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Review - Neomedievalism, Popular Culture, and the Academy from Tolkien to Game of Thrones

Juliette Wood.

The topic of medievalism and its increasing number of sub-categories has become a dominant force in medieval studies, and these two volumes from Boydell and Brewer's Medievalism series, which publishes monographs that in the words of the editors 'investigate the post-medieval construction and manifestations of the Middle Ages', illustrate how diversified the field has become.

KellyAnn Fitzpatrick further refines her subject within the context of neo-medievalism with specific reference to post-medieval imagining or appropriation of the Middle Ages in digital forms of popular culture such as computer games, as well as in fantasy literature from the seminal (and in many ways still central) writings of Tolkien to the recent television sensation *Game of Thrones* and its attendant fandom and internet spin-offs. The volume begins with a discussion of the controversies that have been associated with the idea of 'the medieval' as relating to an academic field of study or as it is used in some types of cultural discourse as a term for the primitive or the premodern, and even more negatively, for superstition. In order to trace connections and to challenge assumptions about the way 'medieval' is employed, Fitzpatrick proposes the term 'neomedievalism' as an essential tool in understanding the continual and often politicized reinvention of the Middle Ages in both popular and academic culture; and 'the way reinventions are often used to naturalize constructed identities (gender, class, race) and historicize certain postmodern practices (war, torture, capitalism, scholarship)' (xviii)

Fitzpatrick's volume is divided into three parts—'Producing Neomedievalism' (3–72), 'Shaping Neomedievalism' (73–142), and 'Playing Neomedievalism' (143–95)—with two chapters in each part. The organization helps give coherence to a subject which is now expanding so quickly. Essays examine various aspects of popular neo-medievalisms such as Disney's re-imagining of its own version of the Sleeping Beauty story in the 2014 film *Maleficent*, which refocuses the well-known tale to create a 'neomedieval space in which patriarchal codes can be reimaged as a vehicle for post-feminist discourse' (102), and how the *Game of Thrones* character Daenerys refocuses the dragon as a useful tool and ally rather than an antagonist. Tolkien, always an important figure in neo-medieval studies, continues to influence and inspire the study of medieval literature, especially through his work in promoting a traditional form of medievalism rooted in the impulse that the Middle Ages can be accurately recovered and incorporated into a secondary world (68). In contrast to this is the popularity of dark fantasies such as George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*, which is presented as a more realistic view of the Middle Ages. Martin himself suggested that it represents history more closely than other fantasies (104), to which Fitzgerald offers an important qualification that Martin's work is neo-medieval fantasy, not history. This book appeared in 2019, and only three years later (despite a global pandemic), a prequel to *Game of Thrones*, a mega-series of another extensive fantasy cycle (*Wheel of Time*), and Tolkien's *Rings* fantasy are all being re-worked for the Netflix audience.

The book also deals with a growing phenomenon in this field: namely, the role of digital gaming, from well-established card games such as Magic to the currently popular multi-player games, as a force for constructing contemporary perceptions of the Middle Ages (171–95). Fitzpatrick notes the frequent intrusion of historically peripheral concepts such as dungeons and torture, which have become both a fixed part of the perception of a neo-medieval world and a tool to extend the complex patterns of consumption, play authorship, and scholarship.

The material in Clare Simmons's volume will be very familiar to many folklorists, as it engages with the ways in which British seasonal customs were fitted into the nineteenth-century concept of a medieval world, specifically the idea that folklore customs were fragmented survivals of an ancient past. Simmons notes that many of the medieval tropes in British calendar celebrations are not in fact very old, and stresses that the tension between a rapidly industrializing Britain and nostalgia for the society from which it came created an arena for popular—often playful—recreations. The essay on creating Christmas (62–93) is a case in point. The perception of Christmas as the merging of Christian feast and pagan Yule is put into a context of how the Victorians repurposed these traditions as a way to create new communities and compensate for loss of communal traditions. Simmons's volume is framed by an introductory essay on 'medievalizing time': connecting seasonal celebrations with a largely romanticized medieval past, thus restoring a feeling of innocence to celebrations that survived the English Reformation. This impulse expressed itself in literature; for example, Keats's *Eve of St Agnes*, in which the descriptions of customs and rituals were most likely drawn from antiquarian publications rather than oral folklore (94–95). Victorian antiquarians typically assumed that Christianity transformed pagan feasts into saints' days, and this was used to interpret practices associated with Valentine's Day (107–18). Simmons's epilogue on 'Christmas Ghosts' (185–202) makes an interesting and very relevant contribution to any study of invented medievalisms. She notes that the ghost story is not associated with Christmas and is not even a medieval genre, but became a favourite item in end-of-year editions of popular Victorian publications.

These two volumes take very different approaches to medievalism. Both make worthwhile contributions to the field and demonstrate the breadth of this subject.