The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist

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A Trip to England: Discovering the Ties between Medievalism and Pop Culture

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In early March of 2014, a group of eager undergraduate students sat huddled in a classroom at Fitchburg State University discussing with ill-disguised excitement the trivial fact that *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* might be a screening option on the plane to England. Our Lone Medievalist—our study abroad course instructor—listened with an amused expression. The following night we boarded said plane to embark on our adventure to walk in the footsteps of medieval England. As we moved through the country it became clear that there was an indisputable link between the medieval sites we visited and the fan culture that we so thoroughly immersed ourselves in daily. Not a single day passed during which we failed to find a link between the medieval past and contemporary “nerd-dom.” In a trip that lasted the duration of nine days, we learned that, while the world of academia may marginalize medieval scholars in favor of contemporary scholars, the world of popular culture embraces and profits from the fascinating and diverse stores of medieval culture.
In the contemporary world that is beginning to favor “nerd culture,” it is no secret that J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth is one of the most popular fantasy realms. Peter Jackson’s two trilogies of films based off Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* both grossed $2.9 billion, earning the entirety of the Middle Earth saga a stunning $5.8 billion,¹ a hoard fit for a dragon. Beyond the monetary figures, though, Tolkien’s world stretches deep into the recesses of fan culture. In 1960s America, the counterculture developed by the baby boomers would spray paint “Frodo Lives!” and “Gandalf for President” throughout the subway systems.² To them Tolkien’s love of the natural world was the standing feature of his work. From the 60s to the internet-prolific age, Tolkien’s popularity has yet to fade. It takes only a simple Google search to discover the plethora of ways contemporary fans have created to learn and teach others how to speak Elvish³, including YouTube videos, numerous websites, and even an app that can be downloaded to a mobile phone. It is obvious that Tolkien has succeeded in bringing the reader into his world, using characters and settings and even languages of his own invention. As a linguist he once stated, “The invention of languages is the foundation. The ‘stories’ were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse.”⁴

Because of his extensive background in medieval literature, Tolkien was able to create a complex world that brought medieval themes into mainstream culture. In fact, there is so much medieval influence in today’s culture that it makes the idea of being a lone medievalist somewhat ironic. As we traveled to Tolkien’s grave in Oxford, England in that same March of 2014, what

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3 One of several languages Tolkien created for his works.
we discovered was a tombstone heavily decorated by fans that had made the pilgrimage before us. As we made our way from Tolkien’s grave to the pub he used to frequent with his writing group, The Eagle and Child, our conversation began to shift from the medieval-influenced Middle Earth to other fandoms that we cherish. While Tolkien’s status as an Anglo-Saxon professor is relatively well known, what we then discovered was that it is not only Tolkien’s world that is shrouded in medieval influence.

The obvious progression from Tolkien himself would inevitably lead to the man who has been dubbed “an American Tolkien.” George R.R. Martin is the author of the series “A Song of Ice and Fire,” which in recent years has been turned into an award-winning HBO television show that is also a dominate force in contemporary pop culture. George R.R. Martin has credited Tolkien as being a major source of inspiration for his book series. Here we have another case of an extremely popular fantasy series that is rooted in medieval influence. While Martin veers away from the “good versus evil” trope that tends to persist in Tolkien’s work, he also compares Tolkien’s work with other fantasy writers, stating, “From the 1970s, Tolkien imitators had retreaded what he’d done, with no originality and none of Tolkien’s deep abiding love of myth and history.” Due to the enduring popularity of his works, Tolkien is not a “lone medievalist” any longer. His works have inspired many readers over the years, and continue to do so today. Tolkien paved the road for Martin and his contemporary popularity as his works of heavy fantasy introduced a new audience to an insatiable craving for stories with a medieval twist. However, Martin cites another


6 The show has been nominated for 83 Emmy Awards, 26 of which it won. “Game Of Thrones: Awards & Nominations,” Television Academy (2015), http://www.emmys.com/shows/game-thrones.

creator as having been “the greatest literary influence on me.”8 The man Martin bestows this honor upon is none other than Stan Lee, the renowned creator of the Marvel Comics Universe.

Martin comments on this icon, “Stan Lee introduced a whole concept of characterisation to comic books and conflict; maybe even a touch of grey in some of the characters.”9 One of the most famous medieval characters with “a touch of grey” would be the outlaw Robin Hood. Contemporary pop culture is no stranger to the arrow-slinging rebel archetype. Despite the seemingly intimidating nature of medieval studies, it is comforting to know that medieval literature is actually responsible for a plethora of works that we are surrounded by on a daily basis, and Robin Hood is just about everywhere. The influence of the honorable thief with the bow and arrow can be seen in the aforementioned The Lord of the Rings, The Hunger Games Trilogy, the Green Arrow comic books and their television adaptation Arrow, as well as another of the most popular contemporary franchises, the Marvel Cinematic Universe.10 The archers in these stories all have the same goal: to protect the innocent and punish the greedy and evil. Beyond this Robin Hood has always stood as an adventurer; it would be a difficult thing to find so much as a child in contemporary society without knowledge of the basic concept of the bandit hero. Throughout the centuries, the popularity of the trope of challenging social norms that are immoral has remained at its peak high. There is an endless list of films that have capitalized on this idea, including but not limited to the Ocean’s Eleven films and The Legend of Zorro. There’s something inherently intriguing about an outlaw doing the right thing guided only by their moral code. Recognizing archetypes like Robin Hood in contemporary literature creates a link to the medieval and makes it more relatable and less overwhelming. It

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9 Ibid.
10 Based on Stan Lee’s Marvel Comics Universe, the MCU has released several films to date, three of which featured the arrow-wielding Hawkeye.
A Trip to England lends these newer stories more depth through their connection to these old tales. What is strange is that the stories themselves have not even remotely disappeared from popular knowledge.

Arguably more prominent than Robin Hood, though the issue of popularity remains unresolved, is the once and future king. The story of King Arthur, along with his knights, wife, and wizard, has evolved into a vital portion of our storytelling traditions, no matter what the medium. Our televisions are filled with modernized courtly love triangles that mimic Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere. Novels whose audiences range in age feature Merlin-esque wizards such as Dumbledore from the Harry Potter series and Gandalf from The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. Both of these pop culture wizards share a resemblance to the aged Merlin with their long white hair and waist-length white beards. While Tolkien’s works continue to pop up because much of his novels’ stories were taken directly from medieval counterparts, such as Smaug, the dragon who was lifted from the epic of Beowulf, Tolkien is just a small fraction of the contemporary canon of work that was inspired by medieval times.

After we watched Smaug rain his desolation on Bilbo thanks to the inflight cinema service, we arrived in England where we were lucky enough to visit the medieval Warwick Castle, built circa 1068. This castle, rich in medieval history, is now a well-known tourist attraction. Upon entering the grounds we were faced with the opportunity to explore just about every area the castle had to offer, including the dungeon and the ramparts. During our visit we got to see in person the ways in which this antiquated castle has evolved with the roaring trade of pop culture as they were at the time hosting an exhibit on the popular BBC One television show Merlin. Merlin, of course, is a television show about the legendary King Arthur and Camelot. The exhibition, which featured wax figures of the cast, was erected due to the fact that Warwick Castle’s contemporary claim to fame is that is was used as a filming location for the show. This type of pop culture phenomenon, in essence visiting locations that re-

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11 The popular and most profitable children’s book series of all time.
late to fandom, creates an interesting juxtaposition between pop culture and the lone medievalist. While the pop culture chalice overflows and then sinks under the weight of medieval influence, fandom moves in and seeks almost to replace centuries of history with a contemporary enthusiasm for the human consciousness that allows us to love deeply, and often obsess, over our respective fandoms. In essence the pop culture group races straight to see where their favorite actors stood to film scenes, and overlook the history and the stories that are exponentially older than they are, and the medievalist stands alone again. This form of pop culture, a TV show based off of a medieval legend, made the visit to Warwick castle lose some of its original essence. It did not feel like a medieval castle, but instead felt like the tourist attraction it has become.

Despite that pitfall of pop culture, the fact remains that the general constraints of what constitutes an entertaining story have remained the same. Today’s stories drip with the centuries-old influence of medievalism, whether they’re told through the medium of television, film, books, or even video games. As students of a lone medievalist, the term doesn’t quite make sense to us as we have learned that much of our contemporary world is sheathed by influence from the Middle Ages. A class discussing the origins of the most popular fan cultures would essentially be a class on medieval literature. While it may be true that many students are daunted by the prospect of tackling medieval literature, we would hope that pop culture’s obsession with the subject would calm their worries.