

Women, Race and Space: An Exploration of the
use of Medievalism in Contemporary Fantasy
Literature

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Abstract

Medievalism studies is concerned with how society responds to, adopts and adapts the Middle Ages within various artforms (and thus create medievalisms). This dissertation explores how four contemporary fantasy novels incorporate medievalisms to re-centralise historically marginalised characters and othered bodies as a means of modern social critique, using the intersecting academic frameworks of feminist critique and post-colonial criticism. Each of the four chapters explore a distinct medievalism that aids the incorporation of modern social critique within the medieval-like setting: for example, medieval re-tellings as feminist (re)mythopoeia; romantasy's subversion of the fairy lover trope as female sexual liberation yet perpetuation of male domination and violence; pre-textual maps as re-enforcing colonial ideologies through spatial absence; and finally, Arthurian imperialism as a continuation of colonial inherited silence, violence and othering of racialised bodies. The focus remains on how medievalisms are utilised, what purpose medievalisms have within the narrative itself, and what medievalisms tell us about modern societal attitudes towards marginalised groups/places. The incorporation of medievalisms into contemporary works can expose how modern society engages with its past, either by perpetuating oppressive ideologies or by using them as examples of how society has advanced.

Introduction

Throughout the ages, people have been captivated by fantastical tales filled with magic, adventure, encounters with the supernatural and romance. In the twenty-first century we label these tales as being part of, and therefore defining the very notion of, the fantasy genre. One of the prominent literary critics in the academic study of contemporary fantasy literature is Colin N. Manlove, who's multiple works offer a detailed and insightful glimpse into the development of the fantasy genre. Perhaps his best-known scholarship, a book entitled *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*, Manlove defines contemporary fantasy as

a fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms.¹

To create their narratives, contemporary fantasy writers may adopt the 'long history of fantasy' in which the conceptualisation of the fantastical 'goes back to the beginning of time' to incorporate, assimilate and encompass the 'magic and supernatural elements of folk narratives, ancient epics and medieval romances'.² Contrastingly, they could also adapt the 'short history of fantasy' which classes fantasy as a 'modern phenomenon', a reaction to the melancholy of realism or scientific fact.³ Regardless, both long and short histories incorporate 'medieval scenarios and mythologies to construct fictional worlds'.⁴ Medievalism has been at the core of the discussion between history and the development of modern fantasy for the last thirty years, distinguishing itself as a separate academic field to medieval studies.⁵ In the introduction to *Medievalism: A Critical History* David Matthews states that whilst medieval studies involves the 'study of the *actual* Middle Ages' and its various literatures, histories architectures, religions, wars etc., medievalism studies is primarily concerned with the study of the *responses* to the Middle Ages.⁶ William J. Diebold reports that medievalism studies, formally regarded as 'peripheral to the study of the Middle Ages', has advanced to such a degree that it is now just as vital to our understanding of

¹ Colin N. Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 1.

² Dimitra Fimi, 'Introduction', in *Imagining the Celtic Past in Modern Fantasy*, ed. by Dimitra Fimi and Alistair J.P. Sims, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), pp. 1-8 (p. 3).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Carolyne Larrington, Hans Rudolf Velten and Helen Young, 'Introduction', in *Popularising the Middle Ages in Modern Fantasy: Neomedievalism, Video Games and Vikings*, ed. by Carolyne Larrington, Hans Rudolf Velten and Helen Young (D.S. Brewer, 2026), pp. 1-14 (p. 1).

⁵ W.A. Senior, 'Medieval Literature and Modern Fantasy: Toward a Common Metaphysic', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 3.3-4 (1994), pp. 32-49 (p. 32); 'Medievalism', *Miriam Webster*, n.d. <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/medievalism>> [accessed 20 Jan 2026].

⁶ David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Boydell & Brewer, 2015), pp. 1-2.

the Middle Ages as medieval studies is.⁷ Medievalism, however, has been historically fluid in its scope. Diebold tracks several definitions from as far back as the mid-nineteenth century, all ranging from: purporting objects/people/things/literatures/art to be ‘authentically medieval’ when they are explicitly not; the incorporation of medievalisms into language; the study of the reception and use of the Middle Ages; and ‘the adoption of or devotion to’ medieval ideals and interpretations.⁸ In contemporary society the images, interpretations, tropes and themes inherent to the Middle Ages have become increasingly ‘popular within popular culture’; TV shows like HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), the CW’s *Reign* (2013-2017) and the BBC’s *Merlin* (2008-2012) are just some examples of media saturated in medievalism.⁹ Although, medievalisms that we see today in contemporary fantasy are deeply influenced by, and arguably are defined by, the Medieval Revival of the nineteenth century. The Medieval Revival drew extensively from the medieval notions of romance, chivalry, feudalism and morality to create various art forms, non-exclusive of paintings, sculptures, architecture and literature.¹⁰ Victorian society’s ‘enthusiasm’ for all things medieval was a direct response to increasing industrialisation, wide-spread poverty and religious discontent voiced by the Romantics.¹¹ For a modern reader, the Middle Ages can still offer modern audiences a romanticised view of social, political and economic realities through the notions of chivalry, courtly love, the feudal order and religious institutions.¹²

Consequently, this dissertation is primarily concerned with the literary responses to the Middle Ages generated within the twenty-first century, and thus shall aim to answer the overarching questions of *how* medievalism is adopted, adapted or subverted within modern fantasy literature; *what* medievalisms are adopted, and for what purpose; and finally, *what* medievalisms can tell us about modern attitudes to prominent issues associated with the Middle Ages – specifically gender, race and colonialism. In this dissertation the term “medievalism” shall exclusively refer to the adoption of medieval ideologies and ideas to create literary spaces that are either exclusionary of women/racially othered bodies, or inclusive because of their subversion of adopted medievalisms. There will be four chapters dedicated to this study, each exploring contemporary medievalisms in literature through several close textual readings that are linked

⁷ William J. Diebold, ‘Medievalism’, *Studies in Iconography*, 33 (2012), pp. 247-256 (p. 247).

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 247-249.

⁹ Carolyne Larrington, Hans Rudolf Velten and Helen Young, ‘Introduction’, in *Popularising the Middle Ages in Modern Fantasy: Neomedievalism, Video Games and Vikings*, ed. by Carolyne Larrington, Hans Rudolf Velten and Helen Young (D.S. Brewer, 2026), pp. 1-14 (p. 1).

¹⁰ Adam Roberts, *Fantasy: A Short History* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), p. vii; David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Boydell & Brewer, 2015), p. 7.

¹¹ Angela Y. Kim, ‘The Medieval Revival: An Influential Movement that First Met Opposition’, 8 January 2024 <<https://victorianweb.org/art/design/gothic/akim10.html>> [accessed 10 April 2026]; Clare A. Simmons, *Medievalism and the Quest for the “Real” Middle Ages* (Frank Cass, 2001), p. 1.

¹² *Ibid.*

together by the intersectional criticism of feminism and post-colonialism as relating to othered people/places.

Literature Review

The first chapter concerns itself with medieval retellings, contrasting nineteenth century translations of *The Fate of the Children of Lir* with Deirdre Sullivan's *Savage Her Reply* to investigate how retellings can create and disseminate feminist (re)mythopoeia.¹³ Women have traditionally existed on the periphery of myths and legends, and feminist scholars writing in the 1970's and 1980's were concerned with the patriarchal ideologies perpetuated in traditional mythological narratives. They specified how re-writings could provide marginalised women with voices.¹⁴ Where Patrick D. Murphy concerns himself with creating an alternative mythological, feminist heritage, Adrienne Rich instead uses her theory of re-vision to enter the original myths from a new critical direction.¹⁵ Instead of creating an entirely new set of myths, Rich argues that women must embrace the negative or regressive nature of myths to prevent the denial of real experience.¹⁶ Taken together, these works articulate the contrary experiences of women in both the real and imagined worlds, allowing for this dissertation to examine how these contrasts appear within the shared – yet entirely individualistic – experience of motherhood.

Chapter two takes the contrary experiences of womanhood further by examining the use of erotic medievalisms in contemporary romantasy fiction through a close reading of Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses*.¹⁷ Whilst there is an abundance of literary scholarship linked to medieval romance, there is very little scholarship that investigates how medieval romance and its presentation of chivalric codes and courtly love has influenced the romantasy genre. "Romantasy" was conceptualised c.2008 and is characterised by its sexual explicitness and amplification of female pleasure in conjunction with references to othered bodies. At the time scholars such as Linda J. Lee and Laurence Talairach-vielmas put forward the notion that eroticisms in modern romance serve as a transformative yet violent experience for the woman.¹⁸ Elan Justice Pavlinich takes this further by concluding that erotic medievalisms blur the line

¹³ Patrick D. Murphy, 'The High and Low Fantasies of Feminist (Re)Mythopoeia', *Mythlore*, 16.2 (1989), pp. 26-31.

¹⁴ Ibid; Alicia Ostriker, 'The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking', *Signs*, 8.1 (1982), pp. 68-90.

¹⁵ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English*, 34.1 (1972), pp. 18-30.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Sarah J. Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹⁸ Linda J. Lee, 'Guilty Pleasures: Reading Romance Novels as Reworked Fairy Tales', *Marvels & Tales*, 22.1 (2008), pp. 52-66; Laurence Talairach-vielmas, 'Beautiful maidens, Hideous Suitors: Victorian Fairy Tales and the Process of Civilization', *Marvels & Tales*, 24.2 (2010), pp. 272-296.

between history and fantasy yet have the potential to be sexually liberating, subverting the normal experience of women seen in medieval texts and extending them beyond the 'normative limits of pleasure'.¹⁹ Carole S. Vance comes to a neutral conclusion, writing that because women's sexual desires and experiences are so diverse, labelling consensual sexual encounters as violent based on their taboo nature can be oppressive rather than liberating. Combined these sources provide a comprehensive overview of contemporary feminist erotic criticism, and because they are applied to an under-explored literary genre within the romance space, new insights can be obtained.

Chapter three marks the transition away from feminist criticism and into post-colonialism. However, this chapter takes chapter two's notion of othered bodies and situates it within the imagined geographies of pre-textual fantasy maps. Sarah J. Maas' novel *A Court of Mist and Fury* is used to explore medieval notions of Irishness and how these are used as medievalisms to create narrative antagonists and othered landscapes.²⁰ Linda Knight, Lauret Savoy and Peta Mitchell all agree that colonial map-making creates the presence of spatial absence because it re-organises the landscape to fit the colony's needs.²¹ In contrast, Anders Engberg-Pedersen and Leah Phillips argue that literary cartography demands that the cartographer (author) place their individual point of view into the landscape, which is then interpreted by the reader in accordance with their own point of view.²² Such studies highlight perpetuated, historical, colonial attitudes within literary cartography, but there are still few academic scholars who are investigating the real-world impact imagined cartography has when it is used in conjunction with medievalisms that other people as well as places.

Finally, chapter four expands on the idea of the colonial landscape and furthers this by examining how Arthurian medievalisms of magic, kingship and knighthood/lineage relate to ideological expansionism, colonialism and racialisation. The primary focus of this chapter is inherited silence and memory loss/control; Louise Dunlap, Saidiya Hartman and Heather A. O'Connell all agree that colonial powers erase the slave's memories of freedom, whilst the destruction of heritage/lineage combined with the trauma of slavery causes inherited silence.²³

¹⁹ Elan Justice Pavlinich, *Erotic Medievalisms* (Routledge, 2023), p. i.

²⁰ Sarah J. Maas, *A Court of Mist and Fury* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

²¹ Linda Knight, *Inefficient Mapping: A Protocol for Attuning to Phenomena* (Punctum Books, 2021); Lauret Savoy, *Trace* (Counterpoint Press, 2015); Peta Mitchell, *Cartographic Strategies of Postmodernity: The Figure of the Map in Contemporary Theory and Fiction* (Routledge, 2012).

²² Leah Phillips, 'A Mapping Sensibility: How Mythopoeic YA (Re)Maps the Terrain of Female Adolescence', *Modern Language Studies*, 48.1 (2018), pp. 46-63; Anders Engberg-Pedersen, *Literature and Cartography* (The MIT Press, 2017).

²³ Louise Dunlap, *Inherited Silence: Listening to the Land, Healing the Colonizer Mind* (New Village Press, 2023) <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/4617121/2>> [accessed 6 November 2025]; Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (Profile Books, 2007); Heather A. O'Connell, 'Monuments outlive history: Confederate

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas furthers the previous chapter's ideas surrounding colonial medieval landscapes and suggests that these spaces are dominated by whiteness, which creates the concept of the Dark Other.²⁴ In addition, Nahir I. Otaño Gracia's notion of chivalric whiteness not only pairs with Thomas' post-colonial criticism but intersects with chivalric concepts outlined in chapter two; chivalry is male centric, white centric, and perpetuates white supremacy.²⁵

monuments, the legacy of slavery, and black-white inequality', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 43 (2020), pp. 460-478, doi: 10.1080/01419870.2019.1635259.

²⁴ Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic* (New York University Press, 2019).

²⁵ Nahir I. Otaño Gracia, *The Other Faces of Arthur: Chivalric Whiteness in the Global North Atlantic* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2025) <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/4396269/7>> [accessed 5 November 2025].

Chapter One: Medievalism in Retellings

Why have we, throughout the ages, felt an innate need to retell stories? This is a question that has been asked by psychologists, anthropologists and folklorists for decades. In indigenous cultures storytelling is a means of preservation, instilling in the next generation the education necessary for continuity of traditions and the education that imparts social norms, spiritual beliefs and history.²⁶ Psychologist Lindsey Braman states that retelling stories allows both adults and children to ‘reprocess and reorganize [their] experiences’, allowing them to understand complex emotions and ‘digest’ events to reach a sense of clarity or closure.²⁷ By nature humans are ‘homo narrans’, passing down stories to the next generation by written and oral means to aid the understanding of familial and cultural identity, history and reality.²⁸ With each retelling, the writer assumes the reader (or listener) possesses pre-existing familiarity with the original text, and thus are able to recognise ‘modifications to the conventional shape of the story and appreciate such nuances’ that these ‘innovations [convey]’.²⁹ Re-writing/re-telling stories is not a modern phenomenon – the medieval scribal process itself produced re-tellings where writers made ‘deliberate compositional choices’ to redact, abbreviate, simplify or amplify specific textual elements from oral narratives or other manuscripts.³⁰ There is no definitive reason as to why medieval retellings in particular have maintained wide-spread popularity; one theory posed by Adam Roberts outlines that contemporary fantasy novels use medievalism to counteract the ‘horrific modernity’ of our lived, real world much like the Victorians did in the nineteenth century.³¹ Much like dystopian novels, public interest in fantasy spikes when there is an increase in real-world political or social unrest.³² Fantasy affords the reader a chance to ‘escape into an

²⁶ Varsha Menon, ‘The Role of Storytelling in Cultural Preservation and Heritage Conservation’, *Diverse Daily*, 8 June 2024 <<https://diversedaily.com/the-role-of-storytelling-in-cultural-preservation-and-heritage-conservation/>> [accessed 19 February 2026].

²⁷ Lindsay Braman, ‘Why We Retell Stories’, *Lindsay Braman*, 6 September 2023 <<https://lindsaybraman.com/why-we-retell-stories/>> [Accessed 12 December 2025].

²⁸ Uncategorized, ‘Family stories – why do they matter?’, *Narrative Inheritance*, n.d. <<https://narrativeinheritance.com/>> [accessed 20 December 2025]; Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* (Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 62-63; John Miles Foley, ‘oral tradition’, *Britannica*, n.d. <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/folklore-academic-discipline>> [accessed 1 October 2025]; John D. Niles, *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 2.

²⁹ Bruce Lincoln, *Between History and Myth* (The University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 4.

³⁰ Gloria Allaire, *Modern Retellings of Chivalric Texts* (Ashgate Publishing, 1999), p. 3.

³¹ Adam Roberts, *Fantasy: A Short History* (Bloomsbury, 2025), p. viii.

³² Ella Creamer, ‘Sales surge for dystopian books after Trump election victory’, *The Guardian*, 7 November 2024 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/nov/07/sales-dystopian-books-trump-election-handmaids-tale-on-tyranny>> [accessed 2 March 2026]; Hermes Falcon & Kendall Covington, ‘Young Readers Struggling with “Reality Overload” Drive Surging Sales of Sci-Fi and Fantasy Books’, *MindSiteNews*, 15 May 2023 <<https://mindsitenews.org/2023/05/15/young-readers-struggling-with-reality-overload-drive-surging-sales-of-sci-fi-and-fantasy-books-experts-say/>> [accessed 2 March 2026];

older, [...] more magical world, a better place'.³³ In addition, by re-telling a familiar narrative contemporary authors are able to interweave critiques of modern societal norms, with the resulting narrative able to 'provide a framework or model for an individual's belief system' that functions within their own social and historical context.³⁴

Therefore, this chapter will explore how medievalism is adapted into contemporary retellings, focusing primarily on investigating what themes or tropes re-occur, and as such *how* they are transformed or altered to fit within the contemporary societies in which they appear. What 'values' are upheld? What 'past' is acknowledged? What 'future' is idealised – and, perhaps most importantly – what mythopoesis is cultivated by situating a medieval narrative in the modern world and applying modern problems, ideology and values to it? Considering feminist retellings, Adrienne Rich's notions of re-vision – 'the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction' – practically transformed the way that the scholarly landscape engaged with female centred retellings, encouraging the reader and the critic to approach a text from their own social, economic, cultural, or gendered perspectives without disrupting the integrity of the text.³⁵ This is particularly interesting when one considers how female-centred narratives that incorporate medievalism can partake in 'feminist (re)mythopoeia': narratives that are situated in our real, recognisable world alongside fantastical elements to purposefully contrast the 'presentation of a feminist critique or perspective of the "real" world established by patriarchally imposed cultural consensus'.³⁶

To answer the questions raised above, this chapter will analyse a retelling of *The Fate of the Fate of the Children of Lir* and its medievalism through the lens of modern feminist critique, seeking to understand the extent of which it is utilised as contemporary social commentary, whilst perhaps revealing new interpretations of the original medieval source. In this chapter *The Fate of the Children of Lir* will be paired with Deirdre Sullivan's *Savage Her Reply*.³⁷ *The Fate of the*

Francis Spufford, 'Myth, monsters and making sense of a disenchanted world: why everyone is reading fantasy', *The Guardian*, 22 February 2026 < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2026/feb/22/myth-monsters-and-making-sense-of-a-disenchanted-world-why-everyone-is-reading-fantasy> > [accessed 2 March 2026].

³³ Adam Roberts, *Fantasy: A Short History* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), p. xiii.

³⁴ Jane Yolen, *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie & Folklore in the Literature of Childhood* (August House Publishers, 2000), p. 17.

³⁵ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English*, 34.1 (1972), pp. 18-30 (p. 18); Liedeke Plate, 'Remembering the Future; or, Whatever Happened to Re-Vision?', *Signs*, 33.2 (2008), pp. 389-411).

³⁶ *Ibid.*; Patrick D. Murphy, 'The High and Low Fantasies of Feminist (Re)Mythopoeia', *Mythlore*, 16.2 (1989), pp. 26-31 (p. 26).

³⁷ Deirdre Sullivan, *Savage Her Reply* (Little Island Books, 2020); Lady Augusta Gregory, 'The Fate of the Children of Lir', in Gregory, *Irish Myths and Legends* (New Island Books, 2022).

Children of Lir is one of the prominent myths in the Irish literary tradition (written some-time between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries) that blends fantastical elements such as magic and transformation with Christian messages of faith, forgiveness and penance.³⁸ Sullivan attempts to reposition the “wicked” stepmother within *The Fate of the Children of Lir*, narrating the story from her perspective and therefore making the representation of non-biological or “unnatural” mothers the focus of this chapter. Alongside these primary texts the principle secondary source that will be consulted is Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*, which articulates the tension between female procreation, bodily autonomy and the patriarchal institution of fatherhood.

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The Origins of the Evil Stepmother Trope

When it comes to literature about motherhood, there is perhaps no myths retold as frequently as those of the villainous, wicked stepmother. She is a staple of the fairy-tale tradition; wicked, evil, jealous, and sometimes in possession of magical powers, today she is most recognisable to the average layman in folktales that have been “Disney-fied”. Mass-market production of “evil stepmother” fairy and folk tales has consequently reduced complex women, their morals and their interactions to two-dimensional variations that serve little value beyond entertainment.³⁹ The most recognisable “Disney-fied” fairytales (i.e., *Snow White* and *Cinderella*) form the basis of our modern understanding of the stepmother role.⁴⁰ However, the collections of folk and fairy tales curated by the Brothers Grimm are not the originators of the stereotypes most associated with stepmothers. These can be traced as far back as Hesiod’s *Works and Days* c.700 BC where he observes that some days are a stepmother, sometimes a mother (metaphorically stating that some days are unlucky, some days lucky).⁴¹ Aesop also has a fable dedicated to contrasting the care and nurture of a biological mother to the supposed false care provided by the stepmother: a gardener is asked why the cultivated vegetables are dying compared to those that are wild, and his response is that the earth is a stepmother to the former but mother to the latter.⁴² Thus the stepmother trope in literature has evolved throughout various patriarchal and political systems to the image that we see in literature and media today – the wicked witch, the malevolent hag, the

³⁸ ‘The Origins of the Children of Lir’, Irish History, 2025 <<https://irishhistory.com/the-origins-of-the-children-of-lir/>> [accessed 18 November 2025].

³⁹ Albrecht Classen, ‘The Fairy Tales by the Brothers Grimm and their Medieval Background’, *The German Quarterly*, 94.2 (2021), pp. 165-175 (p. 165).

⁴⁰ Patricia A. Watson, *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny and Reality* (E.J. Brill, 1995), p. 1; Ibid, p. 166.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 3.

⁴² ‘The Gardener Watering Vegetables’, *aesopica*, n.d. <<https://aesopica.org/en/fables/the-gardener-watering-vegetables/>> [accessed 20 April 2026].

jealous old woman. Fairy tales are folk material that reflect ‘the culture from which they grow’, but some modern retellings are attempting to return them to their roles as social commentaries.⁴³

Savage Her Reply: A Feminist (Re)mythopoeia

The primary translation of *The Fate of the Children of Lir* which shall be used to form the basis of this comparison is the one attributed to Lady Augusta Gregory in 1904, and as to avoid confusion between characters all spellings of names shall come from here. Her translations ‘condensed and streamlined’ Irish legends to heighten their ideological impact during the Celtic Twilight, but they also were critiqued at the time of publication for their emphasis on female characters and feminine perspectives.⁴⁴ The story begins with the coronation of Bodb Dearg who is elected as king of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Lir felt that he should have been chosen, so refused to swear obedience to the new king. To appease Lir (and because his wife had just died), Bodb Dearg pledged one of his foster daughters to him. Aobh was chosen, and during their marriage she birthed four children: Fionnuala, a girl, and three sons Aodh, Fiachra and Conn (the latter two being twins). Birthing Fiachra and Conn was too much for Aobh, and she passed away shortly after. Bodb sent a second daughter to wed Lir and thus take on the role of stepmother. This daughter’s name was Aoife. After a short while Aoife appears to become jealous of the bond that her husband shares with his children, and she becomes ill for about a year. Her illness perhaps gives her time for rumination, and one day she asks the children to accompany her for a chariot ride. She attempts to kill the children twice on their journey – once by imploring her entourage to do so, the second she attempts herself whilst armed with a knife – but both are unsuccessful. Then, when stopped near the shores of Loch Dairbhreach, Aoife uses magic to transform them into swans. When her treachery is discovered by Bodb and Lir, Bodb curses her to be the worst form of being that she can imagine: a demon of the air. Thus, Aoife is transformed, and this is the last the reader sees of her in the original tale.

In Lady Augusta Gregory’s translation, what becomes apparent is that Aoife lacks an individual identity. She has no physical description that sets her apart from her sisters, and they are described in tandem.

⁴³ Dan Donlan, ‘The Negative Image of Women In Children’s Literature’, *Elementary English*, 49.4 (1972), pp. 604-611 (p. 604).

⁴⁴ Rachel McCarthy, Rasika Edirisinghe, James O’Sullivan, Cliona Ó Gallchoir, Rosane Minghim and Órla Murphy, ‘Rewriting Tradition: Quantifying Change in Lady Gregory’s Irish Legends’, *Zenodo*, 17 July 2025 <<https://zenodo.org/records/18340804>> [accessed 2 February 2026], p. 4.

I have with me the three young girls of the best shape, and the best appearance, and the best name in all Ireland, Aobh, Aoife, and Ailbhe, the three daughters of Oilell of Aran, my own three nurselings.⁴⁵

Bodhb's repetition of the superlative 'best' appears in triplicate alongside the three sisters. Triples have been long associated with symbolic meanings in texts originating from the Middle Ages, particularly those of Celtic origins. The number three is often ascribed a 'sacred' meaning usually pertaining to the Christian Holy Trinity, but it can also be associated with increasingly 'abstract' ideas linked to the 'imaginary' or 'non-phenomenal world'.⁴⁶ For this reason the number three often appears alongside the supernatural in medieval texts, and *The Fate of the Children of Lir* is no different; there are three sisters; three acts of violence against the children; three lots of three-hundred years specified within the curse. Aoife, however, is not the third sister – she is the second. The number two is much more sinister.

Two was taken by the mystics to mean echo, reflection and conflict. It [is] the number of contrast, an ominous number because of its ambivalence in posing evil against good, death against life. It [is] a female number, contrasted with the male.⁴⁷

The number two brings forth ideas of the double: Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle argue that texts that feature character doubles implement a 'framework of lifelike or realistic characters to explore what happens when the self is demonically split or doubled'.⁴⁸ The death of Aobh brings forth the destruction of the triad, leading to the demonic corruption of the self. Aoife's malevolence is foreshadowed by the number two; she is the second oldest of her sisters; she becomes the second wife of Lir; the second mother to his children. The latter two points place the concept of step-motherhood within the realm of the unnatural. Ecclesial texts from the Early Modern period discuss stepmothers in this way, with such prominent figures like Bishop William Cowper writing in *The anatomy of a Christian man*:

But here both the naturall mother is to bee discerned from the stepmother, [...] for the chaste spouse of Christ will receiue no seed into her bosom, but the seed of her immortall husband, which is the word of God; and the lawfull mother of the sonnes of God will not giue them any other milke to feed vpon, but the sincere and vnmingled milke of Gods word [...]. And as there is a stepmother, so is there also bastard children, they sit

⁴⁵ Lady Augusta Gregory, 'The Fate of the Children of Lir', p. 123.

⁴⁶ Daniel G. Brinton, 'The Origin of Sacred Numbers', *American Anthropologist*, 7.2 (1894), pp. 168-173 (p. 168); Emory B. Lease, 'The Number Three, Mysterious, Mystic, Magic', *Classical Philology*, 14.1 (1919), pp. 56-73.

⁴⁷ Julian Barit, 'The Lore of Number', *The Mathematics Teacher*, 61.8 (1968), pp. 779-783 (p. 780).

⁴⁸ Andrew Bennett & Nicholas Royle, 'Character', in Bennett and Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 63-70 (p. 65).

vpon the knee of Christs spouse, but neuer sucked her pappes, to draw life and grace out of her breasts [...].⁴⁹

The message here is that only the natural mother can nurture and guide her children into the arms of God as it is her body that He has used as a vessel. To conceive a child through intercourse with her husband is ‘submit[ting] to one another out of reverence for Christ’, (Ephesians 5:21) just as one should submit to God (Proverbs 3:5-6), and ‘he who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food, supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness’ (II Corinthians 9:10).⁵⁰ Ideas of motherhood within medieval Europe were inextricably linked to Christian ideology, which in turn produced conflicting accounts of what or how a mother should be / act. Notions of motherhood ranged from ‘tender [and] sacred to vulgar and blasphemous’, highlighting a dichotomy within ecclesiastical writings that could not reach a consensus as to the value a mother holds within everyday society.⁵¹ However, Christians did not deny the proximity of the mother to the divine; religious art and sculptures often depicted the Virgin Mary as a nurturing, doting mother nursing the infant Christ in her lap (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2), implying that motherhood was a holy duty that the woman would enact for all time.

⁴⁹ William Cowper, *The Anatomie of a Christian Man VWherein is Plainelie Shewed Out of the VVord of God, what Manner of Man a True Christian is in all His Conuersation, both Inward, and Outward. ... by M. William Covper, Minister of Gods Word* (n. pub., London, 1611) <https://www.proquest.com/eebo/docview/2264194297/99844628/1?accountid=130472&docview_hit_text=But+here+both+the+naturall+mother+is+to+bee+discerned+from+the+stepmother%2C&source=Books> [accessed 12 November 2025].

⁵⁰ Pastor David, ‘30 Powerful Bible Verses About Seeds (With Explanation)’, Bible Study For You, 18 July 2026 <<https://biblestudyforyou.com/bible-verses-about-seeds/>> [accessed 28 May 2026]; Pastor David, ‘30 Powerful Bible Verses About Sex In Marriage (Full Commentary)’, 23 August 2025 <<https://biblestudyforyou.com/bible-verses-about-sex-in-marriage/>> [accessed 28 May 2026].

⁵¹ Clarissa W. Atkinson, ‘Christian Motherhood: “Who is My Mother?”’, in Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Cornell University Press, 2019), p. 3.



FIG. 1.1. *Enthroned Virgin and Child* (c. 1260-80), elephant ivory with traces of paint and gilding, 18.4 × 7.6 × 7.3 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA.



FIG. 1.2. Dieric Bouts, *Virgin and Child* (c. 1455-60), oil on wood, 21.6 × 16.5 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA.

Due to this imagery dominating the religious and social landscape of the Middle Ages, the institution of motherhood was thus reshaped in accordance with patriarchal ecclesiastical authority.⁵² This meant that motherhood was determined by the woman's bodily functions for both conception and post-natal nurture of the child, in conjunction with her submission to her husband and God. Anything less than this is corrupt, sinful and evil. Modern feminist critique fundamentally disagrees with reducing femininity to its biological potential. Rich writes that motherhood has 'alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them', going further to argue that our 'lashing' to our bodies is a form of patriarchal control.⁵³ What is interesting is that Aoife never conceives a child with Lir in either the original translations or Sullivan's retelling, and there is little literature which discusses Aoife's potential motivations for her malicious targeting of Lir's children. However, all translations do feature a mysterious illness that causes her to isolate herself for a period of around a year.

[The children] used to sleep in beds in sight of their father Lir. [...] But it is what came of all this, that a fire of jealousy was kindled in Aoife, and she got to have a dislike and a hatred of her sister's children. Then she let on to have a sickness, that lasted through nearly the length of a year.⁵⁴

For comparison, see below for Eugene O'Curry's 1863 translation of the same passage.

But the consequence of all this was, that a dart of jealousy passed into Aoife on account of this, and she regarded the children of her sister with hatred and through enmity. Then she assumed a feigned illness, under the influence of which she continues the greater part of a year. And at the end of that time, she perpetrated an act of hateful treachery, as well as of unfaithful jealousy, against the children of Lir.⁵⁵

In her contemporary retelling, Sullivan gives a voice to the un-voicable. In the above translations Aoife seemingly begins to hate Lir and his children because she envies the familial closeness attributed to biological parent-child relationships. Sullivan subverts this notion, making it clear that Aoife's stepchildren are her 'job, not [her] vocation'.⁵⁶ In this way, motherhood is made a single part of the female experience, not an 'identity for all time' as perpetuated in Christianity.⁵⁷ Although, because to have 'borne and reared a child is to have done that thing which patriarchy

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (W.W. Norton, 1986), pp. 12-13.

⁵⁴ Gregory, 'The Fate of the Children of Lir', p. 125.

⁵⁵ Eugene O'Curry, 'The Fate of the Children of Lir', in *Atlantis* (Catholic University of Ireland, 1863), pp. 113-155 (p. 119) <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433106801644&view=1up&seq=177>> [accessed 7 January 2026].

⁵⁶ Sullivan, *Savage Her Reply*, p. 60.

⁵⁷ Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, pp. 36-37.

joins with physiology' as the ultimate definition of 'femaleness', Aoife's hatred cannot stem from familial or parental jealousy.⁵⁸ Thus it must be born out of marital rape.

Lir decided that the kindest course of action was to give me what I needed. What every woman needed. What Lir liked the best about his wives. A baby of my own. I could barely take care of myself. And there he was on top of me. Too heavy and too much. [...] He kept his eyes closed. He did not call me precious.⁵⁹

Marriage is a patriarchal institution that guarantees male access to female bodies through marriage, securing the creation of legal heirs and property inheritance.⁶⁰ Rich takes this idea further, arguing that 'through the control [in this case, rape] of the mother, the man assures himself of possession of his children: through the control of his children he insures the disposition of his patrimony'.⁶¹ Now, Aoife has a motive for enacting revenge upon Lir; Laura Mattoon D'Amore calls this 'vigilante feminism' which applies 'specifically to the performance of vigilantism by girls and women who have undertaken their own protection [...] against violence'.⁶² Women in such a position often choose to become monstrous in order to defeat the patriarchal systems that oppress them, usually opting to weaponize the very same tools against their oppressors. The tool that Aoife uses is magic, specifically that of sorcery and rituals.

Magic: The Patriarchal Method of Control

Magic aids in the protection of fatherhood, which is at the core of the patriarchal system.⁶³ Lir and Bodb's are both members of the Tuatha Dé Danann tribe, a supernatural race that are usually ascribed godly status due to their immortality and magical abilities. Lir has 'an affinity for water', and Bodb is the son of the Dagda, a king that is known for his wisdom, kindness, and connections to the Otherworld.⁶⁴ Bodb's magic mirrors Aoife's, as both use druid wands to enact their revenge/justice. Due to *The Fate of the Children of Lir* originating within the post-Christianisation of Ireland, druids were depicted not 'as pagan priests, but as magicians'.⁶⁵ Druids were also considered 'true magicians because their power comes from demons', and as such

⁵⁸ Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, p. 37.

⁵⁹ Sullivan, *Savage Her Reply*, p. 75.

⁶⁰ 'Marriage and Rape: We need a law on marital rape but such acts cannot be separated from the structure of the Indian family', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48.12 (2013), pp. 7-8 (p. 7).

⁶¹ Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, p. 64.

⁶² Laura Mattoon D'Amore, 'Vigilante Feminism: Revising Trauma, Abduction, and Assault in American Fairy-Tale Revisions', *Marvels & Tales*, 31.2 (2017), pp. 386-405 (p. 387).

⁶³ Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, p. 57.

⁶⁴ Sullivan, *Savage Her Reply*, p. 72; J.J. Sheridan, 'Bodb Dearg: Ireland's Enigmatic Chieftain', *retrobite*, 9 January 2025 <<https://www.retrobite.com/bodb-dearg/>> [accessed 23 March 2026]; Dan, 'Bodb Dearg: Celtic God of Kingship', *irelandwide*, 8 December 2024 <<https://irelandwide.com/bodb-derg/>> [accessed 23 March 2026].

⁶⁵ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 68.

placed their faith in rituals, conjuring and in the 'powerful objects they exploited'.⁶⁶ The very concept of ritual magic is patriarchal; in his informative work *Magic in the Middle Ages* Richard Kieckhefer describes three functions of ritual magic, of which the first is the most relevant here:

First, it is used to affect other people's minds and wills: to drive them mad, to inflame them to love or hatred, to gain their favour, or to constrain them to do or not do some deed. [...] [The] ultimate goal here [...] is to afflict the victim as a means toward some further goal.⁶⁷

Bodb does not use transformation magic until he punishes Aoife, but the language used to describe his physique alludes to his violent and vindictive nature. His 'hands were large and inelegant', but 'they were always doing something. A vow. A threat'.⁶⁸ Rituals in the Early Modern period were undertaken to 'gain wealth, acquire status symbols [...] or win the favour of a powerful person', and this magic was 'only suitable for a chosen few'.⁶⁹ Such perceptions of ritual magic are elitist and gendered, yet it points to interesting notions of gender status in society.⁷⁰ Some demonic rituals require sacrifices, and therefore it can be argued that in the contemporary retelling Bodb sacrifices his foster-daughters to magically bind Lir as his subject, henceforth quelling his objections to Bodb's reign. In addition, this sacrifice consecrates the subjugation of the woman as mother and sexual slave to the husband, in addition to upholding the patriarchal power of the father

in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour, determine what part women shall play or not play [...].⁷¹

Sullivan's Aoife is acutely aware that she possesses a magical ability that is coveted by men, with her abilities coming to fruition during the breakdown of her marriage with Lir, but before her magical assault upon the children.

I also liked to walk in the wilderness, and barefoot. That is how I came into my power. By listening to the land until it spoke to me, and told me things.⁷²

⁶⁶ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 70; Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 25.

⁶⁷ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 213.

⁶⁸ Sullivan, *Savage Her Reply*, p. 21.

⁶⁹ Catherine Rider, 'Magic and Gender', in *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, ed. Sophie Page and Catherine Rider (Routledge, 2019), pp. 343-354 (p. 348).

⁷⁰ Alan Dundes, 'Defining Identity through Folklore (Abstract)', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 21.2-3 (1984), pp. 149-152 (p. 151).

⁷¹ Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, p. 65; Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, p. 57.

⁷² Sullivan, *Savage Her Reply*, p. 72.

Aoife's powers develop as a means of self-protection. At this point in the narrative, she is beginning to feel herself shift from 'wife to burden' in the domestic sphere.⁷³ In addition, because her heterosexual relationship is significant only 'to the extent that [it serves] a male strategy of acquiring bonds with and control over other men', Aoife comes to the realisation that Lir will never divorce her.⁷⁴ Instead, her will kill her.⁷⁵ Kieckhefer writes that 'demonic magic is linked together with natural magic because the demons themselves exploit hidden powers within nature'.⁷⁶ Aoife has failed to perform her natural, pre-determined role as care-giver and nurturer, and her outright rejection of her biological destiny makes her a threat to the patriarchal system. The realisation that her refusal to become a natural mother (and thus remain a stepmother) has motivated her husband to kill her serves to push her out of the realm of the natural and into the realm of the demonic. This is where patriarchy functions, and thus Aoife engages in 'vigilante feminism', utilising the tools of the very system that imprisons her.⁷⁷

Aoife and Bodb's use of druid wands further emphasise the phallogocentric nature of ritual magic. Rich notes that patriarchal ideology has 'supernatural[ised] the penis' by means of 'sexual possession, property ownership and the desire to transcend death' by having children.⁷⁸ Consequently, Aoife's magic is used to destroy male patrimony and fell what would make Lir "immortal" – his children.

What I did involved unwinding and remaking. Weaving and warping. [...] it hurt my soul [...] to do it. But I was full of resolve, and when I felt my heart soften, I would bite down hard on my own tongue as I had often done in bed with their father as he tried to get sons on me [...].⁷⁹

The interesting element of ritual magic is that it may be deemed positive or negative in nature depending on the purposes they served.⁸⁰ Patriarchal magic subjugates, oppresses and transforms women into the ideal Christian mother; female magic is reactive, destructive only in its attempts to emancipate the woman from the role of mother and wife. The key difference between them lies in the idea of 'weaving', which implies that the self is still in-tact albeit "woven into" a new

⁷³ Sullivan, *Savage Her Reply*, p. 70.

⁷⁴ Aspasia Velissariou, 'Patriarchal Tactics of Control and Female Desire in Wycherley's *The Gentleman Dancing-Master* and *The Country Wife*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Languages*, 37.2 (1995), pp. 115-126 (p. 115).

⁷⁵ Sullivan, *Savage Her Reply*, p. 83.

⁷⁶ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 17.

⁷⁷ D'Amore, 'Vigilante Feminism: Revising Trauma, Abduction, and Assault in American Fairy-Tale Revisions', p. 387.

⁷⁸ Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, p. 61.

⁷⁹ Sullivan, *Savage Her Reply*, p. 101.

⁸⁰ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 100.

form. Male violence is as such that it seeks to destroy the female body – the ultimate symbol of motherhood – when the woman does not comply.

“I am not punishing you for what you did to your sister’s children. I am punishing you for disobeying me. You shirked your duty and have disgraced yourself, your name and your line.” [...] This magic was as old and dark as the earth itself, but it was colder and sharper. There was no nuance. No sense of shaping or weaving. He wanted something to happen, and it happened in the bluntest and most direct way it could.⁸¹

Phallogocentric ritual magic thus serves to physically punish women who do not submit to their predestined nature of motherhood. Aoife’s punishment is to become ‘incarcerated’ within her body, never to touch the earth as a ‘demon of the air’; never to know the Otherworld; granted the gift of speech, but not granted ‘the gift of being heard’; never to be seen; ‘friendless’, ‘homeless’ and alone’.⁸²

Conclusion

Engaging in contemporary feminist (re)mythopoeia gives voices to the marginalised women of medieval texts whilst exploring the functions of gender within these highly patriarchal spaces. Medievalism is represented in the systems of male patrimony, magic, motherhood and Christianity, with the latter still influencing how motherhood is perceived within the modern age. The composition of *Savage Her Reply* can be considered a reaction to the horrors of modernity that are enforced upon women globally.⁸³ Its 2020 publication came at a time where the fight against gendered sexual violence was at the forefront of the public conscience; the #MeToo movement brought attention to the wide-spread sexual violence present in unregulated creative industries, and the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement focused on centralising voices that had remained on the periphery of society whilst also challenging who we think about as the ‘victims and resisters of state violence’.⁸⁴ The stepmother retains her monstrous capabilities within this retelling, but she is transformed from *provoker* to *provoked*, a victim to the patriarchal system who transforms into a villain out of self-preservation. In addition, Sullivan interweaves medievalism into her retelling by fleshing-out the near non-existent magic system displayed within Lady Augusta

⁸¹ Sullivan, *Savage Her Reply*, pp. 122-135.

⁸² Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, p. 13; Sullivan, *Savage Her Reply* pp. 135-136.

⁸³ Roberts, *Fantasy: A Short History*, p. viii.

⁸⁴ Amy Brittain, ‘Me Too Movement’, *Britannica*, 29 September 2026
<<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Me-Too-movement>> [accessed 5 August 2026]; Cathy J. Cohen and Sarah J. Jackson, ‘Ask a feminist: A Conversation with Cathy J. Cohen on Black Lives Matter, Feminism, and Contemporary Activism’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41.4 (2016), doi:10.1086/685115.

Gregory's 1904 translation, causing this to become a weapon that wields patriarchal power and further enslaves women to their husbands and fathers. For a woman to perform magic she must embrace what patriarchy deems "unnatural" and wholly separate herself from her biological capabilities. *Savage Her Reply* voices female discontent with patriarchal standards, urging women to re-claim their bodies and re-centre themselves within their own lives.

Chapter Two: Romance, Romantasy and the Erotic

The romance genre, according to Yin Liu, has a history of polysemy; ‘the Latin *romanus*, pertaining to Rome, eventually generated English “romantic”, with its associations of magic, escapist nostalgia, sexual adventure, and emotional intensity’.⁸⁵ From the thirteenth-century onwards romance literature became implicit with poems, ballads, *lais*, and narratives that had a ‘love motif, the encounter with the supernatural and the elaborate *descriptio personae*’.⁸⁶ Romances from the twelfth-century to the Early Modern period are specifically recognised by their ‘population of knights, courtly ladies, marvellous creatures, exotic landscapes and spiritual challenges’, in addition to the celebration of knightly exploits and sensual longing for a noble (and often unobtainable) woman.⁸⁷ Romances such as these are categorised as chivalric, and the codes of behaviour that dictate the interactions between the female love and her knightly lover are conventionalised in the courtly love tradition.⁸⁸ However, chivalric romances are also noted to feature underlying themes of violence and misogyny that inform the social and political dynamic of the tales.⁸⁹ Some examples of these romances can be found within the twelfth-century *lais* of Marie de France and the Arthurian romances written by Chrétien de Troyes around the same period.⁹⁰ Their wide-spread popularity are exemplified in the sheer volume of manuscripts in which they appear. Marie de France, for example, is reported to have five manuscripts dated between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that contain completed versions of all twelve of her most popular works (*Guigemar*, *Equitan*, *Le Fresne*, *Bisclavret*, *Lanval*, *Deus Amanz*, *Yonec*, *Laüstic*, *Milun*, *Chaitivel*, *Chevrefoil* and *Eliduc*), with only *Guigemar*, *Lanval* and *Yonec* appearing in more than two manuscripts.⁹¹ This popularity meant that medieval writers had a direct and lasting impact upon chivalric romances and the courtly love tradition across Europe, laying the foundations for how these tropes are used within romance literature today.

As we progress into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries chivalric and courtly love

⁸⁵ Yin Liu, ‘Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre’, *The Chaucer Review*, 40.4 (2006), pp. 335-353 (p. 335).

⁸⁶ John Finlayson, ‘Definitions of Middle English Romance’, *The Chaucer Review*, 15.1 (1980), pp. 44-62 (p. 47).

⁸⁷ Roberta L. Krueger, ‘Introduction’, in *The New Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. by Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 1-13 (p. 11).

⁸⁸ ‘courtly love’, *Britannica*, n.d. <<https://www.britannica.com/art/courtly-love>> [accessed 6 June 2026].

⁸⁹ Krueger, ‘Introduction’, p. 11.

⁹⁰ Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, ‘Introduction’, in *The Lais of Marie de France*, ed. by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby (Penguin, 1999), p. 7; William W. Kibler, ‘Introduction’, in *Chrétien de Troyes Arthurian Romances*, ed. by William W. Kibler (Penguin, 2004). p. 1.

⁹¹ Burgess and Busby, ‘Introduction’, p. 8.

romances have been somewhat ‘remediated’ to suit their new cultural context.⁹² Within the last twenty years readers and publishers have increased the demand for stories that situate a love plot within a medieval-esque setting, placing the end result under the umbrella term “romantasy”. It is unclear where this term originates, but it has been used online in various literary forums as early as 2008.⁹³ This is an amalgamation of the words “romance” and “fantasy”, and for text to be categorised as such they must interweave medievalism with ‘magic and wonder, [...] love-story and sexual connections, [...] courtly intrigue, [...] plots [to destroy a villainous figure or entity], elaboration of the hierarchal social system, [...] [and] sex’.⁹⁴ Sarah J. Maas is a behemoth in this literary space; she alone sold 4.43 million books in 2024 spread out across her sixteen titles currently in print, driving revenue growth for Bloomsbury that fiscal year and ‘cementing her position as a publishing phenomenon’.⁹⁵ Her romantasy series *A Court of Thorns and Roses* has sold thirteen-million copies worldwide since the first book’s publication in 2015.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, what appears to differentiate romantasy from the courtly love tradition is the increase in male ‘violence [that] is often addressed with sexual explicitness’.⁹⁷ Unlike contemporary romance novels that stress ‘consensual, egalitarian relationships’ romantasy, by definition, demands the inclusion of the fantastic in its literary politics, social structures and landscape.⁹⁸ This leaves room for ‘the imagined’ world and its ‘transformative capacity’ to take over, which in turn allows both writer and reader to explore taboo sexual desires ranging from BDSM, rape, and incest whilst ‘[eliminating] [...] the kinds of material consequences verisimilitude might insist upon’.⁹⁹ Of grave importance to this academic study into romantasy and its incorporation of medievalism is the work of Elan Justice Pavlinich, particularly her book *Erotic Medievalisms*. She outlines how

⁹² Susan Aronstein, ‘Romance in twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Popular Culture’, in *The New Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. by Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 257-271 (p. 257).

⁹³ Ella Creamer, ‘A genre of swords and soulmates: the rise and rise of “romantasy” novels’, *The Guardian*, 2 February 2024 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/feb/02/romantasy-literary-genre-booktok>> [accessed 15 October 2025].

⁹⁴ Adam Roberts, *Fantasy: A Short History* (Bloomsbury, 2025), p. 242.

⁹⁵ Mary Whitfill Roeloffs, ‘One BookTok Author Sold More Books This Year Than The Top 10 New Books Combined’, *Forbes*, 5 July 2024 <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/maryroeloffs/2024/07/05/booktok-author-sarah-j-maas-sold-more-books-this-year-than-the-top-10-new-books-combined/>> [accessed 30 October 2025]; ‘The “romantasy” novel is now an almost \$820 million business sweeping publishing’, *The Straits Times*, 14 July 2024 <<https://www.straitstimes.com/life/the-romantasy-novel-is-now-an-almost-820-million-business-sweeping-publishing>> [accessed 30 October 2026].

⁹⁶ Tasmin Hackett, ‘Mass’ Court of Thorns and Roses series in development with Hulu’, *The Bookseller*, 31 March 2021 <<https://www.thebookseller.com/rights/maass-court-thorns-and-roses-series-development-hulu-1250919>> [accessed 15 November 2025].

⁹⁷ Roberts, *Fantasy: A Short History*, p. 242.

⁹⁸ August Grey, ‘The TikTok Trap: BookTok and the Normalization of Sexual Violence’, *Student Research and Creative Works* (2025) pp. 1-26 (p. 7).

⁹⁹ Roberts, *Fantasy: A Short History*, p. 243.

modern texts that reference the Middle Ages often ‘represent radical, nontraditional sex acts’ (i.e., erotic medievalisms) that are enjoyed by figures who have typically either been excluded from, or pushed to the periphery of, medieval texts.¹⁰⁰ Such texts are subversive in nature, and often challenge the idea that patriarchal dominance is key to an “authentic” medieval narrative.¹⁰¹ The previous chapter has already outlined how contemporary medieval retellings re-centre marginalised women to defy entrenched patriarchal ideologies pertaining to motherhood and bodily autonomy, particularly through the use of religion and magic. This chapter will attempt to take this further by using Pavlinich’s definition of erotic medievalism to critique and compare how common themes and tropes traditionally associated with medieval romances are used to explore themes of female sexual agency and sexual violence. The main theme we shall focus on is the fairy lover trope, particularly because Otherworldly interventions introduce the possibility for ‘wish fulfilment’ by allowing certain actions to take place that would otherwise be deemed morally or socially unacceptable.¹⁰² Due to concerns surrounding the academic strength of analysing Sarah J. Maas’ *A Court of Thorns and Roses* novel in isolation (which shall henceforth be labelled *ACOTAR*), this chapter shall use the fairy taboo episode from *Lanval* (one of Marie de France’s most popular *lais*) as a means of articulating how the subversion of this trope impacts our understanding of gender within the courtly love tradition.¹⁰³

The Conventional Female Fairy Lover in Lanval

There are two definitions of the word “fairy” that inform how fantasy authors curate them; the first was popularised in the eighteenth-century Celtic Twilight by W. B. Yeats, whereby fairies were akin to ‘fallen angels’, but the ‘exact use of the word’ has origins within the seventeenth century pertaining to ‘one species of those supernatural creatures [...] varying in size, in powers, in span of life and in moral attributes’.¹⁰⁴ The second use of ‘fairy’ is more generic, a stretching of the word to cover all supernatural creatures except angels, devils and ghosts.¹⁰⁵ The word itself was not widely used before medieval times, but in the literatures produced during this period they most often referred to ‘mortal women who had acquired magical powers’ such as Thomas

¹⁰⁰ Elan Justice Pavlinich, *Erotic Medievalisms* (Routledge, 2023), p. 1.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Aisling Byrne, ‘Fairy Lovers: Sexuality, Order and Narrative in Medieval Romance’, in *Sexual Culture in Late Medieval British Texts*, ed. by Amanda Hopkins, Robert Allen Rouse and Cory James Rushton (Brewer, 2014), pp. 99-110 (p. 100).

¹⁰³ Sarah J. Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (Bloomsbury, 2015); Marie de France, ‘Lanval’, in *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby (Penguin 1999), pp. 73-81.

¹⁰⁴ W.B. Yeats, *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*, ed. by Robert Welch (Penguin, 1993), p. 8; Katherine Mary Briggs, *An encyclopedia of fairies: hobgoblins, brownies, bogies, and other supernatural creatures*, (Pantheon Books, 1976), p. 13.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Malory's characterisation of Morgan le Fay.¹⁰⁶ The term is intrinsically bound to female sexual promiscuity, a fairy's chief 'occupation [being] feasting, fighting, making love and playing the most beautiful music'.¹⁰⁷ Medieval romances are dominated by pre-marital and extra-marital sex offered to the hero by the female fairy 'without any demand for the commitment of marriage and without stipulating any directly connected negative consequences'.¹⁰⁸ In addition, medieval accounts of these relationships open up narrative spaces that neutralise actions deemed to cause social and moral problems that would not be acceptable in the human realm and may otherwise be taboo.¹⁰⁹ Questions surrounding the social or moral consequences faced by the human protagonist because of their sexual promiscuity brings us to the implementation of the fairy taboo. This serves to bind the human to the fairy by a promise or vow of some sort, and in exchange both parties receive sexual gratification.¹¹⁰ A conventional fairy taboo can be seen in *Lanval*. When our eponymous character is lounging in a field, ruminating on his recent shunning from court, he is invited to meet a mysterious lady who turns out to be a fairy. She tells him that she has travelled in search of him and that she loves him 'above all else'.¹¹¹ The taboo is an offer to give him whatever he wishes – riches, sex, etc. - in exchange for keeping their love a secret.

I shall tell you the long and the short of it: you would lose me forever if this love were to become known. You would never be able to see me or possess me.¹¹²

Kieckhefer deduces that in romances magical power resides in 'objects', and therefore specific 'conditions' are 'lay[ed down]' for their use.¹¹³ Objects that meet this criteria are usually always owned or disseminated by fairies; in this case, the object in question is the female body.¹¹⁴ The above fairy's offer of 'possession' is used in the active sense of the verb, whereby she will continuously allow Lanval to use her body and wealth in exchange for fealty. In the Middle Ages sexual relations outside of marriage were illicit, with both men and women prosecuted for adultery and fornication.¹¹⁵ Engaging in extra-marital sex privately became a public affair because church and state officials were called upon to investigate those accused of these transgressions.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Yeats, *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁸ Byrne, 'Fairy Lovers: Sexuality, Order and Narrative in Medieval Romance', p. 99.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 100.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 102.

¹¹¹ Marie de France, 'Lanval', p. 74.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 75.

¹¹³ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 129-130.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 130.

¹¹⁵ Ruth Mazo Karras and Katherine E. Pierpont, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (Routledge, 2023), p. 190.

¹¹⁶ Shannon McSheffrey, 'Place, Space, and Situation: Public and Private in the making of Marriage in Late-Medieval London', *Speculum*, 79.4 (2004), pp. 960-990 (p. 961).

Church courts, for example, used penance, ‘a shame punishment’ that often required a public confession whilst wearing a specific ‘shirt, smock or [...] white sheet’ to act as a visual reminder to all who was (and why they were) being punished.¹¹⁷ Therefore, the taboo assures Lanval’s silence in exchange for sexual acts / intercourse and social elevation, classifying the relationship as interdependent and mutually beneficial. All of this, however, is relevant only to the figure of the female fairy lover. *ACOTAR* subverts this trope, making the fairy lover a dominant male figure within the romance space.

The Subversion of the Fairy Lover Trope: Perpetuating Sexual Freedom or Sexual Violence?

Walter Burkert, a renowned scholar of Greek mythology, conceptualises sociobiological theories and their alignment with the persistence of religion in his book *Creation of The Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions*. As part of this study, he identifies patterns in ‘cultural artifacts’ to track the evolution of specific tropes, symbols or motifs that re-occur within different cultures and thus impact our understanding of folklore.¹¹⁸ Here he uses V. Propp’s methodology from his *Morphology of the Folktale* to outline the Maiden’s Tragedy, the principal model structure of the female fairy tale.¹¹⁹ There are five ‘functions or motifemes’ in such tales.¹²⁰

- (1) A sudden break in a young girl’s life, when some outside force makes her leave home [...]
- (2) A period of seclusion, often elaborated as an idyllic though abnormal stage of life [...]
- (3) The catastrophe that upsets the idyll, normally caused by the intrusion of a male [or] a demon [...]
- (4) [...] a period of tribulation, suffering, and punishments, wanderings or imprisonment, until
- (5) She is rescued and there is a happy ending [...].¹²¹

As such, *ACOTAR* can be labelled as a Maiden’s Tragedy. In the exposition we meet the protagonist, a human nineteen-year-old woman named Feyre. She lives in Prythian, an island that segregates the Mortal Lands (the human realm) from the Faerie Realms where beings called High Fae rule over all other magical creatures and entities that live there. The Wall, a magical, invisible

¹¹⁷ Katherine Harvey, ‘Interview of Dr. Martin Ingram’, Brewminate: A Bold Blend of News and Ideas, 14 February 2018 <<https://brewminate.com/carnal-knowledge-regulating-sex-in-england-1470-1600/>> [accessed 14 December 2025].

¹¹⁸ Jack Zipes, ‘The Meaning of the Fairy Tale within the Evolution of Culture’, *Marvels and Tales*, 25.2 (2011) pp. 221-243 (p. 238).

¹¹⁹ Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* (Harvard University Press, 1996). p. 71.

¹²⁰ Ibid.; V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (University of Texas Press, 2015).

¹²¹ Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions*, p. 71.

force-field is the boundary that protects the humans from their faerie enemies. The narrative opens with Feyre hunting in the woods where she encounters a wolf; she kills it with an arrow and skins it, selling its hide in the market. Soon after her home is broken into by a huge beast-like faerie, who subsequently takes her over The Wall and into the Faerie Realm as retribution for killing the wolf (1). It takes them both a few days to reach a manor house, and upon entering the beast transforms into a High Fae male named Tamlin, who is High Lord of the Spring Court. Feyre discovers that the wolf she killed was Tamlin's sentry and close friend, making her a murderer; her sentence is to live in the Faerie Realm for the rest of her life (2). As the weeks turn into months, Feyre develops a romantic relationship with Tamlin. She also discovers a magical blight that is spreading throughout Prythian (3). The blight is caused by a powerful High Fae female named Amarantha who has seized power from the seven High Lords, stolen their magic and thus threatens the lives of the humans beyond The Wall. Tamlin is later captured by Amarantha, so Feyre travels to her court Under The Mountain. When Feyre arrives, she becomes a captive, but Amarantha gives her the opportunity to rescue Tamlin and free the magic of all the High Lords if she can successfully complete three trials *or* solve a riddle (4). The first task makes Feyre use her hunting skills to escape a giant worm in a labyrinth. The second task is a puzzle that she successfully solves, but the third task is the most violent: Feyre must stab three faeries in the heart using ash daggers. Each faerie is wearing a hood that is removed before she stabs them. She kills the first two faeries, but when the hood is taken from the third one Feyre is presented with Tamlin. It is here where Feyre recalls previous conversations where Tamlin referred to his "heart of stone" and she takes this to mean that his heart is literally made of stone. Therefore, Feyre stabs him; Tamlin lives. Amarantha refuses to break the curse and instead beats Feyre almost to death. With her dying breath Feyre realises the answer to the riddle – 'love' – and speaks the solution aloud as she dies.¹²² This frees the High Lord's magic, and Amarantha is destroyed. To thank Feyre, each High Lord gifts her with a droplet of their magic. She is resuscitated, and when she wakes up, she transforms into a High Fae. The novel ends with her return to the Spring Court with Tamlin (5).

Burkert describes such tales as following the 'natural, biological life cycle of a woman', whereby three key events that trigger narrative change: 'seclusion, sexual encounter and childbirth'.¹²³ The latter point has no relevance here (Feyre does, however, have a child in the fifth instalment of this series), but what is interesting is the idea that sexual encounters operate as a bridge between the protagonist's isolation from, and eventual reunification with, society,

¹²² Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, p. 403.

¹²³ Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions*, p. 73.

making it a central part of the narrative.¹²⁴ In addition, modern adaptations of Arthurian romance, as outlined by Elizabeth Archibald, often shift focus from ‘a hero central to the legend [...] to a more marginal character, allowing for criticism or even subversion’ of central tropes and themes.¹²⁵ By centralising sexual encounters within the female experience we are now able to view heteronormative courtly love through the eyes of a woman, who invariably has to navigate sexual desire within the patriarchal court system. Even so, before she can engage with the male sexually the female protagonist must first enter a period of isolation. This is triggered by the implementation of the fairy taboo; the one that Tamlin implements, however, centres around patriarchal power resurgence rather than eventual sexual gratification and social elevation. In a pre-textual Prythian Tamlin’s magic was restricted by Amarantha because he refused her romantic advances. She henceforth bound his magic to a curse, restricting his powers until he could convince a human woman who had ‘ice in her heart’ and was ‘willing to kill a faerie’ to fall in love with him.¹²⁶ The resulting taboo is therefore imbalanced; whilst Feyre may find physical pleasure within the arrangement, Tamlin, much like medieval church and legislative authorities, sees female promiscuity as a threat to his masculine power.¹²⁷ For instance, if Feyre were to engage in a sexual or romantic relationship with another man/male fairy, the curse will remain intact and patriarchal power will remain restricted. The taboo therefore justifies keeping Feyre under ‘strict control’.¹²⁸

I’m going to warn you once, [...]. Only once, and then it’s on you, human. I don’t care if you go live somewhere else in Prythian. But if you cross the wall, if you flee, your family will no longer be cared for.¹²⁹

In addition, the masculine body becomes the object that Tamlin uses to implement the taboo.¹³⁰ However, because his body is both beast and man, masculinity in *ACOTAR* is given a distinct animalistic quality that links patriarchal power to the primal.¹³¹ His beast form is presented almost akin to a human guise attributed to werewolves or sirens in popular folklore, whereby the monster resides, conscious, beneath the human front.¹³² Physical appearances are significant to gender identities; within the courtly love tradition ‘men’s visible gender identities’, writes Ben

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Elizabeth Archibald, ‘Questioning Arthurian Ideals’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Arthurian Legend*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 139-153 (p. 150).

¹²⁶ Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, p. 283.

¹²⁷ Karras and Pierpont, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, p. 133.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 132.

¹²⁹ Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, p. 63.

¹³⁰ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, pp. 129-130.

¹³¹ Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, p. 64.

¹³² ‘Significance of Human Guise’, Wisdom Library, n.d. <<https://www.wisdomlib.org/concept/human-guise>> [accessed 25 July 2026].

Barry, 'are established' through 'dress'.¹³³ Clothes and weapons can 'mark' a man 'by articulating marginalized gender performances' or 'unmark' them by 'articulating dominant masculine performances'.¹³⁴ Without the correct 'arms and armour [that] are imbued with gendered significance', knights like Lanval and Tamlin will be 'marked' by their public appearances as something *other* than masculine. Tamlin's weapons are his 'claws', his 'elf-like horns' and 'yellow fangs'; as such his monstrous body echoes 'the valued artifacts' of patriarchal systems, insofar as it embodies the 'precious objects of armour and weaponry' that are as intrinsic to medieval masculinity as they are to masculine medievalisms.¹³⁵ Therefore, violence becomes intertwined with the fairy taboo because if Feyre does not comply with the terms of her isolation, herself and her family will suffer harm.

Additionally, the introduction of the primal into the patriarchal space dehumanises Feyre and marks her as Other to faerie-kind. Oppressive primal power intersects patriarchal ideas with those of race. Humans in Prythian are seen as a second-class species to High Fae, and Rich argues that 'colonized people [are] defined by [the] conqueror as weak, feminine, incapable of self-government, ignorant, uncultured [...] and in need of civilizing'.¹³⁶ Here, Tamlin is positioned as a crusader, one that Lee Manion describes as believing violence to be 'spiritually meritorious' because it could earn the warrior (Tamlin) spiritual salvation.¹³⁷ His salvation lies in the domination of her body. The transformation of the fairy lover from female to male therefore functions to re-affirm patriarchal dominance over the woman, isolating her from society and allowing her to only explore her sexuality within a confined, controlled space. Although, by ensuring that Feyre remains within the private sphere the fairy taboo can offer private benefits and rewards, with the caveat being that violence remains a central function because it was bound to the object of the male body.¹³⁸ Normative courtly love literatures affirm that violence between men is necessary to maintain social and political order; intersubjective violence, as outlined by Alfred Thomas in his book *Wounded Knights: Violence, Masculinity, and Medieval Courtly Love*, happens between socially dominant and weaker groups (i.e., the sexes) and can be presented as a 'somasochistic' relationship where 'the self and other' are engaged in a 'dialectical process of

¹³³ Marie de France, 'Lanval', p. 73; Ben Barry, '(Re)Fashioning Masculinity: Social Identity and Context in men's Hybrid Masculinities through Dress', *Gender and Society*, 32.5 (2018), pp. 638-662 (p. 639).

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 640.

¹³⁵ Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, p. 33; Megan Cavell, 'Constructing the monstrous body in *Beowulf*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 43 (2014), pp. 155-181 (p. 158).

¹³⁶ Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, p. 65.

¹³⁷ Lee Manion, 'The Crusading Romance in Britain: Religious Violence and the Transformation of Popular Chivalric Narratives', in *The New Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. by Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 101-118 (p. 101).

¹³⁸ Chaim Fershtman, Uri Gneezy & Moshe Hoffman, 'Taboos and Identity: Considering the Unthinkable', *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics*, 3.2 (2011), pp. 139-164 (pp. 141-143).

pain and pleasure'.¹³⁹ Such a dynamic can be labelled as a Dom/sub relationship, otherwise known as the eroticization of power expressed in BDSM.¹⁴⁰

Now the Maiden's Tragedy must explore the sexual encounters between the violent, dominant male and the submissive female. Tamlin's animal form is an integral part of this relationship, not only because of the aforementioned links between his beast form and his masculine identity, but also because beastly or monstrous figures in romance 'function as veiled symbols' of sexuality whereby the woman must tame male sexual violence before she can progress into womanhood.¹⁴¹ The power dynamics 'invoked by Dom and sub are eroticized versions – and inversions – of real socially constructed hierarchies'; in romantasy, this provides the reader with an opportunity to observe intersections between sexual desire and patriarchal power dynamics, with special consideration made to the incorporation of violence.¹⁴² Erotic medievalisms represent power through a series of oppositions, especially ones where 'pain blooms into pleasure'.¹⁴³ The following passage is taken from Feyre and Tamlin's first sexual encounter, whereby sexual violence intermingles with centralised female pleasure.

I was about to pass him when he grabbed me, so fast that I didn't see anything until he had me pinned against the wall. [...] He reeked of magic. When I looked into his eyes, remnants of power flickered there. No kindness, none of the wry humour and gentle reprimands. The Tamlin I knew was gone. [...] I couldn't escape. I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to. [...] He ripped his claws free from the wall [...] he still smiled – smiled like an animal. [...] I cried out as his teeth clamped onto the tender spot where my neck met my shoulder [...]. The push of his body against mine [...] made me grind my hips against his [...] and his tongue caressed the places his teeth had been. He didn't move – he just remained in that spot, kissing my neck. Intently, territorially, lazily.¹⁴⁴

Consent from all parties is critical in any BDSM encounter, but it is most necessary in Dom/sub relationships that may perpetuate 'long and continuous histories of systemic oppression'.¹⁴⁵ In the above excerpt, female consent is ambiguous. To distinguish between rape/sexual assault and freely-given consent the reader has to dissect 'the bodily reaction the female character has to the character she is engaging with'; if this is not provided by the writer then the female protagonist's

¹³⁹ Alfred Thomas, *Wounded Knights: Violence, Masculinity and Medieval Courtly Love* (Macmillan, 2025), p. 4.

¹⁴⁰ Pavlinich, *Erotic Medievalisms*, p. 120.

¹⁴¹ Laurence Talairach-vielmas, 'Beautiful maidens, Hideous Suitors: Victorian Fairy Tales and the Process of Civilization', *Marvels & Tales*, 24.2 (2010), pp. 272-296 (p. 272).

¹⁴² Pavlinich, *Erotic Medievalisms*, p. 120.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, pp. 195-197.

¹⁴⁵ Pavlinich, *Erotic Medievalisms*, p. 128.

‘acceptance’ of what is happening will have to suffice.¹⁴⁶ Feyre’s entrapment and her ‘[crying] out’ imply implicit consent, but a reader may feel this is explicit when Feyre reacts to the brute force of his body against hers by ‘grind[ing] her hips’.¹⁴⁷ Elizabeth Freeman argues that this incorporation of sadomasochism

relentlessly physicalises the encounter with history and thereby contributes to a reparative criticism that takes up the materials of a traumatic past and remixes them in the interests of new possibilities for being and knowing.¹⁴⁸

Pavlinich disagrees with Freeman, countering that

because sexuality is a complex source of power that reciprocally expresses and informs the psyche, then attaching racist, misogynistic histories of oppression to pleasure may perpetuate systems of oppression.¹⁴⁹

I argue that romantasy literature allows for both reparative criticism of oppressive power structures and the perpetuation of oppression. Feminist theory has been dominated by women’s fight against rape, assault and other forms of violence since the 1970’s, and it has provided women with the ability to explore, articulate and identify their own experiences with one another. Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Elizabeth Evans and Judith Butler have all published works that explore female sexuality and its polarisation from, interactions with and politicisation of the erotic.¹⁵⁰ However, Arlene Stein and Andrea Press outline that many feminists now believe that this ‘attention to danger has led to the marginalisation of notions of female pleasure’.¹⁵¹ Carole S. Vance argues that women’s relationships with sexuality are diverse, so any feminist theory that perpetuates uniformity are themselves oppressive.¹⁵² Experiencing sexual violence or taboo fantasies through the mode of romantasy can have the effect of reducing ‘the danger women face’ whilst ‘expand[ing] the possibilities, opportunities, and permissions for pleasure’.¹⁵³ However, Maas’ blurring of the lines

¹⁴⁶ Sofia Tas-Castro, ‘Consent and the Romance genre: Why isn’t There More of it?’, Long River Review, 12 April 2024 <<https://longriverreview.com/blog/2024/consent-and-the-romance-genre-why-isnt-there-more-of-it/>> [accessed 16 May 2026].

¹⁴⁷ Maas, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, pp. 195-197.

¹⁴⁸ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010), p. 144.

¹⁴⁹ Pavlinich, *Erotic Medievalisms*, p. 128.

¹⁵⁰ Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (Silver Press, 2017); Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Yale University Press, 2020); Elizabeth Evans, *The Politics of Third Wave Feminisms: neoliberalism, Intersectionality, and the State in Britain and the US* (Macmillan, 2015); Tim Smith-Laing, *An Analysis of Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble* (Macat, 2017).

¹⁵¹ Arlene Stein, review of Carole S. Vance, *Pleasure & Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 30 (1985), pp. 205-212 (p.205).

¹⁵² Carole S. Vance, *Pleasure & danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Pandora Press, 1992), p. xvi.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* p. xvii.

between fantasy's exploration of female pleasure and consent highlights the need for continued research into: contemporary fantasy's use of historic political and social power structures in narratives that glorify male dominance and control over the female body; the normalisation of male aggression; the pairing of taboo experiences with violence and finally, how such ideas affect real-world notions of acceptable sexual behaviour.¹⁵⁴ Erotic medievalisms can provide us with the tools to explore these ideas, but much more research is yet to be done.

Conclusion

The subversion of the fairy lover trope provides a space where taboo sexual experiences can be explored and actioned within the private sphere. However, because male violence is an integral ingredient of the courtly love tradition and various other chivalric narratives, once the fairy lover has been transformed into a male the use of violence becomes a central feature that impacts how male characters interact with the female. Female sexuality is explicit, but still restricted and discussed in ways that maintain its relationship with the masculine. Erotic medievalisms provide historic tools in which to navigate the new literary space of romantasy, but centralising female pleasure is not synonymous with liberating it from its historic masculine restraints. There are, however, some gains made by the inclusion of BDSM-esque experiences. Such inclusions allow women to explore sexual violence and dominance in the imagined world, taking the element of danger out of the equation and maximising the female reader's opportunities for pleasure.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Grey, August, 'The TikTok Trap: BookTok and the Normalization of Sexual Violence', *Student Research and Creative Works* (2025) pp. 1-26.

¹⁵⁵ Vance, *Pleasure & danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, p. xvii.

Chapter Three: Mapping the Other

Cartography is defined as an art form and a scientific methodology. It works on the premise that landscapes – be they imagined or real – can be charted in ways that communicate political, historical or cultural spatial occupations.¹⁵⁶ As a science cartography was believed to reproduce ‘progressive, cumulative, objective and accurate’ representations of geographical realities.¹⁵⁷ Postmodern criticism has challenged this notion within the last twenty years or so, attempting to move away from the scientific method of map-making to embrace a self-conscious re-negotiation of space.¹⁵⁸ Despite map-making being prevalent within many cultures and histories across the globe, Western ubiquity in this area brings forth questions of impartiality.¹⁵⁹ Maps are intended to be ‘rhetorically powerful visual artifacts’ that ‘inform how we experience the spaces of our physical environments’; colonial cartography, however, is an act of political silencing.¹⁶⁰ In her critically-acclaimed blend of personal reflections and historical inquiry, Lauret Savoy’s *Trace* focuses on how colonial cartography in the United States of America ‘reorganised space on a slate made blank – by drawing borders, by coding what (and whom) lay inside or out, by erasing’.¹⁶¹ Spatial absence in colonial mapping highlights the relationship between power and knowledge (or, ‘power-knowledge’) and the regulation of such knowledge through silence and censorship.¹⁶² What is of interest in this chapter is the presence of spatial absence in the maps created for contemporary fantasy narratives and how this applies to landscapes rooted within an unfamiliar medieval-esque image.¹⁶³ Anders Engberg-Pedersen argues that increased scholarly interest in literary cartography stems from the merging of globalisation and digitization; our real-world experience is dominated by maps that outline everything from the weather to polling to crime, notwithstanding geographical maps or topographical frameworks.¹⁶⁴ Engberg-Pedersen goes on to suggest that literary cartography is an amalgamation of our real-world experience and the imaginary, insofar as suggesting that maps are used in fantasy literature to depict ‘actual

¹⁵⁶ ‘cartography’, *Britannica*, n.d. <<https://www.britannica.com/science/cartography>> [accessed 12 June 2026].

¹⁵⁷ David Turnbull, ‘Cartography and Science in Early Modern Europe: Mapping the Construction of Knowledge Spaces’, *Imago Mundi*, 48 (1996), pp. 5-24 (p. 6).

¹⁵⁸ Peta Mitchell, *Cartographic Strategies of Postmodernity: The Figure of the Map in Contemporary Theory and Fiction* (Routledge, 2012), p. 1.

¹⁵⁹ Linda Knight, *Inefficient Mapping: A Protocol for Attuning to Phenomena* (Punctum Books, 2021), pp. 19-20.

¹⁶⁰ J.B. Harley, ‘Silences and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe’, *Imago Mundi*, 40 (1988), pp. 57-76 (p. 57).

¹⁶¹ Lauret Savoy, *Trace* (Counterpoint Press, 2015), p. 75.

¹⁶² Harley, ‘Silences and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe’, pp. 58-59.

¹⁶³ Ingrid Baumgärtner, *Mapping Narrations – Narrating Maps*, ed. by Daniel Gneckow, Anna Hollenbach and Phillip Landgrebe (de Gruyter, 2022), p. 3.

¹⁶⁴ Anders Engberg-Pedersen, *Literature and Cartography* (The MIT Press, 2017).

existing places and regions that have become objects' of storytelling, transforming these spaces into something that is now mimetic and unfamiliar.¹⁶⁵ Mimetic theory is of vital importance to this analysis of literary cartography and its relationship with colonial mapping; as outlined by Homi Bhabha, 'colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*'.¹⁶⁶ In the same vein, Edward W. Said's notion of imaginative geography from his groundbreaking book *Orientalism* expresses that divisions between 'our land-barbarian land' do not require the acknowledgement of the barbarians, for it is enough for the colonist to envision it in their mind.¹⁶⁷ Therefore, this chapter will attempt to: uncover the Other in the pretextual maps of contemporary fantasy narratives; investigate the relationship between the Other and the mimicked medieval landscapes in which they reside; and finally, judge whether fantastical cartography perpetuates real-world colonial ideology by creating (or re-creating) spatial absence.

The Irish Other in Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Mist and Fury*

Maas' second novel within the *ACOTAR* series is *A Court of Mist and Fury* (which shall henceforth be referred to as *ACOMAF*), and once again we are thrust into the lands of Prythian with Feyre.¹⁶⁸ She is now High Fae, having died a human at the hands of Amarantha at the end of the previous novel. The main plot points of this novel (Feyre's and Tamlin's relationship breakdown and her romance with Rhysand, the High Lord of the Night Court), however, have no relevance to this chapter. What is of interest is the sub-plot involving Hybern. The King of Hybern (a faerie) is planning to invade the island of Prythian and re-enslave the human population. A pre-textual war of independence was fought between Prythian and Hybern five-hundred years before the events of *ACOTAR*, with the segregation of the fae and human populations via The Wall the post-war compromise. This introduces a complicated colonial aspect to the narrative. In their insightful book *Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Bennett and Royle not only distinguish between colonialism, postcolonialism and neocolonialism, but they discuss the intersections of these realms of literary criticism in their shared experience of the colony. One such argument is that the 'colony [...] has to do with the colonizing power and effects of

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October*, 28 (1984), pp. 125-133), p. 126.

¹⁶⁷ Edward W. Said, 'Il Imaginative Geography and Its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental', in *Orientalism* (Vintage: 1979).

¹⁶⁸ Sarah J. Maas, *A Court of Mist and Fury* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

language itself, with language *as* colonization'.¹⁶⁹ Irishness in *ACOMAF* fluctuates in the space between colonised and coloniser: 'Hibernia' is how Ireland was known by Greek and Roman scholars, and Hybern is the name Maas gives to the island located west of Prythian, an alteration of the medieval-Welsh name *Prydain* for Britain.¹⁷⁰ The names may be suggestive, but Maas' intention is solidified when the reader reviews the map of Prythian (see Figure 3.1).

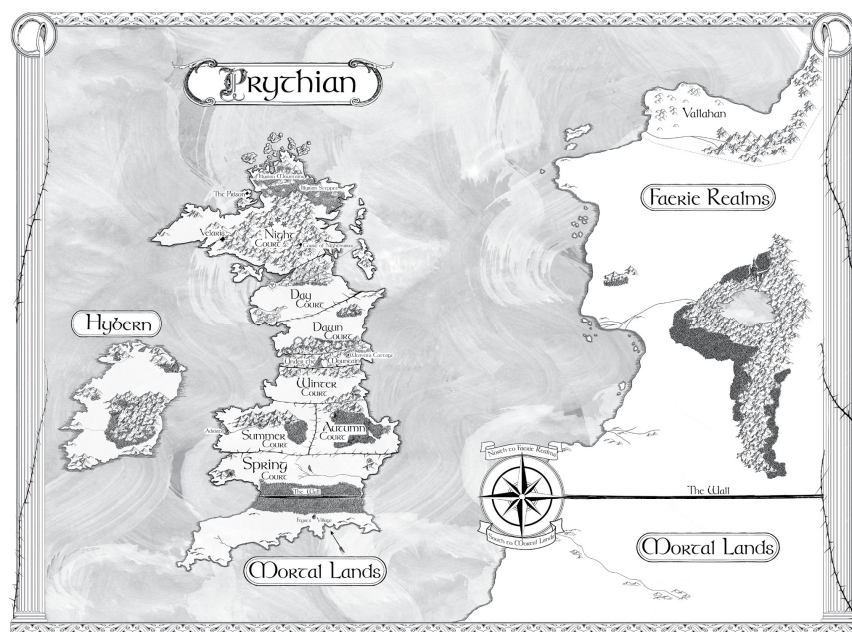


FIG. 3.1. Kelly de Groot, *Prythian* (2015), uncoated offset paper with black ink, 14 × 21.6cm, ACOTAR novel. © Copyright Kelly de Groot.

According to Leah Phillips, pretextual maps are used in fantasy literature to 'shape the "meaning" of [the] place, creating a sense of depth and history' for the reader.¹⁷¹ In conjunction with Engberg-Pedersen's view that fantasy maps draw from real-world landscapes and cultures to create their own worlds, now 'what appears to be valued most in twenty-first-century fantasy

¹⁶⁹ Andrew Bennett & Nicholas Royle, 'The Colony', in Bennett and Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 287-296 (p. 288).

¹⁷⁰ 'Hibernia', *Britannica*, n.d., <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Hibernia>> [accessed 17 February 2026]; 'Prydain', *Gweiadur*, n.d. <<https://gweiadur.com/welsh-dictionary/Prydain>> [accessed 17 February 2026].

¹⁷¹ Leah Phillips, 'A Mapping Sensibility: How Mythopoeic YA (Re)Maps the Terrain of Female Adolescence', *Modern Language Studies*, 48.1 (2018), pp. 46-63 (p. 54).

is not so much escapism and wonder, but rather the adaptation of historical and literary material into an original fantasy world'.¹⁷² In other words, the creation of imagined worlds and societies is now secondary to the preferential interpolation of historical realities that the fiction attempts to mimic, and as a result the fantasies constructed in the twenty-first-century situate themselves far more in our concrete, real world experience as opposed to an imagined ideal. Phillips furthers this notion, writing that cartography graphically represents the 'real' or the 'truth' of the landscape, yet 'despite claims of only describing which is already there, enacts a point of view on those objects'.¹⁷³ The point of view is elicited by the cartographer, and the power of maps is as such that it can shape the social, economic and cultural identities of the landscape.¹⁷⁴ There is little evidence to dispute that Maas' map is directly inspired by the islands of Britain and Ireland; by positioning Hybern as the enemy, Maas is perpetuating a believed 'real' and 'truth[ful]' colonial view of Irishness that has persisted in some form since the Middle Ages.

One of the earliest texts that outright dehumanises and vilifies the inhabitants of Ireland is Gerald of Wales's *The History and Topography of Ireland* published c.1180. In the translation conducted by John Joseph O'Meara in the mid-twentieth century, Gerald of Wales describes the Irish as

handsome, but shameful in their practices and culture. [...] They are a wild and inhospitable people. They live on beasts only, and live like beasts. They have not progressed at all from the primitive habits of pastoral living. [...] the people is, them a barbarous people, literally barbarous [...] uncultivated [...] barbarians.¹⁷⁵

Gerald's choice in adjectives may appear alarming to a modern reader, but his views were not held in isolation. The years of 1550-1650 saw increased English colonial interest in Ireland, and a quick search on Early English Books Online (EEBO) for some of the above descriptors demonstrate that these were widely held perceptions of the Irish Other.¹⁷⁶ Collectively, there are 1,024 results for the term 'wild(e) Irish'; 1,042 results for 'barbarous Irish'; 602 results for 'primitive Irish'; 21 results for 'inhospitable Irish', and perhaps most concerning are the 1,301

¹⁷² Angela R. Cox, 'Celtic appropriation in twenty-first-century fantasy fan perceptions', in *Imagining the Celtic Past in Modern Fantasy*, ed. Dimitra Fimi (Bloomsbury, 2023), pp. 195-208 (p. 200).

¹⁷³ Phillips, 'A Mapping Sensibility: How Mythopoeic YA (Re)Maps the Terrain of Female Adolescence', p. 48.

¹⁷⁴ Mike Duggan, 'Maps shape our lives – showing us not just where we are, but who we are', *The Conversation*, 27 February 2024 <<https://theconversation.com/maps-shape-our-lives-showing-us-not-just-where-we-are-but-who-we-are-224125>> [accessed 15 November 2025].

¹⁷⁵ Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. by John J. O'Meara (Penguin, 1982), pp. 101-102.

¹⁷⁶ Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development* (Transaction Publishers, 1999), p. 72.

results for ‘Irish beasts’.¹⁷⁷ Such ideas of Irishness fed into perceptions of the landscape; J.B. Harley’s theory of spatial absence deduces that its integration into maps of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries stems from hierarchal conceptions of class or race.¹⁷⁸ Geography was a privilege afforded to those in possession of ‘feudal, military, legal or ecclesiastical status’, so the exclusion of economically or racially disenfranchised groups also left them geographically poor and virtually non-existent.¹⁷⁹ In addition, the belief that Irish lower-class agricultural communities were ‘beastly’ in comparison to the urban English firmly established the Irish as Other in relation to Englishness, particularly within the medieval period. As explored in the previous chapter, the world of *ACOTAR* is based upon medieval chivalric ideals and features its own imagined feudal system. Human-esque High Fae rule over lesser faeries who, comparatively, are physically monstrous. For example, Hybern is populated with creatures called Attors who are

All long-limbed, gray-skinned, with serpentine snouts and razor-sharp teeth. And as the legion of its ilk punched through Cassian’s shield as if it were a cobweb, I beheld on their spindly gray arms gauntlets of that bluish stone [...]. Stone that broke and repelled magic. Straight from the unholy trove of the King of Hybern.¹⁸⁰

The neologism ‘grey-skinned’ racially differentiates the Attors from our cast of protagonists who inhabit the main island of Prythian. Similarly to the perception of Irish peoples as Other in relation to Englishness, Helen Young critiques the fantasy genre for constructing images of the ‘Self’ through contrasting ‘Whiteness’ and ‘Otherness’.¹⁸¹ This idea reoccurs often in film, television and literary depictions of the Middle Ages, leading to ‘an array of racist stereotypes’ to flourish.¹⁸² Reader-response criticism is comparative in this regard; Bennett and Royle express that ‘meanings of a text rely, in a dynamic way, on the work of the reader’.¹⁸³ For example, when a reader leaves their Primary World to enter the Secondary World of reading, they apply an ‘internal consistency’ bias that allows them to ‘believe a secondary fictional world is real’ before they can receive enjoyment.¹⁸⁴ Ebony Elizabeth Thomas theorises that this is the reason why ‘people sincerely believe that characters of color are out of place in the fantastic’, as Otherness is

¹⁷⁷ ‘wilde Irish’, *Early English Books Online (EEBO)*, n.d., <<https://www.proquest.com/eebo/results/3F3CD93212954A81PQ/1?accountid=130472>> [accessed 1 May 2026]; ‘barbarous Irish’, *ibid.*; ‘primitive Irish’, *ibid.*; ‘inhospitable Irish’, *ibid.*; ‘Irish beasts’, *ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ Harley, ‘Silences and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe’, p. 68.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Maas, *A Court of Mist and Fury*, p. 561.

¹⁸¹ Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 11-12.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Andrew Bennett & Nicholas Royle, ‘Readers and Reading’, in Bennett and Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 9-18 (p. 13).

¹⁸⁴ Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic* (New York University Press, 2019), p. 71.

atypical within visual or literary contributions to the genre.¹⁸⁵ Like pretextual fantasy maps, racism can transcend limits and place physical, geographical limitations upon the Other.¹⁸⁶ Anti-Irish sentiment is thus a core factor into Maas' establishment of a narrative antagonist, most likely because it allows the reader to draw upon historical, colonial factors which makes their "evilness" believable.

On the Periphery: The Irish Landscape and Spatial Absence

As aforementioned, geography is a privilege afforded to those of higher social status. Consequently, Maas' Ireland is geographically impoverished, for it lacks toponyms. Savoy writes that names 'encode meaning and memory', possessing the power to 'transform a vast unknown into a knowable new chance' by means of linguistic claiming.¹⁸⁷ In this regard Hybern is known and unknown, existing in the periphery of Maas' Prythian map. The core/periphery model of cartography – as explained by Marta Petrusiewicz - 'refers always to an unequal relation' between the 'our land-barbarian land' geography.¹⁸⁸ Ireland's image as a peripheral landscape is both structural and political – historically the country was 'encouraged [into] agricultural specialisation' (structural), whilst around three centuries of English colonial intrigue in the landscape finally culminated in the 1800 Act of Union (political).¹⁸⁹ Such notions are also reflected in the medieval maps of Ireland that date from the Tudor to Early Modern period; here, periphery depictions of Ireland coincided with Tudor and Jacobean desires to '[put] Ireland to plantation' (see Figures 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4).¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 73.

¹⁸⁶ Todd McGowan, *The Racist Fantasy: Unconscious Roots of Hatred* (Bloomsbury, 2022), pp. 2-4.

¹⁸⁷ Savoy, *Trace*, p. 75.

¹⁸⁸ Marta Petrusiewicz, 'Rethinking Centre and Periphery in Historical Analysis: Land-based Modernization as an Alternative Model from the Peripheries', in *Re-Mapping Centre and Periphery: Asymmetrical Encounters in European and Global Contexts*, ed. Tessa Hauswedell, Azel Körner and Ulrich Tiedau (UCL Press, 2019) pp. 17-26 (p. 18); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage: 1979).

¹⁸⁹ Petrusiewicz, 'Rethinking Centre and Periphery in Historical Analysis: Land-based Modernization as an Alternative Model from the Peripheries', p. 19; internal colonialism, p. xv

¹⁹⁰ Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development*, p. 72.



FIG. 3.2. Sebastian Munster, *Des Isles de Betaigne la grand, Albion qui est Angleterre & Hirlande & de leurs citezen general* (1552), 8 x 14 cm., on sheet 24 x 22 cm., National Library of Scotland.



FIG. 3.3. Sebastian Munster, *Das ander buch beschreibung Engellands und Schottlands* (1489-1552), 25 x 17 cm., on sheet 31 x 19 cm, National Library of Scotland.



FIG. 3.4. John Speed, *Britain as it was divided at the tyme of the Englishe Saxons especially during their heptarchy* / performed by John Speed (c.1552-1629), 37 x 29 cm., on sheet 42 x 54 cm, National Library of Scotland.

All three maps disenfranchise Ireland because they either disallow linguistic naming of the landscape or cultivate spatial absence by pushing the landscape into the map's peripheral spaces. Notice also how each map centres the island of Britain. To keep the conquered country in the periphery is to deny them citizenship within the centre, which in turn denies them social, political and civil rights.¹⁹¹ Peripheral nations thus have their ability to self-determine hindered and are therefore more likely to rely on external factors to determine its fate.¹⁹² Each of these maps, be they fictional or factual, perpetuate an interpretation of medieval Ireland as unfriendly, hostile and perverse in nature. Maas' Hybern is 'a terrain of sloping, barren hills' that leaves the visitor feeling 'an overwhelming sense of nothingness'.¹⁹³ According to John Patrick Montañó, one of the foundations of Renaissance thinking is that 'civility' is 'often associated with cultivation and

¹⁹¹ Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development*, p. 165.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

¹⁹³ Maas, *A Court of Mist and Fury*, p. 582.

land use'.¹⁹⁴ In conjunction, what is interesting here is that Maas, through Feyre's narration, comments upon Hybern being a particularly 'sloping' and hilly terrain. Michael Hechter's brilliant study on *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development* characterises the differences between the social organisation of highland and lowland areas in the pre-industrial era.

By and large, highland settlements are relatively pastoral, depopulated, poor, and backward; in contrast, the lowlands tend to be relatively cultivated, populous, wealthy, and culturally advanced.¹⁹⁵

Due to their ecology, highland areas are generally more likely to be economically poorer regions; however, it is 'precisely because of their ecology' that the highlands 'tend to be culturally distinctive' and rich in mythology.¹⁹⁶ Early Irish literatures perpetuate insular cosmologies and centralise Ireland within its own worldview. The *Lebor Gabála Érenn* (*The Book of the Taking of Ireland*) for instance is a pseudo-history of the colonisation of Ireland, which is both inspired by, and written in relation to, The Old Testament subjugation of the Israelites.¹⁹⁷ Such histories determine that Ireland's political, cultural and economic success relies in its isolation from Britain, going so far as to anthropomorphically compare Ireland's insular landscape to divine or female bodies in direct opposition to the unnatural urban English lowland.¹⁹⁸ Grigory Bondarenko summarises comparisons between the landscape and the navel in the chapter *Ireland as Mesocosm* from *Celtic Myth in the 21st Century*:

In a seventeenth-century poem 'Address to David O'Keeffe', some quatrains tell us how an arch druid of Munster, Mog Ruith, came back from the siege of Druim Damgaire and settled in the area of Fermoy and became an ancestor figure for Fir Muighi Féine. He took the land 'of the soft navel of Munster' (*a n-imlind mbhín na Mumán*). this is a hill on which the northern part of modern-day town of Fermoy is situated.¹⁹⁹

Navels hold a spiritual and religious significance across many cultures. Buddhists believe that the navel is the centre of life and vitality; Hinduism connects the navel to the earth through the imagery of the lotus flower, describing the body as a sacred vessel from which life emerges.²⁰⁰ The navel signifies beginning and birth, and therefore the land becomes the mother to Irish

¹⁹⁴ John Patrick Montaña, 'Cultural Conflict and the Landscape of Conquest in Early Modern Ireland', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 40 (2017), pp. 120-141 (p. 122).

¹⁹⁵ Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development*, p. 50.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Grigory Bondarenko, 'Ireland as Mesocosm', in *Celtic Myth in the 21st Century: The Gods and Their Stories in a Global Perspective*, ed. by Emily Lyle (University of Wales Press, 2018), pp. 53-72 (p. 53); *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, trans. R. A. Stewart (Educational Company of Ireland, [1938-1956?]), p. 1.

¹⁹⁸ Bondarenko, 'Ireland as Mesocosm', p. 54.

¹⁹⁹ Bondarenko, 'Ireland as Mesocosm', p. 55.

²⁰⁰ 'Significance of Navel', Wisdom Library, n.d. <<https://www.wisdomlib.org/concept/navel>> [accessed 1 May 2026].

peoples, culture and mythology. Western cartography is in direct opposition to this, because it solely 'originated from the desire to systematically document and control the expansion of empires'.²⁰¹ In response, eighteenth-century Irish nationalist poetry written in the *aisling* tradition (whereby the Irish landscape is presented as a female figure from the Otherworld) often personifies Ireland as a vulnerable woman and positions England as a vicious rapist.²⁰² Bodies are, from a colonialist perspective, expendable economic commodities.²⁰³ Ecofeminism provides an interesting intersection between the feminisation of landscapes and the colonial past. Critics in this field such as Louise Westling and Greta Gaard stress the gendering of the landscape as distinctly female, whereby the patriarchy is 'understood to be responsible for the exploitation of both nature and women'.²⁰⁴

Due to social attitudes that consider women to be the weaker sex, there is a distinct male need to dominate, control and exploit the landscape for personal, social or economic gain. Anti-patriarchal, and thus anti-colonial, thinking will thus provide us with a 'relationship with the ecosystem that is not exploitative and would demand [...] ethics and politics that is no longer driven by patriarchal [...] individualism'.²⁰⁵ Maas subverts this ideology; her description of Hybern as 'barren' directly opposes Irish notions of self as relating to, and originating from, an ecofeminist view of the landscape.²⁰⁶ The land now evokes an 'overwhelming sense of nothingness', resulting in a transformation of perspectives.²⁰⁷ The insular mythology of the landscape is now one of a conscious, hostile, malignant entity, displaying Ireland as a land of colonisers and conquerors, a place re-submerged within its colonial past. What is increasingly unnerving is that Maas has changed the landscape *just enough* so that 'the familiar becomes uncomfortably strange', a duplicity or doubling created within the familiar that is more related to the uncanny than to the fantastical.²⁰⁸ What was once the familiar Ireland has now become contaminated with the unfamiliar.

²⁰¹ Derek Gladwin, 'The Literary Cartographic Impulse: Imagined Island Topographies in Ireland and Newfoundland', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 38.1-2 (2014), pp. 158-183 (p. 160).

²⁰² Josep M. Armengol, 'Gendering the Irish Land: Seamus Heaney's "Act of Union" (1975)', *Atlantis*, 23.1 (2001), pp. 7-26 (p. 7).

²⁰³ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (Profile Books, 2007), p. 6.

²⁰⁴ Andrew Bennett & Nicholas Royle, 'Eco', in Bennett and Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Routledge, 2016), pp.159-172 (p. 167).

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-168.

²⁰⁶ Maas, *A Court of Mist and Fury*, p. 582.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ Andrew Bennett & Nicholas Royle, 'The Uncanny', in Bennett and Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Routledge, 2016), pp.35-43, (p. 40).

Conclusion

Whilst this chapter is by no means a comprehensive exploration into the colonial allusions made by pretextual maps, we can draw some concrete conclusions. Firstly, the Other that features in pretextual maps is the Other that we recognise from our own historical, colonial past. Attempting to map this past is to engage with both fiction and fact, whereby the cartographer faces a dichotomy between their own view of the world and the cultural, social, political and economic realities of the people that they attempt to chart within the landscape. Literary cartography can make the fictional world more believable, but it can also repeat, project and continue harmful racial stereotypes of people and places from the colonial past and give them a new voice in the modern age. Spatial absence and peripheral placement of landscapes appear to be a continuation of medieval cartographic preference, perhaps utilised to make the new, fictional world “more medieval”. Regardless, the mimicking of real-world people and places is a literary re-colonisation of previously (yet arguably still ongoing) disenfranchised groups and landscapes. Ecofeminist criticism could open up new modes of thinking in this vein, perhaps enabling cartographers to move away from individualistic and imperialistic vantage points and embrace a relationship with landscapes, societies and cultures that is not exploitative.

Chapter Four: Arthurian Imperialism as Medievalism

The last twenty years have seen an increase in academic explorations into the historical use of Arthurian legend to justify empirical and imperial expansion. Michelle R. Warren, Christopher Michael Berard and Kathryn Hume all outline the complex, yet intrinsic, relationship between the Arthurian tradition and imperialist ideology.²⁰⁹ Of particular interest is the conceptualisation of Arthur's violent struggle for power over outside forces. Hume argues that empire has always been entwined with the idea of Arthur, with the most widely-cited source being Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century publication of *The History of the Kings of Britain*.²¹⁰ Geoffrey used primarily 'Old Welsh' sources to produce an 'all-conquering British King', an image that was later adapted and used in monarchical propaganda.²¹¹ It is believed that Edward I was the first monarch to sublimate the image of Arthur into a symbol of generalised power, one whose purpose was to 'validate the seizure and maintenance of royal power' and solidify English sovereignty.²¹² This trend carried on throughout the centuries until we reach the Tudor dynasty. It is here that Arthur is absorbed into ideas of English expansionism. From the 1530's England had embarked upon colonial expansions outside of its borders into Wales, Ireland and Scotland, 'gain[ing] an Empire as Britain but [...] also los[ing] its identity as England'.²¹³ To re-establish nationhood as "Great England", Great Britain needed to be secured; one such way was to mimic ancestral heritage between Arthur and the monarchy in the hopes that his sovereignty would strengthen the English crown, and therefore its "greatness".²¹⁴ To establish their "greatness", 'early Tudor kings played up their British (i.e. Welsh [Arthurian]) roots for political advantage'.²¹⁵ This culminated in Henry VII's commission of 'pseudo-genealogies' which established familial connections between the Tudors and the early kings of Britain in an attempt 'to augment [Henry

²⁰⁹ Michelle R. Warren, *Holy Digital Grail: A Medieval Book on the Internet* (Stanford University Press, 2022); Christopher Michael Berard, *Arthurianism in early Plantagenet England: from Henry II to Edward I* (Boydell Press, 2019); Kathryn Hume, 'The Metamorphoses of Empire in the Arthurian Tradition', *Criticism*, 59.4 (2017), pp. 619-637.

²¹⁰ Hume, 'The Metamorphoses of Empire in the Arthurian Tradition', p. 619.

²¹¹ Lewis Thorpe, 'Introduction', in *Geoffrey of Monmouth: The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (Penguin, 1966), pp. 9-37 (pp. 16-21); Hume, 'The Metamorphoses of Empire in the Arthurian Tradition', p. 619.

²¹² Rob Gossedge and Stephen Knight, 'The Arthur of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 103-119 (p. 104).

²¹³ Stewart Mottram, 'An Empire of Itself: Arthur as Icon of an English Empire, 1509-1547', in *Arthurian Literature XXV*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and David F. Johnson, (Brewer, 2008), pp. 153-173 (p. 155).

²¹⁴ Gerald Porter, "Who Talks of My Nation?": The Role of Wales, Scotland and Ireland in Constructing "Englishness", in *Imagined States*, ed. by Luisa Del Giudice and Gerland Porter (Utah State University Press, 2001), pp. 101-135 (p. 102).

²¹⁵ Mottram, 'An Empire of Itself: Arthur as Icon of an English Empire, 1509-1547', p. 167.

VII's] social status [and reinforce] his tenuous claim to the English throne'.²¹⁶ Henry VIII also participated in the perpetuation of these pseudo-genealogies; he directed the re-painting of the Winchester Round Table in 1522 and perhaps enforced the inclusion a Henry-esque portrait of King Arthur seated atop a thriving Tudor Rose.²¹⁷ Eventually this portrayal of Arthur caused the assimilation of Arthurian legend into English folklore, history, law and culture, transforming the legend into an expression of colonial ideology. Even so, what this chapter is concerned with is the relationship between Arthur and what – or, more specifically, *who* – remains after empirical power has been achieved. A noteworthy postcolonial argument from Amelia A. Rutledge suggests that 'what remains in place' after colonial occupation is 'a category of "Other" in the still-present colonial structure', a gap that must be filled by 'groups from the periphery' of society.²¹⁸ As outlined in chapter two using Archibald's theories, marginalised characters are often used in modern Arthurian fiction to 'shift the focus from a hero central to the legend [...] thus allowing for criticism and even subversion' of classic tropes and themes.²¹⁹ This has resulted in the historical landscape of Medieval Europe, and the resulting medievalisms, to become dominated by notions of 'undifferentiated whiteness'; blackness occupies the spatial Otherness, a concept which Thomas names the Dark Other.²²⁰

This chapter will therefore analyse how the presence of black bodies in Arthuriana subverts the notion of Arthur and his Round Table as an exclusively white, institutionalised, generational manifestation of racial supremacy and spatial exclusion.²²¹ Tracy Deonn's *Legendborn* series will serve as the primary text for this postcolonial exploration of the Matter of Britain, in conjunction with Thomas' notion of the Dark Other and Nahir I. Otaño Gracia's analysis of 'chivalric whiteness' – the proposal that Arthurian texts 'rely on the institution of chivalry to

²¹⁶ Ibid.; Adam D. Curry, 'King Arthur in Early Tudor England: Henry VII to Edward VI', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Northumbria at Newcastle, 2024), p. 132 <https://researchportal.northumbria.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/169506325/curry.adam_phd_16024424_.pdf> [accessed 20 March 2026]; Christopher Michael Berard, *Arthurianism in early Plantagenet England: from Henry II to Edward I* (Boydell Press, 2019).

²¹⁷ Jo Romero, 'Why Did Henry VIII Re-Paint The Round Table at Winchester?', Love British History, 6 February 2020 <<https://www.lovebritishhistory.co.uk/2020/02/why-did-henry-viii-re-paint-round-table.html>> [accessed 14 March 2026].

²¹⁸ Amelia A. Rutledge, 'Romans, Celts, and "Others": Residual Colonial Models and Race in Contemporary Arthurian Novels', *Arthuriana*, 31.2 (2021), pp. 40-60 (p. 41).

²¹⁹ Elizabeth Archibald, 'Questioning Arthurian Ideals', in *The Cambridge Companion to Arthurian Legend*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 139-153 (p. 150).

²²⁰ Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic* (New York University Press, 2019), pp. 12-23.

²²¹ Sarah Salih, 'Race and Gender', in *A Cultural History of Race in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Thomas Hahn (Bloomsbury, 2025), pp. 137-152 (pp. 137-138).

racialize [...] enemies' and 'excuse medieval colonisation' which 'thus allow[s] readers/listeners to be engulfed by the fantasy of whiteness and white supremacy'.²²²

Legendborn: Chivalric Whiteness and the Dark Other of Arthuriana

Before we begin it is paramount to summarise the key plot points of *Legendborn* that will be discussed. The novel begins by introducing the reader to a sixteen-year-old African American girl named Briana (Bree) Matthews. Her mother dies in a car accident in the prologue, and at the hospital Bree encounters a strange police officer that appears to manipulate her memories by using magic. Three months later we follow Bree as she enrolls in the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill's Early College Program alongside her life-long friend Alice. At a party held in the woods off-campus on their first night, Bree notices something 'shimmering and dancing' in the air 'like a glitching hologram'.²²³ As the narrative progresses we discover that the strange, shimmering phantom is a semi-corporeal demon that is invisible to everyone who is not Legendborn – members of an elite secret society called The Order who are descended from the knights of King Arthur's Round Table, tasked with hunting and killing demonic threats known as Shadowborn in an invisible war to save humanity. The heirs are Scions, able to channel the supernatural abilities of their ancestors – be it abnormal strength, speed or healing – because they have bound the power to their bloodlines. Bree convinces her friend Nick, the Scion of Arthur, to help her join The Order so that she can investigate her mother's death; in the process she realises that she can manipulate aether, a magical energy that comes from the natural world, and that she comes from a long lineage of Rootcrafters. At the novel's closing we find out that Bree's ancestor, Vera, was enslaved on a plantation belonging to Samuel Davies (the Scion of Arthur at that time) and was later raped and impregnated by him. Consequently, Vera bound root magic to her bloodline to protect herself and her child (and Arthur's subsequent heirs) from those in The Order who may do them harm.

Deonn transposes the traditionally Euro-centric imperial Arthur and his knights onto the landscape of the American South, a space that has been deeply scarred by the effects of the transatlantic slave trade. This has allowed medieval social systems to thrive within the postcolonial landscape, particularly chivalric ideology. In medieval texts knighthood follows a chivalric protocol which dictates that the "best knight" will be rewarded with social mobility or

²²² Nahir I. Otaño Gracia, *The Other Faces of Arthur: Chivalric Whiteness in the Global North Atlantic* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2025) <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/4396269/7>> [accessed 5 November 2025]; Tracy Deonn, *Legendborn* (Simon & Schuster, 2020).

²²³ Deonn, *Legendborn*, p. 19.

material wealth in exchange for violent acts that uphold the chivalric institution.²²⁴ As an extension of this, the king himself was expected to be the ‘best knight because he was at the top of the social hierarchy’.²²⁵ Gracia writes that this logic leads to the king becoming a symbol of ‘expansion [into] and controlling’ of ‘conquered territories’: as a result, the king becomes both a protector of his land and a prominent justifier of territorial expansion.²²⁶ To expand upon this, chivalric whiteness presents the knight/king as ‘always morally right and aggrieved’ when committing acts of violence.²²⁷ Combined with the notion of the Dark Other, we are faced with the inclusion of both symbolic and actual violence against the Dark Other that ‘mirrors the spectacle of violence against the endarkened and the Othered in our own world’.²²⁸ Rape is one of these violent acts – a medievalism that centralises ‘male physical aggression’ as a ‘fundamental [aspect] of [...] knightly identity’ that is ‘centralized around women’s bodies’ to allow men to participate in the chivalric system.²²⁹ Bree’s Rootcraft allows her to communicate with, and be possessed by, her dead ancestors. At the closing of the novel, she is possessed by both Vera and Arthur: the former shows Bree the rape that made her an inheritor of Arthur’s legacy.

The master appears. She is frightened. Caught.
He holds a hand out. “I’m not here to hurt you,” he says.
But he is. He hurts her anyway. [...]
When she shows,
the master notices,
and he cares.
He cares very much.²³⁰

Amy N. Vines cites Katherine Gravidal’s argument that, even if the act of rape is committed by the narrative’s hero, it is a distinct action that is separate from the chivalric feats that follow.²³¹ Vines instead argues that rapes in medieval romances are ‘inceptive moments’ that proceed important advancements in moral or social acceptance for the knight.²³² Rape is still viewed as a violation of the chivalric institution that requires the knight to participate in various acts of

²²⁴ Kathy M. Krause, ‘Gender in Old French Romance’, in *The New Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. by Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 135-149 (p. 136).

²²⁵ Gracia, *The Other Faces of Arthur: Chivalric Whiteness in the Global North Atlantic* <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/4396269/7>>.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, p. 24.

²²⁹ Amy N. Vines, ‘Invisible Woman: Rape as a Chivalric Necessity in Medieval Romance’, in *Sexual Culture in Late Medieval British Texts*, ed. by Robert Allen Rouse and Cory James Rushton (Brewer, 2014), pp. 161-180 (p. 161).

²³⁰ Deonn, *Legendborn*, pp. 465-466.

²³¹ Vines, ‘Invisible Woman: Rape as a Chivalric Necessity in Medieval Romance’, p. 162.

²³² *Ibid.*

penance, but ultimately his moral suffering offers him ‘the opportunity for chivalric advancement’.²³³ In the case of *Legendborn*, rape results in the necessary function of lineage preservation that is made all the more crucial when The Order members discover that Samuel Davis had no biological children with his wife Lorraine. According to Gracia, repetition is vital to the establishment of chivalric whiteness in modern fantasy literature; Deonn includes the motif of the adulterous love triangle of Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot, but subverts this to include the rape of the Dark Other.²³⁴

“It’s just like the legend. Lancelot is Arthur’s most trusted knight, until he sleeps with his king’s wife. Lorraine sleeps with Reynolds and passes the baby off as Davis’s”.²³⁵

Thus, Bree’s character is one of dualities, a character who is ‘demonically split’ to unify the sovereignty of the white male with the figure of the Dark Other.²³⁶ One of Thomas’ key arguments behind the construction of the Dark Other is that they ‘[occupy] the same space in reality that the monster occupies in fantasy’, or ‘[are seen as a] spectacle, a monstrous Thing that is the root cause of *hesitation*, *ambivalence*, and the *uncanny*’.²³⁷ As mentioned in Chapter Three, Thomas theorises that this is the reason why ‘people sincerely believe that characters of color are out of place in the fantastic’ – racial difference takes us out of the imagined world of fantasy literature because our ‘formed habits of whiteness’ are seen as innate factors of a literary culture that favours a white-centric conceptualisation of the Middle Ages.²³⁸ The previous chapter dealt with the presence of spatial absence within the ‘our land-barbarous land’ imagined geography of fantasy, whereby the Other is eradicated or controlled; now we shall focus on the use of inherited silence as a medievalism used to distract, ignore or downplay the lasting effects of colonialism, and how its presence attempts to solidify the Middle Ages as a predominantly white, heterosexual male space that seeks to dominate the bodies and lands inhabited by the Dark Other.²³⁹ In psychology the term “inherited silence” refers to the familial avoidance of articulating difficult emotional or traumatic experiences, resulting in silence becoming the

²³³ Vines, ‘Invisible Woman: Rape as a Chivalric Necessity in Medieval Romance’, p. 163.

²³⁴ Gracia, *The Other Faces of Arthur: Chivalric Whiteness in the Global North Atlantic* <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/4396269/7>>.

²³⁵ Deonn, *Legendborn*, pp. 482-483.

²³⁶ Bennett and Royle, p. 65

²³⁷ Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, pp. 12-23.

²³⁸ Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, p. 73; Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (Routledge, 2016), p. 1.

²³⁹ Edward W. Said, ‘Il Imaginative Geography and Its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental’, in *Orientalism* (Vintage: 1979).

inherited language of self-protection and preservation.²⁴⁰ Inherited silence in postcolonial criticism, however, refers to the historic silence of colonial descendants that either deny, minimise or omit their ancestral role in global colonisation. Louise Dunlap's 2022 book deals with this very subject, writing that regardless of race our 'ancestors pass on habits of mind, wounds, and silences that come from the historical context they inhabited'.²⁴¹ Ancestral lineage and inherited silences form the basis of The Order's construction and consolidation of power in North Carolina, but it also informs how the Dark Other interacts with the 'undifferentiated whiteness' of The Order's members.²⁴² Memory and forgetting are both 'organised and wielded' by The Order to ensure their race's anonymity and exclusivity, yet coincidentally this power is maintained because they have primary control over aether.²⁴³ For instance, there are several points within the narrative whereby The Order use magic to manipulate the memories of mortals. When Bree is exposed to a Shadowborn on her first night at UNC, Selwyn Kane, the Merlin assigned to protect Nick, uses his power to remove Bree's memories of the attack. Unnervingly however, this magic manifests in the image of physical restraints.

A vicious snap of invisible electricity wraps around my body like a rope and yanks me backward [...]. It pulls so hard and so fast that I nearly fall. [...] I resist, but the rope sensation *responds*, tight pain in my body blossoming into a single utterance: *Leave*.²⁴⁴

The simile 'like a rope' paired with the verbs 'yank' and 'pull' elicit imagery of enslavers manoeuvring enslaved bodies by force, particularly by use of chains or yokes that could control multiple people at one time.²⁴⁵ Although, The Order is not attempting to exert permanent control over the physical body; their goal is the permanent alteration of the Other's mind, effectively withholding all knowledge of magic for a select few. In another powerful memoir that interweaves personal anecdotes with historical meditations on race, Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* proposes that 'in every slave society, slave owners attempted to eradicate the slave's memory, [...] to erase all the evidence of an existence before slavery'.²⁴⁶ What Hartman is referring to here is the eradication of the slave's memory of freedom. Deonn is communicating a

²⁴⁰ 'The Inherited Silence: How Generational Trauma Teaches Suppression', *Online Therapy UK*, n.d. 2026 <<https://onlinetherapyuk.co.uk/the-inherited-silence-how-generational-trauma-teaches-suppression/>> [accessed 6 November 2025].

²⁴¹ Louise Dunlap, *Inherited Silence: Listening to the Land, Healing the Colonizer Mind* (New Village Press, 2023) <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/4617121/2>> [accessed 6 November 2025].

²⁴² Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, pp. 12-23.

²⁴³ Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, 'Memory for forgetfulness: Conceptualizing a memory practice of settler colonial disavowal', *Theory and Society*, 52 (2023), pp. 263-292, doi: 10.1007/s11186-022-09486-0.

²⁴⁴ Deonn, *Legendborn*, p. 21.

²⁴⁵ 'Yoke', Understanding Slavery Initiative, n.d. <<https://understandingslavery.com/artefact/yoke/>> [accessed 27 March 2026].

²⁴⁶ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (Profile Books, 2007), p. 155.

similar message; the restriction of freedom by means of limiting the Other's right to learn, possess, or disseminate information due to magical memory erasure. Colonial memory is not finite; it persists 'as a structure of power with enduring effects on governance, cultural identity and social institutions'.²⁴⁷

The act of *knowing* as an exclusive, exclusionary power is a medievalism primarily influenced by Geoffrey of Monmouth's and Sir Thomas Malory's constructions of Merlin. Geoffrey presents a prophetic Merlin in his *History* who foretells Vortigern's triumph over the Saxons with the Red Dragon/White Dragon allegorical vision.²⁴⁸ What is most interesting however is Malory's depiction of knowledge as a weapon, which perhaps best explains The Order's anxieties surrounding accidental knowledge dissemination. In the tale *Of Nénive and Morgan le Fay*, Merlin falls in love with Nénive and teaches her 'all [...] thing[s] he knows about magic'.²⁴⁹ These revelations allow her to use 'subtle working' to entrap and imprison him in a cave.²⁵⁰ Perhaps the most jarring factor is Merlin's prior knowledge of this plan, yet his inability to prevent it. Transferring knowledge is thus to transfer power, and Merlin becomes powerless to stop his own entrapment because he has given an outsider exclusive knowledge about the institution he safeguards. Therefore, to maintain control over knowledge The Order must engage in the 'intergenerational [transfer] of knowledge' that teaches a 'Eurocentric historiography that has reproduced, for generations, a grand foundationalist narrative of Western exceptionalism that is taught, and retaught, in academic silos of knowledge transmission'.²⁵¹ If the intergenerational transfer of knowledge allows for the Order's members to identify themselves as racially exceptional, then anxieties surrounding the loss of control over knowledge must feed into The Order's hesitation towards the Dark Other. This is especially apparent in the discoveries Bree makes about The Order's history within North Carolina. Upon joining The Order, it is explained to her that

By the 1700s [...] the founders opened the first Round Table chapter, built the Lodge, then added the school around it. Hell, Carolina was partially built as an excuse to gather

²⁴⁷ Yujie Zhe and Lia Kent, 'Memory politics of colonial heritage in Asia and the Pacific: conflict, remembrance, and peacebuilding', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 31.5 (2025), pp. 569-577, doi: 10.1080/10286632.2025.2510640.

²⁴⁸ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (Penguin, 1966), pp. 170-185.

²⁴⁹ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript*, ed. by Helen Cooper (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 58.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59; Kenneth Hodges, 'Swords and Sorceresses: The Chivalry of Malory's Nynveve', *Arthuriana*, 12.2 (2002) pp. 78-98.

²⁵¹ Geraldine Heng, *The Global Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p.10.

and train eligible Scions. [...] The Lines are spread out along several historic schools, but our chapter's the oldest.²⁵²

Ancestral heritage is the backbone of Deonn's narrative, and Bree is frequently reminded that the histories of her enslaved ancestors are secondary to the celebration of The Order's white heroes. To tell the history of the North Carolina chapter is to engage in mythopoeia. William, the descendant of Gawain, is educating Bree in the above lines. He uses the word 'built' as a past participle verb of "build", which implies The Order was the sole group that actively built the Lodge. This is a myth in the sense that it is a wholly 'unfounded or false notion', proven to be so around twenty pages later.²⁵³ On the grounds of the University sits Old Chapel Hill Cemetery - 'the most beautiful graveyard ever' - that was separated from the main University campus in the early 1800's by a low stone wall.²⁵⁴ In an effort to teach Bree how to hone Rootcraft, Bree's mentor Patricia takes her beyond the stone wall boarder of the cemetery to 'a grove'.²⁵⁵ At first it appears empty, until Patricia reveals the truth:

"It's barely filled."

"Oh, it's filled. This wall marks where the segregation begins. All the Black folks are buried in these two sections. [...] Some were enslaved folk owned by faculty and kept on campus to help build and maintain the school. Some were servants or freed folk after slavery ended in this part of the Confederacy. [...] The blood's buried here".²⁵⁶

By denying the presence of, and participation from, black bodies in the building of Arthur's American colony, The Order is 'over[riding] the traumas and struggles of African Americans' and allowing the 'legacy of slavery' to persist within the chapter and its surrounding landscape.²⁵⁷ Gracia suggests that some Arthurian texts 'use chivalric whiteness, underpinned by an emphasis on lineage' to argue for 'supremacy' both within and beyond the borders of origin.²⁵⁸ The Order maintains a strict historiographical approach to their lineage which allows them to lack racialisation, and the introduction of a biological component (e.g., the powers of the knights / Arthur bound to their bloodlines) to their concept of race perpetuates ideologies of racial

²⁵² Deonn, *Legendborn*, p. 137.

²⁵³ 'myth', *Miriam Webster*, n.d. <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/myth>> [accessed 16 October 2025].

²⁵⁴ Deonn, *Legendborn*, p. 219.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-221.

²⁵⁷ Susi Westerfield, 'Some Legacies Are Meant to Be Broken': Race, Slavery and Arthuriana in Tracy Deonn's *Legendborn* (unpublished bachelor's thesis, Universiteit Utrecht, 2022) <https://www.academia.edu/82787087/_Some_Legacies_Are_Meant_to_Be_Broken_Race_Slavery_and_Arthuriana_in_Tracy_Deonns_Legendborn> [accessed 20 October 2025], p. 5.

²⁵⁸ Gracia, *The Other Faces of Arthur: Chivalric Whiteness in the Global North Atlantic* <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/4396269/7>>.

purity.²⁵⁹ The Order's Wall of Ages is a prime example – it is a silver slab that is 'three stories tall' and outlines all thirteen bloodlines of the Round Table alongside their Scions.²⁶⁰ This is juxtaposed with Bree's comment that the grove is 'barely filled', presenting the graveyard as lacking in headstones and monuments and linking monument making to racial inequality as it pertains to the history, lineage and remembrance of enslaved black people. "Monument" derives from the Latin *monere* which means 'to remind', and physical monuments not only serve as a visual reminder of a person's value, but they also establish *how valuable* they were / are to society.²⁶¹ In 2020 – when conversations were ignited over the continuing social presence of statues, monuments and buildings celebrating individuals who owned slaves – Heather A. O'Connell published an article that discusses the relationship between the locations of Confederate monuments and the presence of 'black-white inequality' within racial, economic and political boundaries.²⁶² She proposes two hypothesis; the first, that Confederate monuments are an extension of the legacy of slavery as they are often physical manifestations of racism; the second theory is that Confederate monuments contribute to the upkeep of a collective memory that unites racist ideology to slavery and the American Civil War in a way that 'justified the division between blacks and whites'.²⁶³ The latter monuments are utilised by The Order to demonstrate what Geraldine Heng calls 'race-making', whereby 'strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pressures, so as to construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment'.²⁶⁴ Therefore, the absence of lineage, either through memory loss, inherited silence or a lack of monuments aligns Bree with the Dark Other because she is unknown, and to be unknown in the world of The Order - where power resides in *knowing* – is uncanny.

Conclusion

The world of the Middle Ages continues to be a Euro-centric, white, male space within modern fantasy literature. However, the incorporation of medievalisms relating to inherited silence and knowledge can provide us with a contemporary reflection on how the medieval texts deal with race/racialisation, in addition to how a modern reader may project their own racial, social or

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Deonn, *Legendborn*, p. 134.

²⁶¹ Andrew Bennett & Nicholas Royle, 'Monuments', in Bennett and Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Routledge, 2016), pp.44-53 (p. 44).

²⁶² Heather A. O'Connell, 'Monuments outlive history: Confederate monuments, the legacy of slavery, and black-white inequality', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 43 (2020), pp. 460-478, doi: 10.1080/01419870.2019.1635259.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Geraldine Heng, 'Race and Politics', in *A Cultural History of Race in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Thomas Hahn (Bloomsbury, 2025), pp. 97-112 (p 97).

gender-based hierarchies onto the text. The Dark Other is a figure who has traditionally been omitted or pushed into the periphery of the text; now, the centralisation of these characters can allow us to think about how interactions between whiteness and blackness inform our perceptions of the Middle Ages as well as the resulting medievalisms. Arthur remains an imperial figure, but combining his chivalric whiteness within the body of the Dark Other causes us to confront systems of power and challenge the idea that these are born out of historical accuracy and not expansionist, imperialist and colonialist desires.

Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to locate medievalisms within contemporary fantasy literature and explore how they were adopted/adapted to suit modern audiences, in addition to investigating what medievalisms may tell us about the social ostracization of othered, non-male, non-white bodies. Throughout the four chapters it was discovered that contemporary fantasy adopts medievalisms to predominantly subvert ideologies hailed as “traditional” or “historically accurate”. Chivalric ideology has always been regarded as white, patriarchal and resistant to outside influence; Deirdre Sullivan’s *Savage Her Reply* and Tracy Deonn’s *Legendborn* ultimately challenge perspectives that perpetuate traditional chivalric ideologies as ideal or desirable, and instead they allow us to enter the medieval world from an entirely new perspective. All of the texts discussed in this dissertation centralise a peripheral character or body that has often been excluded from medieval narratives, which in turn reflects how modern culture has shifted to not only include these characters, but to give them voices, spaces and bodies that they have otherwise lacked. Also, medievalisms in modern texts can allow us to enter original medieval narratives from a new perspective, perhaps allowing the reader to expose previously under-explored spaces and carve out new literary identities for legendary characters (i.e. Aoife, Arthur). In addition, subversions of medievalisms can provide a crucial social commentary of how modern society engages with, recognises and/or ignores its past; this is why medievalism studies should be regarded as equally important to the overall study of the Middle Ages, an ideal that this dissertation contributes to.

Despite the above, this study also found that medievalisms can be used to perpetuate racist and/or discriminatory notions of people and places. Romantasy exists in a dichotomy where female sexual desire – a previously marginalised notion - is centralised within a rigid, unchanged “traditional” chivalric system that depends on male violence. In a modern world where statistics regarding violence against women, misogyny and femicide are disproportionately higher when compared to male-on-male violence (12.8% of women have experienced intimate partner violence compared to 8.4% of men), romantasy can be viewed as perpetuating dangerous medieval gender expectations that have no place in the modern world.²⁶⁵ In addition, pre-textual maps that incorporate medieval attitudes towards othered people and places can cause such groups/landscapes still struggling with their colonial pasts and post-colonial identities to face further marginalisation and erasure. Medievalisms used to inform or influence literary

²⁶⁵ ‘Violence Against Women Statistics in UK 2026’, *The World Data*, 19 July 2026 <https://theworlddata.com/violence-against-women-statistics-in-uk/#google_vignette> [accessed 17 August 2026].

cartography should therefore be used sparingly and cautiously, as otherwise they risk further harm towards the people and places they are depicting.

This dissertation was limited in scope due to word-count and the vast thematic explorations undertaken. Therefore, further study needs to be undertaken with a larger sample of literature if we are to understand how such usage of medievalism is affecting modern perceptions of non-white, non-male bodies, but because genres like romantasy are still relatively new and developing we may not see the consequences for years to come. In addition, this study focused solely on medievalism in literature; for a truly comprehensive, detailed investigation into what medievalisms say about modern attitudes to othered bodies, one must perhaps incorporate other forms of media that dominate the modern age (i.e., film, television, video games etc.). Although, this study is still a valid contribution to the field of medievalism because it critiques, explores and analyses texts that have previously been ignored in the academic sphere.

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