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Introduction

Accuracy and authenticity – interactions in contemporary medievalism

Robert Houghton and Karl C. Alvestad

The Middle Ages are an important cultural reference within both popular and high modern culture. The medieval and medievalism is common in contemporary culture in almost every genre and media format. Numerous TV series including *Game of Thrones*, *Vikings* and *Tudors* draw on medieval stories and imagery.¹ Films from *Lord of the Rings* to any of the range of Robin Hood films have followed the same trend.² Tabletop and computer games increasingly engage with the Middle Ages, either directly or through fantasy settings, and draw growing audiences.³ There is a growing trail of tourism to sites of real or imagined historical significance.⁴ Medieval historical and fantasy literature has undergone something of a renaissance in recent years.⁵ This all implies a broad interaction with the Middle Ages and a complex and changing construction of cultural perceptions of the period.

In recent years, a concern for an accurate or authentic representation of the Middle Ages has formed a core element of this popular interaction.⁶ There is a substantial demand for 'historical accuracy' among the audiences of modern media concerning the Middle Ages, and presenting an 'authentic experience' can have considerable commercial value. Popular discussion around depictions of the Middle Ages in modern media is often dominated by arguments about the authenticity of a particular work or element of a work. Critique of accuracy has also formed a core element of academic interaction with popular medievalism.⁷

On the surface, this drive for accuracy appears harmless or even beneficial. An apparently authentic environment can support audience immersion in any form of media. Medieval stories can act as the basis for entertaining retellings through modern media. The draw of an 'authentically' historical site may expose a greater portion of the public to the period. More generally, much of the appeal of historical media is its ability to convey knowledge of the past. A degree of historical accuracy is clearly desirable for these purposes.

However, these demands for accuracy and authenticity are often problematic. Those demanding accuracy are sometimes incompletely informed about the Middle Ages and demands for authenticity are based on modern perceptions of the Middle Ages rather than the reality of the period.⁸ There is also substantial debate over the definition of historical accuracy and authenticity across and within media forms:⁹ Are

they the slavish recreation of the past? Or the creation of a believable setting for a story? Moreover, and most problematically, 'historical accuracy' is frequently used to justify the proliferation of racist, sexist and nationalist rhetoric.

The democratization of popular medievalism

Scholarly discussion around the medieval in modern culture has grown and evolved significantly in recent years, contributing to a vibrant and active debate around modern medievalism. Key voices in this discussion have been presented in a series of edited volumes including *History and the Media*,¹⁰ *Playing with the Past*¹¹ and *Neomedievalism in the Media*.¹² More recently, Andrew Elliott's *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media* (Boydell & Brewer, 2017) has nuanced the debate with a concise and detailed piece about the importance of mass media in modern medievalism.¹³

Popular interaction with the medieval and medievalism is not a new phenomenon, but it has changed substantially in recent decades. Paralleling the rise of mass tourism in the second half of the twentieth century, popular demand for and interaction with the medieval through commercialization and innovation has changed the form and use of the medieval in modern culture. A broader spectrum of audiences seek out new experiences and interactions with the medieval through tourism, amusement parks, films and games. This growing demand for opportunities to experience the medieval or medievalism is perhaps demonstrated most strongly through the emergence and popularity of 'medieval' pilgrimage routes throughout Europe and the guided tours dedicated to themes such as *Game of Thrones* and the Viking Age in relevant sites as discussed by Megan Arnott in her chapter in this book.

Technological and social changes have simultaneously altered the way in which audiences interact with popular medievalism. Media of all formats is more readily available to growing audiences as access to TV and the internet widens. Social media allows the near endemic spread of medieval tropes, and it positions users as the constructors and curators of the medievalism in which they participate.¹⁴ Digital games allow immersive interaction with the past in a different way from other modern media and very much centre the player within their medieval and medievalist worlds.¹⁵

In short, popular medievalism has become democratized to a quite substantial extent. Audiences have transitioned from a relatively passive role as recipients of knowledge dispensed by the creators of popular media to a more active role, by driving the discussion and shape of medievalism to a much greater degree.

This democratization has shaped the messages and cultural relevance of popular medievalism, and, in conjunction with changing cultural and political environments, this process has contributed to several negative trends within contemporary medievalism. The use of the Middle Ages as a backdrop for the presentation of race,¹⁶ nationality,¹⁷ gender¹⁸ and other key contemporary issues in modern media has been critically analysed through various methods within numerous disciplines, as has the impact of these representations on modern society and their role in broader cultural issues. In many cases, whether intentionally or coincidentally, the use of the medieval and medievalism within popular media upholds regressive social values

and contributes to harmful political agendas. Many of these modern appropriations of the medieval past have roots in earlier academic and political approaches to the period, although in each case contemporary variations have emerged around the broad themes. The substantive change here is not so much that of ideas or ideals, but of audience size and participation. The democratization of popular medievalism has allowed the unprecedented spread and mutation of this rhetoric.

However, despite the severe and widespread negative trends associated with popular medievalism, there still exist several positive elements within some modern media's representation of the Middle Ages. The educational potential of social media and digital games is increasingly acknowledged, and these systems are being deployed more frequently and with greater success in classrooms at every level of study.¹⁹ There are commercial, artistic and social benefits to the greater engagement with the medieval period, which is prompted by the democratization of medievalism and history more generally.²⁰ The more active engagement with history encouraged by much of this media may promote a more critical approach to modern political issues.²¹ Most significantly, several media have exploited the engagement potential of popular medievalism to challenge popular misconceptions of the period and to dispute harmful modern rhetoric.²²

Accuracy and authenticity

Within this broader trend, a reoccurring topic of discussion within and outside the academy is the issue of authenticity and accuracy in presentation and depiction of the medieval.²³ Absolute historical accuracy is an impossible goal for academic history, much less for popular history. It is impossible to recreate the past as our knowledge is inevitably incomplete. Sources do not survive; those that do distort events to suit the goals of their authors. The histories presented by modern authors are dictated to a large extent by their choice of sources, parsing of said sources and construction of arguments influenced by their own ideologies, social backgrounds and prejudices.²⁴ The creators of popular historical works must contend with these issues, and their ability to produce historical accuracy is further limited by the necessity of producing an entertaining (and often profitable) output. They are further limited by the restrictions of their genre and media format and by the expectations of their audiences. While academic and popular histories in any format may provide plausible versions of events, they can never reliably reconstruct the past.

It should not be surprising therefore that contemporary medievalism across media formats generally have little relation to the medieval reality. Instead medievalism tends to reiterate popular stereotypes and tropes of the Middle Ages: the period was the 'Dark Ages';²⁵ medieval is synonymous with violent;²⁶ Europe was socially isolated and ethnically and racially homogenous.²⁷ Elliott has demonstrated through a series of case studies that the use of the medieval and medievalism within modern mass media rarely has a substantive connection with an academic understanding of the period.²⁸ He contends that medievalist imagery and narrative is often separated from its original meaning through a lengthy and sometimes passive process, which ultimately allows its use as a supporting structure in modern ideologies and rhetoric.²⁹

These representations are potent in their influence and resistant to academic scrutiny and sanction, because they create worlds which feel authentic to their audiences.³⁰ The use of reductive and accessible medievalist tropes provides a much more convenient and recognizable shorthand than complex and nuanced academic considerations, and hence allows the communication of a clearly understood message.³¹ Attempts to counter the misconceptions perpetuated by these contemporary media often enjoy limited success as their nuanced counter-narrative and acknowledgement of unknowns produce a substantially less accessible story.³²

Despite their inevitable and often unavoidable shortcomings in this regard, appeals to historical accuracy can certainly be powerful marketing tools for contemporary media.³³ Many digital games set within the Middle Ages, including the *Total War* and *Assassin's Creed* franchises, lay claim to historical accuracy founded on academic research and this forms a core component of their appeal to a large portion of their player base.³⁴ The advertising for numerous films set in the period including *King Arthur* (2005) and *Robin Hood* (2010) takes the presentation of a 'real' story as their core element.³⁵

These appeals to accuracy can act in more insidious ways. In recent years, the longstanding use and appropriation of the Middle Ages by nationalist, racist and misogynist groups highlighted earlier has increasingly turned to claims of historical accuracy to grant authority to their rhetoric and media. The ubiquity of white characters within digital games set in the Middle Ages or medievalist fantasy worlds has been justified on the grounds of 'historical accuracy' by players and designers alike.³⁶ The absence of women from films such as *The Lord of the Rings* and casual sexualization and abuse of women in shows such as *Game of Thrones* have been highlighted in academic and popular circles, but have been justified as 'historically accurate'.³⁷ The overt and covert narratives of nationalism, colonialism and imperialism present within many museums and historical sites are well documented and the authority and impact of these narratives are driven by the implicit and explicit claims to 'historical accuracy' made by the curators of these sites. Historical accuracy may be an impossibility, but claims to this authority are nevertheless incredibly powerful.

The audiences of these contemporary medievalisms should not be viewed as passive consumers: they play a pivotal role in parsing the vision of the Middle Ages presented through these media. This role is perhaps most obvious within digital and physical games, where the user takes an active role in the outcome of the narrative through interactive play.³⁸ However, audiences of all media formats consume and construct the Middle Ages through their preconceptions of the period.³⁹ Their understanding of what is authentic to the period contributes to their interpretation of the story and its representation of the medieval. The simple act of setting a book, film or game in the Middle Ages establishes assumptions in the minds of the audience based on their conception of the period. They will often expect a violent and regressive society which may drastically alter their comprehension.

The ideas and debates concerning authenticity and inauthenticity that surround contemporary medievalism illustrate contemporary cultural perceptions of the medieval both among consumers and producers; hence these ideas and appeals to historical accuracy and authenticity may be used to gauge wider cultural values,

developments and sensitivities. Discussions about the perceived authenticity and inauthenticity within the audiences of this popular medievalism, and about the steps through which authenticity is constructed by their creators, illustrate the ways in which contemporary society relates to and interacts with the medieval. They reveal nuances and trends within modern culture.

This poses difficulties for the creators of contemporary medievalist media. There is a growing demand for historical accuracy, but absolute accuracy is impossible to deliver and, in any case, will not be recognized as historically authentic by a sizeable portion of the audience. These creators must contend with vocal claims to an exclusionary Middle Ages as the 'accurate' version of the past as well as less divisive but more widespread misconceptions about the 'authentic' Middle Ages. Many creators of contemporary medievalist media certainly have the desire to create worlds close to the medieval reality, for both commercial and artistic purposes, but the desire is often stymied by practical requirements and by popular misconceptions of the period.⁴⁰

The production of medievalist media which approaches the medieval reality can be a worthwhile pursuit, however. From an educational perspective, popular media has a substantial impact on audience's perceptions of the Middle Ages and hence can be a valuable tool for influencing these perceptions.⁴¹ By challenging the misappropriation of the Middle Ages in this manner, these media could be used to challenge the ideologies which make use of misrepresentations of the period for their rhetoric.⁴²

Conversely, a number of academics and creators have promoted the opposite approach: deliberately eschewing the rigidity of claims to historical accuracy and instead employing anachronisms and medievalist tropes as part of their means of countering harmful ideologies in the modern world.⁴³ To this end, the presentation of progressive viewpoints and messages regarding politics, racial and sexual identities, and other issues within media which draws upon medieval themes could be considered to be of greater importance than meticulously crafting a simulacrum of the past. This line of reasoning is particularly powerful within works of fantasy fiction: worlds of magic and dragons already break from medieval reality and hence should not be subject to the more mundane tropes associated with the period.

In sum, the debate over historical accuracy and authenticity within popular medievalism is complex and nuanced and is far from resolved. It remains an important issue within the academy, within the classroom, and, above all, in the wider world.

Interactions in contemporary medievalism

This book addresses several issues of great significance within and outside the academy. In a world where the understanding of 'historical truth' is simultaneously becoming more fluid and authoritative, where 'alternative facts' dominate the news cycle, where authors of fiction and fantasy insist on the 'historical authenticity' within their works and where the validity of expert opinion, research data and reasoned analysis is rejected by those in power, the debates around historical accuracy have never been more relevant. The popularity of games, films, books and other media with medieval or medievalist themes combined with a less-than-comprehensive popular understanding

of the period and extremist groups and politicians willing to exploit these perceptions to further their rhetoric makes issues of historical accuracy and authenticity particular relevant to works which are set in or draw upon the Middle Ages. By employing the expertise of a large and international range of scholars, the book demonstrates the great variance and nuance of thinking surrounding ideas and ideals of historical accuracy and authenticity across disciplines and audiences.

In doing so, this work meshes with a substantial and growing body of research into the use of the medieval in the modern world. Many of these works focus on one (or at most two) variety of media. The study of medievalism in contemporary literature is well established with recent key works including monographs by Young and Carroll, and the edited volume *Medieval Science Fiction*⁴⁴ Among many others, Aberth, Haydock, Bildhauer and Sturtevant have produced learned volumes addressing the use of the medieval in film.⁴⁵ Canadine's edited volume *History in the Media* and Elliott's *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media* provide deep considerations of medievalism in news media.⁴⁶ A number of recent volumes address medievalism in television – often in comparison with other media forms.⁴⁷ Medievalism in digital games remains an embryonic subfield, but is represented by a growing number of scholarly works.⁴⁸ Several important works have been produced addressing medievalism across media more generally, including recently the edited volumes *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, *The Middle Ages in the Modern World* and monographs by Fitzpatrick and Utz.⁴⁹

In contrast to much of this previous scholarship, this book considers a diverse range of media and hence provides an important and underutilized interdisciplinary angle of enquiry. Through a focus on the key issue of accuracy and authenticity across media formats and by drawing together a range of perspectives from different elements of the academy, this work highlights new connections, comparisons and contrasts. Further, this book provides an important bridge across the divide between academia and industry through the inclusion of chapters by the creators of medievalist media in various forms (Black, Theatre; Gottlieb, Board Games; Hiriart and Houghton, Digital Games).

This book explores definitions, claims and uses of historical authenticity around the Middle Ages and medievalism across a range of modern media formats (literature, heritage, tourism, politics, film, TV, board games and digital games). As highlighted previously, numerous authors have demonstrated the importance of this issue both within and outside the academy. Several scholars have conducted work within this area previously, but this is the first book dedicated to the theme.

To this end, the chapters of this book address three interconnected issues: claims to authenticity, deployment of known inaccuracies and methods of creating authenticity. Each of these issues is addressed within a dedicated selection of chapters which cohere around this common theme.

Part I addresses claims to authenticity within contemporary medievalism. The chapters in this section consider the notion and ideology behind purportedly authentic works. They consider the appeals to authority, which these claims represent, and underline the importance of the acceptance of a piece of media's historical authenticity in ensuring the effective transmission of its ideas. Karl C. Alvestad's chapter addresses

the national foundation narratives of post-war Norway and considers the changing approaches employed by the creators of various media and the changing comprehension of historical accuracy among the audiences of these media. Helen Young's chapter uses a case study of the recent digital game *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* to highlight the trend within popular medievalism to promote a vision of a racially homogenous Middle Ages and to tie this image firmly to claims of authenticity.

The chapters in Part II explore the willing misrepresentation of the Middle Ages within modern media. They consider why particular inaccuracies emerge and remain in these works, despite repeated refutations from the academic community, and explore audience perceptions of these discrepancies. Laura S. Harrison's chapter addresses the commonplace anachronism within modern media representations of William Wallace's two-handed longsword and argues that while the representation is certainly inaccurate, this does not undermine its perception as an authentic part of Wallace's story or broader ideology surrounding Scottish independence. In her chapter on medieval medicine in modern film, April Harper demonstrates the disconnect between popular representations of medieval doctors as backwards, superstitious and ineffective, with the dominant academic narrative of practical, if limited, medical practice. She argues that this wilful misrepresentation forms part of a broader tendency to present the Middle Ages as primitive and violent, which has substantial application within modern political rhetoric. The chapter by Sian Beavers and Sylvia Warnecke employs a deep and methodical survey of audience perceptions of authenticity in visual media relating to the Middle Ages to demonstrate a strong perception that violent and regressive representations of the period are the most authentic. In his chapter on medieval combat in modern media, Jacob Henry Deacon argues that medieval fighting practices are deliberately ignored or marginalized within popular medievalism in order to create more visually spectacular set pieces. Daisy Black's chapter on medieval gender in modern card games concludes the section and demonstrates the marginalization and trivialization of women within these games before highlighting the negative impact this may have on gender relations in contemporary society.

Part III considers the methods employed by creators of modern media to produce medieval environments, which will be perceived as accurate or authentic by their audience. The chapters in this section address the limitations of various media forms and consider the benefits and pitfalls associated with the creation of authentic portrayals of the Middle Ages. The section opens with a chapter by Megan Arnott, which considers the impact of tourist expectations on the presentation of the medieval within museums and at historical sites. Owen Gottlieb's chapter describes the development of an education card game designed to broaden discourse around religious legal systems and considers the methods used to incorporate historical accuracy within this medium. In her chapter on user modifications of the digital game *Skyrim*, Victoria Cooper discusses the work of players who strive for a more historically realistic and authentic game, noting that most of this work focuses on creating a more violent environment, but highlighting a number of mods which take a more mature and constructive approach. Juan Hiriart's chapter details his construction of an educational digital game about Anglo-Saxon daily life and discusses the difficulties faced when using this medium alongside the opportunities it presents for educational and outreach purposes. Robert

Houghton's chapter engages with the impact of victory conditions and other objectives on the behaviour of players of strategy games, argues that unrealistic objectives can negatively impact their educational utility and suggests methods through which this issue can be overcome in and around the classroom.

Each chapter builds its own argument on the depiction of the medieval and its relationship to authenticity. However, an overarching thesis emerges: claims to historical authenticity are powerful tools in any media format and these claims may have both positive and negative influences on the consumers of these media and the history they present. The volume in no way claims to be the final word on this subject, but contributes to a diverse and growing field of interdisciplinary study.

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