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Malevolent and marginal

The feminized ‘Dark Ages’ in modern card game cultures

Daisy Black

Since the early 1980s, things medieval have provided a fertile source of narrative concept, artwork and play in popular board and card game culture. These tabletop games have produced detailed, often surprisingly nuanced models of medieval societies, with game-plays demonstrating a strong awareness of the ways in which medieval lay, civic, religious and literary communities operated.¹ As well as creating an attractive aesthetic, these often form part of strategy and are able to teach the games’ participants something about the mechanisms of medieval narratives as well as the histories of commerce, combat strategy or land management and expansion. However, a heavy focus on warfare, civic politics, knightly activity and monasticism frequently has the effect of rendering the medieval female a marginal, spectral figure – that is, a figure re-produced for a variety of purposes, but very rarely employed as a historical figure or to signify (her)self. In this, I am adapting Stephen Kruger’s definition of spectrality in another fantasy figure: the medieval Jew:

The Jews we encounter in medieval Christian texts [. . .] are constructions that do not correspond in any easy way to the lived experiences of Jews, or even of Christians who elaborated and made use of these constructions.²

The complex male hierarchies in medievalist games are rarely matched by those of female characters, who, if they are present, rarely ‘correspond in any easy way to the lived experiences’ of medieval women. This chapter highlights how often overlooked tabletop games provide just as a rich a resource of study into ludic and narrative medievalism as digital gaming has, while opening a discussion about the games’ lack of engagement with diverse medieval female roles. Giving attention to the prefatory narratives accompanying two card-based games, the artwork of cards featuring human characters and the mechanics of gameplay, this chapter analyses the ways their representations of ‘medieval’ men and women are constructed, performed and valued. It also contends that the medieval female is often figured as a point of dark origin,

which gives us insight into the ways these games interact with notions of ‘past’ and history.

This chapter examines two recent card games employing medieval aesthetic and narrative in their play: *Dominion* (2008) and the less complex micro-game *Love Letter* (2012). Neither of these games claims to be ‘historical’ or ‘authentic’ and, while they engage with elements of medieval culture, they also contain aspects from later eras. For example, *Dominion*’s ‘Seaside’ expansion pack (2009) includes pirates and characters wearing eighteenth-century wigs, while the clothing shown in the artwork of *Love Letter* admit trends from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries. This kind of temporal playfulness is captured in David Matthews’ claim that ‘one of the enabling conditions of medievalism is unending play with the instability of temporal boundaries.’³ While these games also tend to merge the aesthetics of medievalism, fantasy and romance, they also present a Middle Ages that is both recognizable and sufficiently ‘other’ to generate interest in the game play and narrative as being of a time unlike ours. In this, both games might be more properly considered neomedievalist, as they mingle referents from a number of periods.⁴ While, as will be shown, female figures are often marginal, misrepresented or absent in the mechanics of *Dominion*’s game play and artwork, female figures in both games do appear in the narratives with which games introduce their medievalist fantasies. These kinds of narrative appear as contextualizing literature within games’ rulebooks or publicity material and create a sense of context or ‘history’ for the game. Both games align the ‘time before’ the medieval context of the game with ambitious, morally dubious or malignant female figures. These depictions often concur with a game’s (either deliberate or unconscious) presentation of pre-medieval society as ‘backward’, regressive or simplistic, thus playing into the mid-sixteenth-century dialectics figuring the (Catholic) past as ‘middle’ or ‘dark.’⁵ This centring of the woman in establishing these ‘Dark Ages’ simultaneously provides foundation and inspiration for the gameplay whilst simultaneously articulating a warning – constituting a less civilized, unruly and feminine past to which the players might revert if they are unsuccessful.

Dominion

Dominion is a deck-building card game. It was created in 2008 by Donald X. Vaccarino and has sold over a million copies, winning, among other awards, the prestigious *Spiel des Jahres*. It has been translated into several languages and has spawned eleven expansion packs and one standalone pack. In character, the game reflects the kinds of medievalism trope identified by M. J. Toswell:

The tropes of medievalism, of which there are a congeries (knights; heroes; swords; vast landscapes with castles and forests and mountains; handmade artefacts; treasure hunting; questions; witches and warlocks; various representations of the Other [. . .]) offer ways in which someone engaged in recreating the Middle Ages can do so with a kind of useful shorthand.⁶

As the speed of the gameplay and rapid discarding of cards means players might have cards in their hand for less than five minutes, this rapid accretion of tropes temporarily suggests a kind of coherent ‘authenticity’ where coherency does not, on more leisurely inspection, exist. While the original *Dominion* base set had an early medieval theme, with elements referencing pre-industrial social structures, the expansion packs *Dark Ages* and *Empires* extended the game’s time period backwards. *Guilds* extends it forwards to fifteenth century civic guild cultures, while *Hinterlands* extends the game geographically to engage with the medieval outside Europe. In 2016, a second edition of the game’s base-set was released, which removed some cards, introduced others and, as will be shown later, slightly changed the artwork and gender representation on the cards.⁷ While this chapter will primarily focus on the 2008’s original base game, which was current at the time of this research and to date has sold the most copies, the game’s principles have remained the same across all expansions and editions. The object is to gain the highest number of victory points which, in the base set, are cards representing land (Estates, Duchies and Provinces).⁸ Players must gain enough money to buy these ‘land’ victory points by purchasing and using action cards, which helps them build machines within their deck that increase their purchasing power. These action cards represent certain roles, trades or spaces within the medieval world.

The base game’s world-building is first established in the rule book, which sets *Dominion* within a non-specific feudal era of ‘fiefs, freeholds and *feodums*’:

You are a monarch, like your parents before you, a ruler of a small pleasant kingdom of rivers and evergreens. Unlike your parents, however, you have hopes and dreams! You want a bigger and more pleasant kingdom, with more rivers and a wider variety of trees. You want a Dominion! In all directions lie fiefs, freeholds, and feodums. All are small bits of land, controlled by petty lords and verging on anarchy. You will bring civilization to these people, uniting them under your banner. But wait! It must be something in the air; several other monarchs have had the exact same idea. You must race to get as much of the unclaimed land as possible, fending them off along the way. To do this you will hire minions, construct buildings, spruce up your castle, and fill your treasury. Your parents wouldn’t be proud, but your grandparents, on your mother’s side, would be delighted.⁹

While the game refers to its players as ungendered ‘monarchs’, the actions the player is asked to perform are those which have conventionally been gendered male. The rulebook sets up a colonialist fantasy: the player will subdue the ‘petty lords verging on anarchy’, with conquest and warfare being framed as positive forces of ‘civilization’ and the assertion of order. In this, *Dominion* follows the alignment of the medieval world with warfare and conquest, which has been long-established in digital gaming as well as in the medieval fantasy aesthetic of *Dungeons and Dragons*.¹⁰ However, it is curious that *Dominion* suggests that this drive to expand comes from the maternal line: ‘your grandparents, on your mother’s side, would be delighted.’ This claim, appearing at the end of the passage in which the game introduces its medievalist fantasy, does two things. First, it aligns conquest with an ambitious and less content past – that is, with the violent, land-based ambitions of a ‘Dark Ages’.

Second, this final sentence genders this ambition female by making it the desire of the maternal grandparents. While, of course, the mention of grandparents suggests a male and a female desire for conquest and order, the fact that this drive comes from the player's imagined maternal line complicates the earlier narrative of conquest as a fully masculine occupation. While the *actions* of the game play are historically often aligned with the masculine, the source of the *desire* for expansion is therefore located in the maternal line which experienced 'anarchy' but longed for order – a feminized Dark Ages.

Origin myths of this kind, in which chaotic, feminine dominion is superseded by a more 'civilized' masculine order, have long been part of European medieval narratives of nation. In the late thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, a new myth was added to the foundation histories of Britain and preceded the myth of Trojan exile Brutus.¹¹ This origin myth appeared in several versions, including in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. It began in Syria or Greece, where a king had many daughters, whom he married off to his subject kings. The daughters resented this and the oldest daughter, Albina, suggested they kill their husbands. When the plan was revealed, the sisters were exiled in a leaky boat. They landed on an island, which Albina named 'Albion', after herself. After a while, the island's native devils begot a race of giants with the sisters. The giants ruled until Brutus and his company arrived. They expelled or killed the giants and renamed the island 'Britain'.¹² There are several similarities between the way this myth functions and the way *Dominion* fashions its medievalist mythology. First, they both create myths of national identity and history which pre-empt the narratives of martial dominion which follow. Through the figures of the maternal grandparents, *Dominion*'s gameplay forms its own network of communal associations by establishing a familiar foundation 'past'.¹³ Albina is ambitious: resisting her father's splintering of his daughters and kingdom between 'small bits of land, controlled by petty lords', she claims ownership over her new land through giving it her own name. Yet in both stories, these ambitious ancestors left the civilizing process incomplete. While the bloodthirsty Albina and her sisters demonstrate a desire for power and risk anarchy through murdering their husbands, when they arrive on the island they express no desire to conquer or build on it; they instead live peaceably and cultivate the land. It is not until Brutus arrives that Albion is subjected to the 'civilizing' forces of warfare, building and trade. While Albina's giant descendants are easily overcome by the Greco-Roman 'civilization' of Brutus, *Dominion* tasks its players with carrying out the same work. *Dominion*'s opening narrative also marks a similar movement from an arable, subsistence farmed landscape – 'a small pleasant kingdom of rivers and evergreens' – to one open to conquering, building and commerce. This becomes particularly evident in the game's expansions, which suggest the further expansion of territory, trade and industry. The players thus perform the role of Brutus. Like Albina, whose name is superseded by Brutus' in Britain's re-naming, the maternal line provides both the origin of the drive to dominate and a warning against reversion to a prior, less civilized time.

The tension this opening establishes between male and female gendered activities and their implied moral statuses is continued through *Dominion*'s gameplay. The game's several expansion packs treat both the medieval and gender slightly differently. In early

2016, when the research for this paper was undertaken, *Dominion* and its expansion packs had between them:

108 cards featuring male figures (of which 5% are ‘fantasy’ or romance roles, that is, roles that are inspired by medieval legend or literature but could not have historically existed e.g. giant, golem, cultist). The majority of these benefit the player.

27 cards featuring female figures (of which 56% are ‘fantasy’ roles, for example, witches and female knights). The majority of these benefit the player but are malignant towards other players.

74 cards featuring scenes or spaces with men in them

24 cards featuring scenes or spaces with women in them.

While several cards show multiple figures in one environment, there is a significant lack of cards showing men and women occupying the same spaces. In those that do, these spaces are chiefly celebratory or carnivalesque environments (as opposed to, say, commercial, craft or domestic environments). This gives the impression of a medieval era in which men and women lived separate lives and women were generally excluded from commercial life. As Angela Jane Weisl observes, this creates a simpler, if historically unrealistic, game world: ‘by conforming to older genres, modern stories continue ideas and assumptions – such as those about race and gender – that can no longer be intellectually articulated.’¹⁴ While recent historical work attests to the complexity of female commercial production and trade in the Middle Ages, in the world of *Dominion* these roles are marginalized or absent.

In contrast, the 2008 base game features a complex variety of male occupations and trades. The male figures making up the action cards may be placed into five categories:

Fighting Men: Militia

Exploring Men: Adventurer

Criminal Men: Spy, Thief

Working Men: Mine, Smithy, Woodcutter

Bureaucratic Men: Chancellor, Bureaucrat, Moneylender

Although *Dominion*’s expansion packs add more male figures and roles to the game, these categories remain constant. I have not included the category ‘religious men’ here as, while the game’s expansions contain roles hinting at a kind of pre-Christian faith (such as Soothsayer and Cultist – both of which are represented as being of ambiguous sex in the artwork), the only recognizably medieval religious figure is that of the hermit. Likewise, knights are missing from the base game, though they do appear (anachronistically) in the *Dark Ages* expansion pack and in a single foreground figure on the Village card. In the base set, the Militia card provides a distinctly un-chivalric (and perhaps, more realistic) portrayal of military force, giving its player two gold coins while forcing other players to discard cards to their disadvantage. This suits the conquest-driven nature of the game’s narrative. Again, times are collapsed in the artwork of the Militia card. The two soldiers wear a mixture of Viking, Saxon and Norman armour,

including the kind of leather tunic worn by Guy of Ponthieu in the Bayeux Tapestry.¹⁵ This hotchpotch of military gear marks the militia out as having apparently pillaged across history, thus making them timeless and stateless representations of fighting men and diminishing any potential chivalry associated with their role. Two further depictions of disreputable masculinity appear in the attack cards of Spy and Thief. These loosely resemble the most famous outlaw, Robin Hood – a figure whose film representations, Andrew Higson has noted, frequently blur the boundaries between different periods.¹⁶ Depictions of working men also have something of Robin Hood about their costuming, while the long-bearded man working in the Smithy draws on the aesthetic legacy of Tolkien's dwarves. Meanwhile, the dress of the second figure in the Smithy, with his double-bladed axe, braided beards and leather fetish-wear, appears to emphasize the most threatening aspect of the labouring craftsman's skills.

The bureaucratic men represented in the *Dominion* base set, however, reflect an economically 'civilized' Middle Ages in which the mechanisms of state are seen at work. However, their representation and costuming in the game's artwork places them towards the very end of the 'medieval' period, with their early Tudor garb contrasting with the medievalist fantasies of warfare seen in the other male images. The Chancellor, for example, is an elderly Henry VII lookalike and grants his player gold. Meanwhile, the Bureaucrat and Moneylender perform more morally complex transactions, as they each temporarily increase their player's money while sabotaging the next turn of the other players. The occupations of these male figures, who are engaged in political and economic, rather than military functions, is communicated through their presentation in the game's artwork. The Moneylender card shows a pale, thin bespectacled, young figure wearing an early Tudor man's bonnet, seemingly in velvet. While his clothing is ambiguous on this small card, it appear to be a loose white robe. The Bureaucrat, meanwhile, appears in a wide-sleeved pink shirt, a neatly-trimmed, well cared-for beard and small early Tudor hat. Noting the beard's preponderance in early Renaissance portraiture, Will Fisher has argued that 'Renaissance facial hair often conferred masculinity: the beard made the man.'¹⁷ Both the Bureaucrat and the Moneylender are surrounded by books and both wear a jewelled ring on their right hands. While the pink and white colours of their costumes are expensive, their clothes do not have the layered, hotchpotch nature of the clothing associated with warfare in the game. In playing these cards, the player engages with an age in which there is a perceived introduction of bureaucracy and more complex monetary systems.

These cards, alongside the Chancellor's nod to early Tudor portraiture, therefore not only align more 'civilized' economic structures with a later, Tudor age but also indicate difference from the game's (medieval) military masculine identities, locating the violence involved in conquest in a 'medieval' past. While creating a game world sophisticated enough to contain bureaucrats, chancellors and libraries, *Dominion* creates a 'middle' ages which is, as Pat Clements has suggested, 'filtered through a variety of eras, cultures, zeitgeists'.¹⁸ The 'filtering' effect of *Dominion*'s asynchronous medievalism aligns its male figures with a variety of time periods and features Saxon, Norman, Viking and Tudor elements in its imagining of masculinity.¹⁹ As Daniel T. Kline's discussion of the 'virtual medieval' in digital games attests, this palimpsest of temporal signifiers 'reveal[s] a constellation of related ideas that influence a game

player's understanding of the Middle Ages'.²⁰ It also, however, maintains the idea of a Middle Ages of warfare and primitive administration, which did not develop into something more complex until the Tudor period.

Yet while the artwork of *Dominion's* cards show an attempt to reflect diversity in its depictions of medieval and early modern masculinities, its temporal inconsistency indicates that the game is not so much concerned about reflecting historical research as it is in reproducing extant medievalist cultural productions already made familiar through film and digital gaming cultures. Male figures also appear in the artwork for the Festival, Mine, Library, Village and Laboratory cards. Between them, these place/space cards give the impression of a Middle Ages that is simultaneously chivalric, industrious, learned and scientifically advanced. Yet these are solely masculine spaces. The lack of inclusion of female and non-white bodies in game play is an issue much discussed in digital game criticism as something which 'privileges the ethics of simulation' over plurality or inclusivity.²¹ As Aaron Trammel has noted:

Pursuits of authentic recreations and representations of past histories (such as in historical re-enactments) can be problematic for the ways in which they offer an airtight alibi for the reproduction of predominantly white, male, historical vignettes.²²

This game, like many other medievalist products, presents histories that are ultimately outdated – that is, histories compiled before feminist historical and literary enquiries began to take notice of the ways in which women *were* present in medieval spaces. The game's depiction of a Middle Ages of binary exclusion consequently leaves no space to acknowledge figures such as the nuns of Syon Abbey, who held one of the biggest libraries in fifteenth-century England, women engaging in trade and craft, the women who worked in smelting and sorting ore in mines, or the many female thinkers whose writings covered a variety of theological and scientific subjects.²³ The game's chief problem is not, therefore, so much a question of its 'authenticity', but a question about what we view as 'past history' and whose past histories we choose to reproduce.

The original *Dominion* base game represents the medieval female in a single card: the Witch. Unlike the game's male figures, the figure of the Witch straddles the limen between medievalism and fantasy. Accounts of witchcraft are more a feature of the sixteenth century than the Middle Ages, though the conception of a 'medieval era' which burnt and tortured witches is firmly entrenched in modern popular culture.²⁴ Furthermore, the witch depicted in *Dominion's* gameplay and artwork feeds more into modern fantasy than medievalist tropes. The Witch does not look like an elderly woman, midwife, herbalist or any of the other female groups who fell victim to witchcraft accusations during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.²⁵ Her body is cloaked and her long fingernails twist between them a spell, suggesting that she is really able to conduct supernatural activity, rather than merely being accused of it. This card is unambiguously malicious. While there are four male cards (Bureaucrat, Militia, Spy and Thief) whose actions are beneficial towards their player while acting malignantly towards others, the Witch card is the only one whose sole feature is to devalue other player's cards. The other players gain a curse card, losing some of their

victory points. The game's sole female figure therefore poses a threat to the players' land-based economies.

The Witch's spectrality is based on the fact she is the only character in the base set to occupy a fantasy status. In moving the game's medievalism to medievalist fantasy, the card effectively removes all medieval female bodies from the game's playing space. It also suggests the absence of the female body from the *medieval* social space. The Witch, unlike the Miner, Smith, Chancellor or Moneylender, is not part of an economic community, but outside it: the ultimate 'other'. Witches are found at the edges, not the centers, of civilizations. In medieval romance, they are also almost always distinguished by their malignant opposition to masculine progress and rule.²⁶ This dynamic is also reflected in the Arthurian board game *Shadows Over Camelot* (2005), where the Guinevere cards disrupt the quest-play of the gamers, while Morgan le Fay is figured as the chief enemy, watching malevolently from the margins: 'The forces of evil are gathering around Camelot – the Black Knight was sighted atop a desolate ridge; a scheming Morgan plots her revenge.'²⁷ Like the spectral maternal ancestors featured at the opening of the game, *Dominion's* Witch constitutes a figure of malevolence whose power temporarily interrupts the masculine narratives of dominion, conquest and bureaucratic order: much as Albina in the English foundation myths disrupted her father's attempt to consolidate territories through marriage. Yet the power of these women is always limited. Depending on play, there is usually a point at which *Dominion's* Witch ceases to function as a useful card – something widely criticized in forum discussions.²⁸ As with the Albina myth, the neutralization or 'death' of this card allows players to strive towards the (masculine) 'civilization' outlined as the game's object. This casting of female figures as outside society and crossing into the realm of fantasy is replicated throughout all but the most recent expansion packs. Of the twenty-seven action cards featuring women throughout these expansions, fifteen can be classed as 'fantasy' roles. These include a Sea Hag, Swamp Hag, Mystic, Soothsayer and Young Witch. Meanwhile, the *Dark Ages* expansion contains some of the more interesting female action cards through its five male and five female knights. However, unlike the cross-dressing knights of medieval romance, whose chivalric action relies on maintaining their disguise, these figures exist in a fantasy world in which women are apparently allowed to *be* knights.²⁹ As with the Witch, the knight cards all benefit their player at the expense of the game's other participants. Even some of the more historically plausible roles performed by women in the expansions, such as Herbalist and Peddler, are associated with social and economic liminality. Women are very much marginalized in this medievalist world-building.

In 2016, Vaccarino released a second edition of the *Dominion* base set of cards. In a forum post for *Board Game Geek*, he outlined his reasons for this, which included improving the artwork, rulebooks and card wordings as well as replacing 'some cards with better ones'.³⁰ This involved dropping six cards from the original set and the addition of seven new cards. These new cards suggests a commitment to increasing the representation of women in the game, with the artwork Harbinger, Merchant, Poacher, Bandit, Sentry and Artisan featuring female figures. As these cards are intended to form the base set for other expansions, this significantly increases female presence within the game, while the fact that four of the cut cards depict men or male roles means the game

has far more balanced gender representation. Apart from the Sentry and the mystical role of Harbinger, these new cards are not solely confined to fantasy world-building and represent roles that a medieval woman might have performed. Moreover, several of these are action cards that do not undermine the other players. While Vaccarino does not draw attention to this in outlining his reasons for the changes in artwork and role, he does suggest that gender was a consideration in changing the wording, both of these cards and on future prints of all expansion packs prior to *Empires*: ‘we now use “they” instead of “he.”’³¹ While this does not change the game play or the medievalist theme of the game, this small change in language does acknowledge the implicit gender bias of earlier editions, and the more inclusive ‘they’ allows women to exist in the game beyond a shadowy, malevolent mythical past.

Love Letter

While the makers and artists of *Dominion* are doubly rewriting the past through their first and second edition of their base cards, gender is not (and is not intended to be) an integral part of the game’s mechanics. Later card games, however, do give us examples of the ways in which medieval gender roles might productively be engaged in a game’s mechanics as well as its narrative concept. Unlike the complex 2008 *Dominion* base set, Seiji Kanai’s micro-game *Love Letter* (2012) is comprised of just sixteen cards. Unlike *Dominion*, it takes between ten and fifteen minutes to play and the game mechanics operate via a romance-like courtly love narrative. The player performs as a suitor trying to get a love letter to a Princess by passing it through a hierarchy of other characters. As with *Dominion*, the game’s framing narrative features a shadowy, morally dubious female character. The rulebook says:

In the wake of the arrest of Queen Marianna for high treason, none was more heartbroken than her daughter, Princess Annette. Suitors throughout the City-State of Tempest sought to ease Annette’s sorrow by courting her to bring some joy into her life.³²

Although she does not make an appearance in the game, the arrest of Queen Mariana themes and frames the gameplay, while her daughter’s sorrow becomes the focus of the players’ actions. Again, this is consistent with the kinds of foundation myth established both at the beginning of *Dominion* and in medieval traditions. Patrick Geary has noted that:

Prominent women [in myths of origin] are often distinguished by their wickedness. [. . .] If present, women at the beginning tend to die violently so that proper, male civilization could develop.³³

This arrest therefore leaves the players with a number of questions concerning the nature of this ‘high treason,’ which they might draw on their own medievalist knowledge to answer. Perhaps she, like Albina, plotted to kill the King or perhaps her treason was

reminiscent of Guinevere and Lancelot's story. The Queen's unspecified treason at the game's opening enables the player to invest in an already familiar world, while the players themselves become cast members in this story: performing as a lover trying to get their letter to Princess Annette.

By giving balanced attention to its male and female figures, *Love Letter's* gameplay performs a series of gendered and hierarchical negotiations. Characters are ranked in a hierarchy which indicates their proximity to the Princess. The highest card is the Princess (8 points), followed by the Countess (7); King (6); Prince (5); Handmaid (4); Baron (3); Priest (2) and Guard (1). Within the micro-world of *Love Letter*, the cards gendered female in the game hold as powerful, if not more powerful, positions as those gendered male. This ranking implicates that the spectre of the absent queen might plausibly have filled the empty space above the Princess. With her out of the gameplay, the Princess becomes the highest-scoring, most desirable card – if you can keep hold of her. The rule book characterizes the Princess as rather naïve and easily influenced: 'When she reads enough letters from one suitor, she becomes enamored and grants that suitor permission to court her. [. . .] However, she is self-conscious about matters of the heart, and, if confronted, will toss your letter in the fire and deny ever seeing it.'³⁴ Unlike *Dominion*, which is more invested in mechanics than the character of its cards, this game creates back stories and motives, for each of its figures.

The highest card below the Princess is the Countess. This suggests that, when it comes to narratives of love, the Princess and the Countess form a female hierarchy which circumvents the patriarchal hierarchies of the King and Prince: '[Countess] Wilhelmina's age and blood make her one of Princess Annette's friends.'³⁵ Even the Handmaid is worth more points than the Baron and Priest. This is consistent with the romance narrative tropes which act as the conceit for the game. Weisl argues:

In the medieval romance, women are given a great deal of freedom and authority because of their power in love, and within the liminal worlds these texts construct, women on the narrative periphery may still occupy important positions, ranging from confidants and go-betweens to judges and doctors.³⁶

As the game already inhabits a 'liminal world', women perform more complex functions. The romance theme therefore brings female characters in from the narrative margins occupied by the imprisoned Queen to place them at the operating centre of the game's mechanics. This suggests that the game has a good knowledge of the ways in which medieval courtly narrative operates, with female allies helping lovers to communicate and eventually meet.³⁷ It also reflects medieval accounts in which men express their anxieties concerning their wives' and daughters' networks of female friends and the ability of these relationships to threaten their own authority.³⁸ This fear of female treachery is likewise reflected in the rule book's description of Handmaid Susannah:

Few would trust a handmaid with a letter of importance. Fewer still understand Susannah's cleverness, or her skilled ability at playing the foolish handmaid. That the queen's confidante and loyal servant escaped any attention after the queen's arrest is testament to her clever mind.³⁹

In fashioning the Handmaid as a go-between for both the Princess and her absent, treacherous mother, *Love Letter* reflects the female servant's role both in romance and in comic literature.

As in medieval romance, however, the go-between does not always come out well in *Love Letter's* game play. The Countess's power is limited when placed in proximity to either the King or the Prince. The female hierarchy is limited when the Countess card is subject to a sexually suggestive discard if caught in the company of either of these male cards. Women are also sexualized in the artwork, the Countess being shown in flirtatious positions and wearing a dress which emphasizes her breasts. Moreover, despite her high value, the Princess fulfils the popular medievalist trope of fragile love object. In mourning and, like many romance heroines, without a mother-figure, she is figured as a prize and is vulnerable to male pursuit. More tellingly, she is unable to act except by being discarded and thus losing her player the game. If, as Kevin and Brent Moberly have argued in relation to the functions of medievalism, '[medievalism in] play . . . is one of the primary means through which the inequalities of late capitalism are constructed as inevitable and unassailable', it seems that female characters in this game retain their unequal role as sexualized currency.⁴⁰ Where the game's narrative therefore acknowledges and mechanizes a medieval literary tradition of female agency within the courtly love narrative, the artwork and play remain invested in more limiting medievalist tropes.

Token women

While this chapter has explored only two of a vast and growing number of popular games employing medievalism, it is clear that diverse medieval constructions of women are frequently overlooked in modern game culture. Veronica Ortenberg West-Harling has noted that one of the attractions of medievalism is that it offers participation in a world involving 'returning to a traditionally-gendered role, of women doing women's things and men fighting'.⁴¹ In certain games, however, the women represented are not even 'doing women's things'. This trend is worrying. Studies into gender representation in digital gaming have shown that the marginalized (or sexualized) representations of women in games have led to real-life consequences (often expressed via misogynist trolling and the exclusion of female gamers).⁴² As Adrienne Shaw's work on digital gaming has recognized, this lack of representation not only denies women's right to be present in game-spaces, they can also lead to behaviours which 'flat out reject[t] anyone's right to critique games as cultural texts'.⁴³ Yet as this chapter has demonstrated, critical analyses of games as modern cultural texts (and, in the case of *Love Letter's* storytelling rulebook, *as* texts) can tell us a great deal both about how modern game-makers and players understand medieval gender roles, but also hints at how such games might themselves creatively engage with medieval cultural texts concerning notions of origin, agency and identity.

Recent years have produced a number of works on medievalism in digital gaming, roleplay and 'living history' groups. However, there remains a great need for more consideration of medievalist functions in tabletop game cultures, which

offer material, as well as ludic engagements with ideas of the medieval. As small successes in diversifying gender representation in the digital game industry have shown, there is an ongoing need to acknowledge the gender biases written into the games we play.⁴⁴ We, as medievalists, need to consider how we might use our work to expand popular knowledge and enrich gameplay opportunities, world building and designs.

Notes

- 1 Earlier games, such as Klaus Teuber's *Settlers of Catan* (Kosmos, 1995), Klaus-Jürgen Wrede's *Carcassonne* (Rio Grande Games, 2000) and Bruno Faidutti's *Citadels* (MultiSim, 2000) used an indeterminate 'medieval' era as a setting but didn't engage with medieval culture beyond that. More recent games are increasingly using aspects of medieval social and literary history as gameplay mechanisms. For example, in Sébastien Dujardin, Xavier Georges and Alain Orban's *Tournay* (Pearl Games, 2011) the players aim to rebuild the city's military, religious and mercantile districts after the Norman invasion of 881. Bruno Cathala and Serge Laget's *Shadows Over Camelot* (Days of Wonder, 2005) uses Arthurian romance, especially the works of Malory, to drive the game mechanics and narrative, while, in the short card and dice game *Biblios* (IELLO, 2016), you compete with other monasteries to build the greatest library of rare and illuminated books.
- 2 Steven F. Kruger, *The Spectral Jew: Conversion and Embodiment in Medieval Europe* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xvii–xx. The link between medieval depictions of both Jews and women as spectral, malignant symbols of regression into an uncivilized 'prior' has also been outlined in Joan Young Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews: Reflections of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 1997).
- 3 David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer Editions, 2015), 49.
- 4 See Pat Clements, 'Authenticity', in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, eds Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer Editions, 2014), 25: 'One definition of neomedievalism considers postmodern works that abandon any attempt at historical coherence in favour of a playful intermingling of themes, tropes, images, and referents from numerous time periods, thus revelling in historical inaccuracy'.
- 5 See David Matthews, 'Middle', in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, eds Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer Editions, 2014).
- 6 M. J. Toswell, 'The Tropes of Medievalism', in *Defining Medievalism(s)*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2009), 69–70.
- 7 On the creator's changes and the reasons for them, see Donald X. Vaccarino, 'The Secret History of the Dominion 2 Editions', *Board Game Geek*. Available online: <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1648227/secret-history-dominion-2nd-editions>, accessed 10 September 2019.
- 8 Later editions also feature Victory points as metal tokens, which do not follow the 'land' theme, but which also sit outside the player's deck and do not therefore clutter up their hands with points that will have no use until the end of the game.
- 9 Donald X. Vaccarino, *Dominion Rulebook* (Rio Grande Games, 2008).

- 10 See David W. Marshall, 'A World Unto Itself: Autopoietic Systems and Secondary Worlds in *Dungeons and Dragons*', in *Mass Market Medieval: Essays in the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*, ed. David W. Marshall (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2007).
- 11 Anke Bernau, 'Albina: Remembering the Nation', *Exemplaria* 21.3 (2009), 248.
- 12 On the giants of Britain, see Ruth Evans, 'Gigantic Origins: An Annotated Translation of *De origine gigantum*', *Arthurian Literature* 16 (1998): 191–211; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- 13 See Bernau, 'Albina: Remembering the Nation', 249: 'The story of Albina allows us to think about the processes involved in the construction of a communal web of associations that have to do specifically with national history and which acts of remembrance.'
- 14 Angela Jane Weisl, *The Persistence of Medievalism: Narrative Adventures in Contemporary Culture* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 19.
- 15 See Michael John Lewis, 'Identity and Status in the Bayeux Tapestry: The Iconographic and Artefactual Evidence', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 29 (2007): 105.
- 16 Andrew Higson, "'Medievalism'", the Period Film and the British Past in Contemporary Cinema, in *Medieval Film*, eds Anke Bernau and Bettina Bildhauer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009). On the legacy of Robin Hood as a medievalist trope, see Stephen Knight, 'Parody and Archery: Re-generating the Robin Hood Tradition', in *Robin Hood in Outlawed Spaces: Media, Performance, and Other New Directions*, ed. Lesley Coote and Valerie B. Johnson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).
- 17 On the rise of the beard and its importance in Early Modern artwork and politics, see Will Fisher, 'The Renaissance Beard: Masculinity in Early Modern England', *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2001): 156, 158.
- 18 Clements, 'Authenticity', 20.
- 19 'Asynchronous medievalism' is examined in Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History*, 45–64.
- 20 Daniel T. Kline, 'Virtually Medieval: *The Age of Kings* Interprets the Middle Ages', in *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*, ed. David W. Marshall (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 154–5.
- 21 Aaron Tramell, 'Misogyny and the Female Body in *Dungeons and Dragons*', *Analog Game Studies* 2, no. 4 (2014). Available online: <http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/10/constructing-the-female-body-in-role-playing-games/>, accessed 3 March 2018.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 See the diverse essays on work contained in Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986); Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt, eds, *The History of British Women's Writing, 700–1500* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); and Veronica O'Mara's extensive work on literacy and writing at Syon Abbey, including her *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe* series and her article 'A Middle English Text Written by a Female Scribe', *Notes and Queries* 37, no. 3 (1990): 397. On medieval women and mining, see Paweł Cembrzyński, 'The Ecology of Mining. Human–Environmental Relations in the Medieval and Early Modern Mining in Central Europe', *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej* 67, no. 1 (2019): 26.
- 24 Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History*, 13.
- 25 Alison Rowlands, 'Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe', in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 449–51.

- 26 See for example, the role of Morgan le Fay in Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485).
- 27 Cathala and Laget, *Shadows Over Camelot Rulebook*.
- 28 On the various strategies and limitations of the Witch card, see 'Witch', *Dominion Strategy*. Available online: <http://wiki.dominionstrategy.com/index.php/Witch>, accessed 10 March 2018.
- 29 See Michele Perret, 'Travesties et Transsexuelles: Yde, Silence, Grisandole, Blanchandine', *Romance Notes* 25 (1985): 328–40 at 329.
- 30 Vaccarino, 'The Secret History of the Dominion 2 Editions'.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Seiji Kanai, *Love Letter Rulebook* (Alderac Entertainment Group, 2012), 5.
- 33 Patrick Geary, *Women at the Beginning: Origin Myths from the Amazons to the Virgin Mary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 3–4.
- 34 Kanai, *Love Letter Rulebook*, 10, 17.
- 35 Ibid., 16.
- 36 Weisl, *The Persistence of Medievalism*, 26.
- 37 See for example, the Duenna's speech in the thirteenth-century *Le Roman de la Rose*. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Charles Dahlberg (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), ll. 13434–5248.
- 38 See Sandy Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues: Speech and Gender in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 1–13.
- 39 Kanai, *Love Letter Rulebook*, 20.
- 40 Kevin Moberly and Brent Moberly, 'Play', in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, eds Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer Editions, 2014), 175.
- 41 Veronica Ortenberg West-Harling, 'Medievalism as Fun and Games', *Studies in Medievalism XVIII* (2009): 9.
- 42 Patricia G. Lange, 'Learning Real-Life Lessons from Online Games', *Games and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2011): 17–37.
- 43 Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2014), 4.
- 44 Ibid., 207–32.