much of what passes for history is, in fact, merely a concatenation of legends that we have chosen, for one reason or another, to believe”.²⁷

In the Middle Ages, the distinction between the real and the mythical past was not clear, as in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae* or epics and other pieces of literature that merge the fantastic with historical events. As remarked in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* “[m]uch world literature has been described, at one time or another, as fantasy” and before the sixteenth century and the scientific revolution, “most Western literature contained huge amounts of material 20th-century readers would think of as fantastical”.²⁸ Since the advent of science and technology caused the fantastic and the real to start parting in the minds of people, one cannot avoid noticing that authors’ use of medievalism may be an endeavour to take their readers into the time when the differences between imagination and reality were blurred and not so easily, so willingly, or so readily noticed and accepted.

Furthermore, weaving of the elements of the known world into fantasy helps readers to willingly suspend their disbelief, which is the effect Coleridge and Tolkien

23. Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto...*: 118-119.

24. Chance, Jane, ed. *Tolkien the Medievalist*. London: Routledge, 2003: 4.

25. Chance, Jane. *Tolkien’s Art: A Mythology for England*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001: 1.

26. Chance, Jane. *Tolkien’s Art...*: 3.

27. Stableford, Brian. *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy...*: XXXIX.

28. Clute, John; Grant, John eds. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy...*: 337-338.



considered very important. In his essay *On Fairy-Stories* Tolkien, who distinguished between the Primary World, which is our reality, and the Secondary World, which is the fantasy world created by the writer, explained that the latter must be convincing, because the “moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside”.²⁹ Borrowed elements of medievalism help the readers orientate themselves and navigate within the invented world of fantasy in which there may exist occurrences and laws substantially different from the ones present and at work in the world of reality.

These overt elements of medievalism are present in the representative examples of the fantasy genre —George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Bernard Cornwell’s *The Warlord Chronicles*, John R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Joe Abercrombie’s *The First Law* trilogy, Roger Zelazny’s *The Chronicles of Amber*, Robert Jordan’s *The Wheel of Time* series and numerous other examples of stories that are built upon the foundations of the medieval-like setting, system and society. Such fantasies are often written in several volumes, from trilogies like Tolkien’s and Abercrombie’s, to a collection of seven books planned by Martin for his *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, or Zelazny’s ten-volume *The Chronicles of Amber*, to Jordan’s almost monstrously long *The Wheel of Time* series consisting of 14 lengthy books. Written as collections of volumes they bear a likeness to medieval chronicles describing events through several generations and offering a detailed history of the (imaginary) world.

These series and standalone novels all include well-known and easily recognizable medieval elements: castles, fortified towns, mercenaries, knights and their codes of chivalry, and numerous other elements that demonstrate notable similarities in works, both old and new. In Martin’s *A Game of Thrones* the cavalcade arriving with the king to Winterfell is not very different from the one entering Otranto.

The visitors poured through the castle gates in a river of gold and silver and polished steel, three hundred strong, a pride of bannermen and knights, of sworn swords and freeriders. Over their heads a dozen golden banners whipped back and forth in the northern wind, emblazoned with the crowned stag of Baratheon.³⁰

As in Walpole’s *Otranto*, where the sole purpose of marriage is “to unite the claims of the two houses”,³¹ in *A Song of Ice and Fire* “marriage [is] made from politics, not passion”, so Ned’s daughter Sansa and prince Joff will marry only to join two houses.³² The roles of all individuals are well known from their birth.

Robb would someday inherit Winterfell, would command great armies as the Warden of the North. Bran and Rickon would be Robb’s bannermen and rule

29. Tolkien, John R. R. *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006: 132.

30. Martin, George R.R. *A Game of Thrones*. New York: Bantam Books, 2013: 32.

31. Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto...*: 112.

32. Martin, George R.R. *A Game...*: 306.



holdfasts in his name. His sisters Arya and Sansa would marry the heirs of other great houses and go south as mistress of castles of their own.³³

Like the Gawain poet, Martin provided numerous descriptions of life in his pseudo-medieval world. There are vivid descriptions of knights with gear and intricate suits “of white enameled scales, brilliant as a field of new-fallen snow, with silver chasings and clasps that glittered in the sun”; and of feasts, with meat “roasting for hours, turning slowly on wooden spits while kitchen boys basted them with butter and herbs until the meat crackled and spit”.³⁴ Martin’s kingdoms of Westeros, Zelazny’s Amber, Abercrombie’s Union are fictional worlds built on historical foundations. As in medieval Europe, noblemen pledge allegiance and pay homage to kings, in a society with familiar feudal social, economic and political circumstances in which the “King needs money, so he squeezes the nobles. The nobles squeeze their tenants, the tenants squeeze the peasants”.³⁵ Other ingredients of medievalism recognizable from history include the king’s small council in Martin’s series that reminds of Witan, feudal conflicts among the kingdoms of Westeros not very different from the wars among the medieval Anglian and Saxon kingdoms and the Wars of the Roses, or in Abercrombie’s series exclusive royal licences for trade to merchants and guilds similar to those granted during the Tudors. In both Martin’s and Abercrombie’s works plagues decimate the population like in the Middle Ages, and their corrupt clergy could easily fit into Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. In all the abovementioned standalone fantasy novels and series the warriors have medieval weapons, such as axes, maces, swords, spears, armours, and heraldry, coats of arms, and banners, worn and wielded by landowning gentry and peasants. They all paint an overall picture of the world in which life resembles the one led in medieval Europe —civilized kingdoms surrounded by wilderness, wildlings and geographical areas yet to be discovered, conquered and civilized, usually drawn on medieval-like maps attached to the story.

In addition to the elements of reality, borrowed from both historical and literary sources, contemporary fantasies, like their medieval predecessors, also incorporate and heavily rely on the fantastic. The Green Knight, “a perilous horseman, / the mightiest on middle-earth in measure of height” and many other marvels that Gawain faces, ‘the worms he wars’, ‘the wolves’, ‘wood-trolls that wandered in the crags’, ‘bulls’, ‘bears and boars’ and ‘ogres’³⁶ and other supernatural beasts, usually magnified to great proportions, as well as medieval magic, prophecies, artefacts and omens, like those in *Otranto*, represent impressive portents of what is to come, or mighty adversaries that the protagonists have to face. There are numerous examples of supernatural and unnatural creatures in Martin’s series —beasts like dragons, or direwolves that “will rip a man’s arm off his shoulder as easily as a dog will kill a

33. Martin, George R.R. *A Game...: 45.*

34. Martin, George R.R. *A Game...: 120, 250.*

35. Abercrombie, Joe. *The Blade Itself (The First Law: Book One)*. New York: Pyr, 2007: 262.

36. Tolkien, John R. R. *Sir Gawain...: 28, 43.*



rat”, stories told by Old Nan about ghosts and “dungeons where terrible things had been done, and dragon heads on the walls”.³⁷ The White Walkers, like incarnations or allegories of Black Death or the Horseman of the Apocalypse, are

cold things, dead things, that hated iron and fire and the touch of the sun, and every creature with hot blood in its veins. They swept over holdfasts and cities and kingdoms, felled heroes and armies by the score, riding their pale dead horses and leading hosts of the slain. All the swords of men could not stay their advance, and even maidens and suckling babes found no pity in them.³⁸

Martin’s red witch Melisandre, wizards and mages like Gandalf in Tolkien’s fantasies, Dwokin in Zelazny’s *Chronicles of Amber*, or Bayaz in Abercrombie’s series, are not very different from their medieval counterparts Merlin and Morgan le Fay. The examples are too many to be listed all.

There is another particularly interesting parallel. Modern fantasies also make use of the old beliefs in the strong connections between nature, supernatural and divine powers. Tolkien’s elves and their love of nature are perhaps the most striking example. Lothlórien, on the one hand, “is the fairest of all the dwellings” of elves where “the boughs are laden with yellow flowers; and the floor of the wood is golden, and golden is the roof, and its pillars are of silver, for the bark of the trees is smooth and grey”.³⁹ Mirkwood, on the other hand, “is dark, dangerous and difficult”, “in there the wild things are dark, queer, and savage”, the trees are “huge and gnarled, their branches twisted” and their leaves “dark and long”.⁴⁰ In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, when nature reflects the warmth of Arthur’s castle and the known world in general, “flowers there open”, “shining rain is shed in showers”, “birds are busy a-building and bravely are singing” and “blossoms burgeon and blow”.⁴¹ Later, however, when it reflects the perils of the unknown, it is changed.

This oratory looks evil. With herbs overgrown
it fits well that fellow transformed into green
to follow here his devotions in the Devil’s fashion.⁴²

Martin’s series also contains passages that remind of this relationship. Like the Green Chapel, a place of old, seen as the pagan counterpart of the places of religion in the known world, the Godswoods in the North, dedicated to the Old Gods of the forests, are different from those in the South, which are “bright and airy”, with “tinkling streams”, birds singing “from hidden nest” and the air “spicy with the

37. Martin, George R.R. *A Game...: 17, 64.*

38. Martin, George R.R. *A Game...: 203.*

39. Tolkien, John R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. New York: Ballantine Books/Del Ray, 2012: 375.

40. Tolkien, John R. R. *The Hobbit*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1982: 131, 134.

41. Tolkien, John R. R. *Sir Gawain...: 37.*

42. Tolkien, John R. R. *Sir Gawain...: 79.*



scent of flowers". "The gods of Winterfell kept a different sort of wood. It was a dark, primal place, three acres of old forest untouched for ten thousand years as the gloomy castle rose around it".⁴³

Definitions and inherent features of the fantasy genre show that no clear line can or should be drawn between the fantastic and the real. Accordingly, it is not surprising that fantasies abound with passages, doorways, mirrors and other paraphernalia serving to directly link the two, as in Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. An interesting example is Roger Zelazny's *The Chronicles of Amber* about a medieval-like world and its numerous shadow-worlds including the one that readers can recognize as their own objective reality. Not only are there connections and pathways for the members of the royal family to roam freely from one shadow-world to another, but the level of reality of the known world is degraded in this fantasy because, in the hierarchy of realness, it is positioned below the world of Amber. The only true world is Amber, it "had always been and always would be, and every other city, everywhere every other city that existed was but a reflection of a shadow of some phase of Amber".⁴⁴ The medieval-like world of Amber substitutes the world of known reality and takes its place thus becoming more real than the 'real' one.

Stephen R. Donaldson noticed that

all English epics are fantasy, in the sense that they contain magic, all present supernatural perceptions of reality. From *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* to *Idylls of the King* and *Lord of the Rings*, the English tradition of the epic is clear.⁴⁵

In his essay *Epic Fantasy in the Modern World* Donaldson used these taproot texts to explain the way humankind looked at themselves, as they "articulated the best religious and cultural, the best social and psychological self-perceptions of their times". According to Donaldson, these texts show how "our perception of ourselves becomes smaller and smaller" and, as he noted, by Milton's time the role of humans in the epic became irrelevant.⁴⁶ It is Tolkien who "restored the epic to English literature. Roughly a century after the epic became an impossible literary form, he made it possible to write epics again".⁴⁷

Tolkien, a *Beowulf* and *Gawain* scholar, and perhaps the most popular and beloved fantasist of the twentieth century, made it possible by rekindling the old tales⁴⁸ and their heroes, knights, magic, dragons and other elements of their worlds into a new fantasy sub-genre. *Beowulf* was written by the author who used "afresh ancient and

43. Martin, George R.R. *A Game...: 18.*

44. Zelazny, Roger. *The Chronicles of Amber*. London: Gollancz, 2000: 78.

45. Donaldson, Stephen R. *Epic Fantasy...: 9-10.*

46. Donaldson, Stephen R. *Epic Fantasy...: 12.*

47. Donaldson, Stephen R. *Epic Fantasy...: 14.*

48. Tolkien did not consider them epics, as explained in his essays "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" and "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight".



largely traditional material"⁴⁹, whereas *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is another example of story "made of tales often told before and elsewhere, and of elements that derive from remote times, beyond the vision or awareness of the poet: like *Beowulf*, or some of Shakespeare's major plays, such as *King Lear* or *Hamlet*".⁵⁰ As Tolkien pointed out, there are older myths behind the story of Gawain, wherein one can hear the echoes of ancient cults, beliefs and symbols, yet this story is "not about those old things, but it receives part of its life, its vividness, its tension from them".⁵¹ These older, essential structures incorporated into the medieval stories originate from myths, with heroes following the standard path of the mythological adventure, whose formula was defined by Joseph Campbell.

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.⁵²

This 'world of common day', of course, is a world of fantasy to the reader, yet it is common to the hero. And here lies the beauty of fantasy. The fantasy worlds, with all their wonders and oddities, are common to their heroes and other inhabitants. As such, they are reflections of the reader's objective reality. For this reason, the authors do what they can to make them, if not common, then at least fairly commoner to their readers as well. Such fantastical worlds, although invented, are intricately and persuasively developed into believable creations that allow the readers to imagine them, navigate through them and quickly and easily suspend their disbelief in spite of all the supernatural and unnatural occurrences that they contain.

As mentioned above, works of fantasy with elements of medievalism often imply the presence and use of magic. Sometimes it is fully functional, as it was believed to be in the Middle Ages when people were burned at stakes for practicing magic, witchcraft and devilism. Sometimes it is only imagined. Magic in some works of fiction represents a reflection of the medieval fears and superstition, when it actually 'worked' only because people believed in it. Bernard Cornwell re-enacted such relationship between magic and superstition in his *Warlord Chronicles* by showing that magic can exist if one believes in it, or it can simply be regarded as an ability of clever individuals to deceive superstitious people who are willing to suspend their disbelief in magic, in real and fantastic worlds alike.

In Cornwell's trilogy there is a notable withdrawal of magic that goes away along with the skilful mage Merlin. Such waning of magic is not uncommon in fantasy. Some examples include Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, where the magic ebbs away along with the world of Faerie and John R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord*

49. Tolkien, John R. R. *The Monsters...*: 9.

50. Tolkien, John R. R. *The Monsters...*: 72.

51. Tolkien, John R. R. *The Monsters...*: 73.

52. Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. London: Fontana Press, 1993: 30.



of the Rings in which the elves return to the undying lands. In Abercrombie's *First Law* trilogy the mage Bayaz stated that "the magic ebbs away", that it "leaks out of the world",⁵³ and in George R. R. Martin's series dragons become progressively smaller from one generation to another, from "the three great monsters of song and story" to "the smallest; a matched pair no bigger than mastiff's skulls, and oddly misshapen".⁵⁴ With the arrival of the age of reason dragons and magic did ebb away from the world and were left behind in the past, suppressed by the wonders of science and technological advancement that lifted the veil of superstition and supernatural. Maybe this is why it is so tempting and appealing to return into this world of fantasy with the stories set in the Dark Ages or pseudo-medieval earth-like worlds in which magic and the fantastic still shape the lives of everyone.

As Tolkien wrote, "[t]here are in any case many heroes but very few good dragons" and "dragons, real dragons, essential both to the machinery and the ideas of a poem or tale, are actually rare. In northern literature there are only two that are significant".⁵⁵ The two that he singled out are the dragon of the Völsungs, Fáfnir, and Beowulf's bane. A dragon in a fantasy is not an allegory, it is "no idle fancy", but "a potent creation of men's imagination, richer in significance than his barrow is in gold".⁵⁶ And as evidence of this statement he created "a most specially greedy, strong and wicked worm called Smaug".⁵⁷ Smaug, like Beowulf's bane, is more than a simple allegory. Like Beowulf's dragon, this worm is not a "plain pure fairy-story dragon", as it "approaches *draconitas* rather than *draco*: a personification of malice, greed, destruction (the evil side of heroic life), and of the indiscriminating cruelty of fortune that distinguishes not good or bad (the evil aspect of all life)".⁵⁸ People still make and write myths, modelled on those found in old stories and Tolkien's novels are evidence of this. They are those "great fantasies, myths and tales" that Le Guin had in mind when she wrote that fantasies "are like dreams: they speak *from* the unconscious *to* the unconscious, in the *language* of the unconscious – symbol and archetype", the stories that "use words" but, like music, "short-circuit verbal reasoning, and go straight to the thoughts that lie too deep to utter".⁵⁹ Smaug can be placed among those manifestations that Le Guin regarded as archetypes translated, with the "language of the night" as she called it, from the realm of the unconscious to the world of fantasy.

The Witch, the dragon, the hero; the night journey, the helpful animal, the hidden treasure... we all know them, we recognize them (because, if Jung is right, they

53. Abercrombie, Joe. *The Blade...*: 102.

54. Martin, George R.R. *A Game...*: 102.

55. Tolkien, John R. R. *The Monsters...*: 17, 12.

56. Tolkien, John R. R. *The Monsters...*: 16.

57. Tolkien, John R. R. *The Hobbit...*: 23.

58. Tolkien, John R. R. *The Monsters...*: 17.

59. Guin, Ursula K. Le. *The Language of the Night, Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Susan Wood. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1979: 62.



represent profound and essential modes of thought). Modern fantasy attempts to translate them into modern words.⁶⁰

Tolkien's Smaug is an archetype translated into modern words, although cloaked in the medieval form. This is why it is still so very much alive and will stay so, regardless of the time when *The Hobbit* is read, just like his medieval counterpart in *Beowulf*.

In addition to immersing the eager reader into the wondrous age of dragons and medieval magic, there is another reason to set fictional worlds into such historical or pseudo-historical environments. New technological solutions and scientific discoveries are so fantastical that they almost resemble magic. However, the arrival of the new age always brings uncertainties and the feeling that something will be lost, that the common and known world is dissolving into something new and that the loss of known forces that have kept the world together will result in chaos. With the end of the Middle Ages the balance between the centrifugal and centripetal forces of fantasy and reality was lost and the world changed irrevocably. In the minds of the writers and readers starved of magic, not always for the better. The loss of old values and the arrival of the new ones does not necessarily imply enthusiasm, not in literature, as Walpole showed, and not in real life. People were sceptical about the machines when they started replacing manual labour. The nuclear bomb ended the Second World War; however, such frightening scientific breakthrough with devastating consequences that marked the beginning of the nuclear age fuelled fears of misuse and irresponsible use of technology. In the second half of the twentieth century, writers of the New Wave and cyberpunk science fiction often wrote about the dangers of androids, robots, biological weapons, and other scientific and technological world-changing wonders. Some new Luddites may start wrecking robots in factories any day now.

"Long ago, before there was a Union, Middelrand was made of many petty kingdoms, often at war with one another, rising and falling with the passing years".⁶¹ Medieval Europe or England, as it is commonly the case, is not very different from this passage that refers to the history of Abercrombie's fictional medieval-like Circle of the (known) World in its large kingdoms of the Union, Gurkhul and the North, peoples and their lives, problems and relationships are very similar to those that existed in the Middle Ages. Thus we come to the ciphers for 'real' political circumstances mentioned by Smith. As Italo Calvino noted, "[d]uring the twentieth century, intellectual (no longer emotional) fantasy has become uppermost: play, irony, the winking eye, and also a meditation on the hidden desires and nightmares of contemporary man".⁶² Contemporary politics, national and international, are not

60. Guin, Ursula K. Le. *The Language...*: 12.

61. Abercrombie, Joe. *The Blade...*: 351.

62. Calvino, Italo. "Definitions of Territory: Fantasy", *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, David Sandner, ed. Westport-London: Praeger Publishers, 2004: 134.



very different from medieval struggles to come to power, influence monarchs, or replace them on their thrones.

As mentioned earlier, fantasies are reflections of the objective reality, its mirror-images, although twisted and reshaped by imagination. Unlike realistic fiction in which the characters are expressions of the world they live in, fantasy has the ability to externalize what is inside the characters, according to Donaldson who saw epics as recordings of “the way humankind looked at itself”, as they “articulated the best religious and cultural, the best social and psychological self-perceptions of their times”.⁶³

Contemporary fantasies reflect the perception of the time they are written in. Naturally, a lot has changed since the Middle Ages, which is why heroes like Gawain, the ideal knight with knightly virtues, are long gone and not all heroes fulfil their quests and return from their adventures with their heads on their shoulders. Ned Stark from George Martin’s *A Game of Thrones* is one of such unlucky heroes. Gawain, who takes up the challenge and “stoutly dare strike one stroke for another”⁶⁴ to protect his king from peril and indignity, goes on a quest of which the probable end is death by decapitation and he “accepts this challenge to deal the blow *quatsso bifallez after* (‘whatever the consequences’)”.⁶⁵ Like Gawain, Theodore in *Otranto* kneels “down, and prepare[s] to receive the fatal blow” and, being an innocent and virtuous person, keeps his head on his shoulders.⁶⁶ In Martin’s novel, Ned Stark accepts the duty expected of a king’s knight and goes to a perilous place alone and unprotected. Like Gawain, he is, after all, only human and possesses a fault, which makes him a perfect knight in his imperfection. He also comes to a castle where he is to be challenged. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, “our poet is bringing Gawain to no haunt of demons, enemies of human kind, but to a courteous and Christian hall”.⁶⁷ This Christian place is not only a symbol of Christian values, but also of a real place in the real world, not a castle one can expect to find in a fairy-tale. Like the fantastic that comes to Arthur’s court in the form of the enchanted Green Knight, a symbol of older beliefs and forces that shaped and governed the pre-Christian world, the fantastic in contemporary fantasies comes to the reader’s world of reality in the form of medieval-like world. And its heroes, quests and their outcomes are a reflection of their authors’ world.

As in the story about Gawain, in *A Game of Thrones* the castle in King’s Landing, the capital of the Seven Kingdoms, is not a place where fairies and ogres dwell. As a mirror-image of the time when it is written, however, it is not a chivalrous place where one can expect of its inhabitants to be courteous, moral, and virtuous. Instead of being a symbol of knighthood and knightly conduct, its king does not come from the hunt with a boar but is killed by one. Like Gawain, Ned Stark successfully

63. Donaldson, Stephen R. *Epic Fantasy...*: 10.

64. Tolkien, John R. R. *Sir Gawain...*: 32.

65. Tolkien, John R. R. *The Monsters...*: 75.

66. Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto...*: 97.

67. Tolkien, John R. R. *The Monsters...*: 78.



answers to perils, temptations and trials, but this is exactly the reason why he must perish. Both Gawain and Ned Stark deal one fatal blow at the beginning, in wintertime. After Ned Stark's strike blood "sprayed out across the snow, as red as summerwine",⁶⁸ and after Gawain's blow "the blood burst from the body, bright on the greenness".⁶⁹ Unlike Gawain, who survives the challenge and the blow that he is willing to take for the king and for himself, and unlike Walpole's virtuous Theodore, in Martin's reflection of the contemporary reality masked with the medieval-like folklore, customs and décor, Ned Stark is decapitated. This virtuous knight who accepts the challenge to protect his flawed king has to perish, so the strike of the blade is fatal for him. To borrow Tolkien's observation about Gawain quoted from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, "Gawain with his olde curteisye goes back into Fairye".⁷⁰ In our present reality, which the authors of contemporary fantasies and their readers know and live in, acts of hospitality, courtesy and chivalry are not necessarily rewarded. Not even in their fiction, in which, as a reflection of our times, heroes like Zelazny's Corwin of Amber, Abercrombie's Glokta, or Donaldson's Thomas Covenant, are far from being perfect knights governed by noble principles. And in spite of 'Faerie', like Gawain, who is "presented as a credible, living, person", everything they think, say or do, "is to be seriously considered, as of the real world".⁷¹

In an article on *A Song of Ice and Fire*, historian Dr. Kelly DeVries noticed that Martin's world is modelled after medieval England, partly because Martin himself encouraged such comparisons since he admits that he reads everything he can get his hands on medieval history. A particularly interesting part of the article is the one which explains how and why Martin's work is not very realistic, giving detailed differences between the fictional world and reality. DeVries's argument that "[n]o Geat named Beowulf ripped the arm off a monster named Grendel and then fought the monster's mother in a cave"⁷² effectively sums it all up. It is the writer's imagination, and not his reliance on reality, that is truly captivating about this fictional world.

Owing to Tolkien's "love for Germanic medieval sources", as noted by Chism, when "critics and reviewers began to suggest analogues for *The Lord of the Rings* in the progress of World War II and modern industrialization [...] Tolkien dismissed such readings as allegories".⁷³ In the Foreword to *The Fellowship of the Ring* he wrote that his novel was not intended to convey inner meanings or messages, that it "is neither allegorical nor topical", that he "cordially dislike[s] allegory in all its manifestations, and always ha[s] done so", and that the "real war does not resemble

68. Martin, George R.R. *A Game...*: 12.

69. Tolkien, John R. R. *Sir Gawain...*: 35.

70. Tolkien, John R. R. *The Monsters...*: 100.

71. Tolkien, John R. R. *Sir Gawain...*: 15.

72. DeVries, Kelly. "Game of Thrones as History: It's Not as Realistic As It Seems-and That's Good". *Foreign Affairs*. 29 March 2012, The Council of Foreign Relations. 2 February 2014. <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137363/kelly-devries/game-of-thrones-as-history>>.

73. Chism, Christine. "Middle-earth, the Middle Ages, and the Aryan Nation: Myth and History in World War II", *Tolkien the Medievalist*, Jane Chance, ed. London: Routledge, 2003: 63-64.



the legendary war in its process or its conclusion". "If it had inspired or directed the development of the legend", as he wrote, the story would have ended differently, and so would its heroes and villains.⁷⁴

When asked whether his novels are allegories Martin answered that they are not. As he explained in an interview, "I agree with Tolkien, in the sense that you really don't want to inject any sort of allegory and satire or contemporary political issues into your medieval fantasy".⁷⁵ So if the writers do not write their medieval fantasies with such an intention, how come that they are so widely popular and read all over the world in the modern times? What is it in the worlds modelled on the Medieval period that draws the readers to find them still fresh and easy to relate to? Half of the answer lies in the writer's imagination. Another half is found in the elements of reality. As Martin explained in the same interview, "there are certain universal themes. There are certain things that I'm trying to say about politics, governance, the use of power, kings, and all of that stuff."

Writers can create and use medieval-like worlds as reflections of contemporary circumstances and the world of objective reality because not a lot has actually changed in the human nature since the Dark Ages. In spite of numerous scientific breakthroughs and technological inventions that are borderline fantastic and that have changed the world beyond recognition, people are still governed by the same urges, needs, desires, and fears. As one of Abercrombie's characters noticed, many are shaped by material wealth.

'The world changes, Glokta, the world changes. The old order crumbles. Loyalty, duty, pride, honour. Notions that have fallen far from fashion. What has replaced them?' [...] 'Greed. Merchants have become the new power in the land. Bankers, shopkeepers, salesmen. Little men, with little minds and little ambitions. Men whose only loyalty is to themselves, whose only duty is to their own purses, whose only pride is in swindling their betters, whose only honour is weighed out in silver coin.'⁷⁶

This is just one of the themes that is constantly present in human life and nature. It seems that the writers of fantasy have found the worlds built on medieval foundations to be effective reverberators of many universal themes that remain interesting, appealing and worth repeating in the world of present-day reality, and fantasies.

Contemporary fantasists use medievalism to place their fictional worlds into a blurry area where fantasy and reality overlap, halfway between the age when magic was still believed to exist, and the one from which supernatural has ebbed with the advance of science and technology. In a sense, the Medieval period is halfway between fantasy and reality. Moreover, due to the advancements in science and

74. Tolkien, John R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*...: X.

75. Radish, Christina. "George R. R. Martin Interview Game Of Thrones". *Collider.com*. 17 April 2011, Complex Media Inc. 2 February 2014 <<http://collider.com/george-r-r-martin-interview-game-of-thrones/#vRpQErrvGW6P8Rou.99>>.

76. Abercrombie, Joe. *The Blade*...: 85.



technology the line between the magic of the past and the science of the present is another fuzzy area, which is why, as Philip K. Dick said, “magic equals science... and science (of the future) equals magic”.⁷⁷ As such, contemporary fantasists borrow the elements from the Middle Ages to build an effective bridge between fantasy and reality, creating thus a new species of romance that brings together ‘imagination and improbability’ and ‘common life’. The fact that contemporary readers readily cross that bridge justifies the fantasists’ willingness to use Walpole’s recipe that was, conveniently so, written in the 18th century, which is halfway between the Middle Ages and their own reality.

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