Cluster Editor's Introduction

Comparative neomedievalisms: A little bit medieval

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At one end of the spectrum, the neomedieval encourages the substitution of superficial understanding, the 'gist' gathering of cultural bits and pieces, for real knowledge and understanding of the Middle Ages. On the other, it offers the insights of a space in which the medieval can 'speak back' from the margins to which *it* has been confined by the domination of the modern.

Lesley Coote

Keep 'em laughing as you go.

Eric Idle

Researching this Introduction, I was interested to note that my plan of beginning with an anecdotal encounter with some real-life neomedievalists had already been done.¹ But of course. What is more neomedieval than those curious re-enactors of the Middle Ages? In my case, the members of The Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), who were sword-fighting, playing medieval-sounding songs, dancing and engaging in various performative acts at Dunn's Meadow, in the shadow of the Indiana University Campus in Bloomington on 9 October 2013. A costumed fellow by the (fitting) name of Mike Squires lectured a group of spectators on Elizabethan swords and boots, in front of a table where sat a bearded man tinkering with calligraphy instruments. A young man in chainmail

1 Eddo Stern's 'A Touch of Medieval: Narrative, Magic, and Computer Technology in Massively Multiplayer Computer

Role-Playing Games' begins with a stroll through the 39th Annual Renaissance Pleasure Faire in San Bernardino, California.

- 2 The *Indiana Daily Student* wrote up the gathering and three angry comments appeared chiding the author for inaccuracies about the SCA. There are surely ironies to be unpacked here. See 'Fencers, artists attend medieval festival' by A. Priester, <https://www.idsnews.com/news/story.aspx?id=94580>.

- 3 Though maybe not tenure yet: see Clements and Robinson's 'Neomedievalism Unplugged' (Clements and Robinson, 2012a).

- 4 2012–2013 alone has seen the publication of: Pamela Clements and Carol L. Robinson's *Neomedievalism in the Media: Essays on Film, Television, and Electronic Games* (Edwin Mellen,

armor by the name of Keenan Dadds told me of the society's interest in 'recreating the Middle Ages.' Later I spoke to two other armored SCA members, and chatted with them about North America's relationship to a Middle Ages it never had. One of them mentioned that Native American re-enactments are very popular in Europe, suggesting a sort of mutual interest in re-creating each other's missing past. I found this explanation highly dubious – I have never heard of European Native American re-enactments. Another member informed me that the fantasy element (elves, orcs, trolls) had been routed out early in the society's history, in favor of historical accuracy.² The setting for this conversation, the medieval-type buildings of the campus around us, silently performed their own North American neomedievalism.

There are generally understood to be two types of neomedievalism. One is the International Relations (IR) school that stems from the 1970s work of Hedley Bull. It centers around the idea that nation-states are weakening in the face of non-state actors (NGOs, multinationals, supra-national entities such as the European Union, global networks, private armies, terrorist organizations and so on), and that the global order is entering a medieval-type scenario of layered political allegiances: one in which the nation-state ceases to hold privileged sovereign power. The second type derives from the work of Umberto Eco, who (also in the 1970s) put forward the notion that we are living in cultural and political new Middle Ages, citing the end of the 'Pax Americana' (Eco, 1986, 76) as an analog to the fall of the Roman empire. Neomedievalism for Eco is a postmodern predicament by which the contemporary can be understood as a re-enactment of the medieval, spanning a spectrum from the historically accurate and philologically responsible to pop kitsch fantasy medievalism. Over the last decade, neomedievalist studies have found fortune³ in the realm of pop culture, in particular examining online videogames set in pseudo-medieval fantasy worlds, often by way of Baudrillardian theories of the simulacrum.⁴

Debates proliferate, particularly on the pages of *Studies in Medievalism*, about the nature of neomedievalism as an academic discipline and its relation to more traditional medievalisms: Is neomedievalism a medievalist subgenre, or a different field altogether? Does neomedievalism do something that medievalism doesn't, or is it like the fake medievalisms it analyzes, itself a kind of *faux* medievalism? If so, would that be a bad thing? What has medievalism done to deserve the birth of a sub-field that appears to mimic it mockingly, substituting its rigorous quests for textual authenticity and historical accuracy with a gleeful, playful irreverence? Or, is that dichotomy itself a neomedievalist essentialization of the work that medievalists do, especially of those well versed in postmodernism and invested in bringing the medieval into the present? Can neomedievalism help itself from trivializing the medieval? Is it a kind of jester at medievalism's court, telling truths through taboo jokes? Is it a punk medievalism that 'borrows creatively from the old matter' (Risden, 2010, 58), often without putting in the actual work of medieval textual exegesis? Is it a 'dumbing down' or a 'democratization of

medieval studies' (Coote, 2010, 30), curtailing or softening the traumatic otherness required of reading the actual medieval? Is it, as Karl Fugelso has suggested, a nihilistic anti-medievalism, attempting to substitute a nothing for serious scholarship and defending 'artificial borders that diminish medievalism without establishing valid alternatives' (quoted in Clements and Robinson, 2012a, 191)?

Is it perhaps a child? As Terry Jones observes, we discover the Middle Ages early in life, via 'the world of the *fairy tale* ... a world with which we become familiar with our first exposure to literature' (Clements and Robinson, 2012b, 390–391). Are we then neomedievalists before we are medievalists – if we are to take the definition of neomedievalism as a medievalism that has dispensed with a historical or accurate relationship to the Middle Ages, and has instead accepted a primarily culturally mediated one? This would be a mode which looks not so much to the Middle Ages, but to *medievalism* for inspiration.⁵ The fantasy pseudo-Middle Ages of Tolkien's Middle Earth or fairy tales are just that: stylized Middle Ages made through the selection and re-organization of medieval fragments (themselves also fabricated) to construct new wholes. Eco calls this process *rabberciamento* (patching, tinkering; Eco's translator William Weaver renders this as *bricolage*) (Eco, 2012, 1099): the act of grabbing and patching from the Middle Ages to construct something old and new, familiar yet alien.

Taking their cue from Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements' foundational essay 'Living with Neomedievalism,' the authors of the papers in *Defining Neomedievalism(s) I* (a special issue of *Studies in Medievalism*) weave a fascinating and enthusiastic debate about the sheer sense of possibility that neomedievalism appears to offer. At times, those writing about neomedievalism seem to be taken by a kind of rapture or ecstasy. Neomedievalist theorizing produces and encourages proliferations, lists, enumerations and so on – from Eco's 'ten little Middle Ages' (which Cory Lowell Grewell adds to) to the swarming virtual crowds of the much-discussed neomedieval MMORPGs (sounds like the name of a monster, but is actually an acronym for 'massively multiplayer online role-playing games'). Below the enthusiasm lies also a genuine concern for the politics of neomedievalism: Does it rewrite the script, or does it tell an 'old, old story?' (Dinshaw, 1999, 184). There is the problematic nature of North American neomedievalisms that tend to exalt one particular type of Middle Ages (a Eurocentric, Western white one) in a fantasy of an isolated West. Or is neomedievalism rather a globalization of the medieval (Coote, 2010), replete with contemporary concerns, such as racial politics (Grewell, 2010)? Critics are both wary and optimistic about neomedievalism's relationship to the hegemonic narrative. Coote writes that:

the neomedieval takes its inspiration and its materials from what is hegemonically accepted as 'the medieval,' thus affirming the central narrative. However, it then deploys these elements in ways unacceptable to

2012); Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl's *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (Routledge, 2012); Tison Pugh and Susan Aronstein's *The Disney Middle Ages: A Fairy-Tale and Fantasy Past* (Palgrave, 2012); and Daniel T. Kline's *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages* (Routledge, 2013).

- 5 'The neomedieval idea of the Middle Ages is gained not through contact with the Middle Ages, but through a medievalist intermediary' (Kaufman, 2010, 4) and 'is distinguished from previous forms of medievalism by its multi-culturalism, its lack of concern for history, and its habit of imagining the medieval through the lens of previous medievalisms' (Grewell, 2010, 40).

‘traditional’ medievalists, in order to create playful narratives that trouble and challenge the central ‘medievalist text.’

(Coote, 2010, 29)

We may circle back to Eco’s spectrum: on one end ‘Dart Vader’ [*sic*] and other pop culture and political appropriations of the medieval; on the other end, the architectural work of Viollet-le-Duc, Mâle and Panofsky. Here we see the opposition between the serious and conscientious work done with medieval materials, and the fantastical, irreverent trash, not to mention those cultural appropriations that enter into the realm of the devious or malicious, such as fantasies of the Middle Ages represented as a dark and barbarian zone employed in the exaltation of virile, philo- or proto-Nazi aesthetic currents (Wagner, Frazetta): ‘the hairier the model, the worse the yearning: the Hobbit as human model for new aspirers to new and long nights of knives’ (Eco, 2012, 1102, my translation).

Medievalizing, Orientalizing

The arguments of Carolyn Dinshaw’s *Getting Medieval: Sexual Communities: Pre- and Postmodern* (1999)⁶ and Bruce Holsinger’s *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (2007) are not radically different: both argue against cavalier categorizations of the medieval for nefarious ends. Dinshaw warns that ‘totalizing’ Middle Ages reproduce the patriarchal white male by way of a total abjected medieval other to be homophobically rejected. Holsinger makes a similar analysis of how International Relations (IR) neomedievalism buttresses neoconservative war practices, by deviously conflating contemporary Islam with the medieval, in a ‘banal rhetoric of medievalism – imputing darkness, lack of women’s rights, intolerance, oppression, fanaticism, brutality, terror, extremism, bigotry and so on to the enemy’s failure of modernity’ to ‘intellectually doping effects’ (Holsinger, 2007, 48, 24). Positing the medieval as abject and total other permits contemporary Western hegemony to perceive itself as always in the right: the ‘Middle Ages is ... the dense, unvarying and eminently obvious monolith against which modernity and postmodernity groovily emerge’; modernity or postmodernity is thus ‘bought at the cost of the medieval’ (Dinshaw, 1999, 16, 18). The hegemonic West finally emerges on top in a teleological narrative by which the global South, in particular Islam, is medievalized into an inferior other to be saved, conquered, civilized, democratized, modernized and so on.

Atwood’s 1985 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which my own essay in this cluster discusses, may be read as articulating a similar process, in its construction of a dystopian alternate present which seamlessly blends the medieval with the Islamic to depict a totally abjected society against which we may favorably

6 Dinshaw does not use the term ‘neomedieval,’ but her work is helpful for both definitions of neomedievalism and inspiration to the kinds of playful, pleasurable and ‘amateur’ relations with the medieval that characterize neomedievalism. In this vein, see also Dinshaw (2012).

measure our own contemporary West. Without ever even explicitly mentioning either Islam or the Middle Ages, Atwood assembles a composite neomedieval/pseudo-Islamic society by suggestively pointing the reader toward those very culturally known markers that Holsinger describes as ‘banal.’ *The Handmaid’s Tale* thus works to medievalize Islam.⁷ What role might *The Handmaid’s Tale* have played in the seemingly feminist rhetoric used to justify the US invasion of Afghanistan, which posits the liberation of Afghani women from the brutality of the hyper-patriarchal Taliban, as one of the primary arguments for military intervention?

Holsinger’s train of thought provides various critical opportunities, which is why I wish to return to his marker ‘banal,’ which is also a banalization of that which arguably constitutes the bulk of the attraction of the medieval: that total world in which all is shockingly other yet also uncannily familiar. Undergirding his and Dinshaw’s writing (they are both medievalists) is a clear irritation with degraded, even dangerous misuses of the medieval. Dinshaw’s work, grounded in postmodern theory, does not go as far as making a binary distinction between a true or false Middle Ages – her scholarship is too nuanced for that, trading as it does in competing narratives and discourses rather than competing ontological realities. Holsinger’s (2007) book, on the other hand, seems to suggest jingoistic neocon neomedievalism as a *false* medievalism, one that the responsible medievalist is duty-bound to expose. Eco also distinguished responsible, scholarly medievalisms from the wild ludic bricolage of pop culture, with their sometime fascistic tendencies. The difference is that Eco displays an enjoyment of the tacky stuff (the ‘bad’ medievalisms), and positively revels in the absurdities of pop-culture medievalism.

It is this ludic, irreverent, shameless aspect that scholars such as Robinson and Clements identify as central to the neomedievalist aesthetic: its absurdity is key to its creative potential. This neomedievalist laughter is constructed precisely through its anti-historicism, and through the pleasurable wrongness of positing a medieval that delights in its rejection of historical accuracy, of time and teleology, and of reality itself: ‘neomedievalism is further independent, further detached, and thus consciously, purposefully, and perhaps even laughingly reshaping itself into an alternate universe of medievalisms, a fantasy of medievalisms, a meta-medievalism’ (Clements and Robinson, 2010, 56). For Holsinger, neomedievalism is no laughing matter: it is a tool for tyrants. For Clements and Robinson (and Monty Python), neomedievalism is an occasion for hilarity, mirth, humor and fun. But even the ludic is political. Monty Python’s medieval grotesque bathos, for example, enacts a well-needed mockery of pompous British nationalistic medieval heritage narratives. Yet laughter and pleasure and play are not necessarily either progressive or liberating. Dinshaw moves from one type of levity to another: from Tarantino’s homophobic joke that gives her tome its title, to her exhortation toward ‘playing in an abject space’ (Dinshaw, 1999, 189). It may be argued that neocon neomedievalism is also an unserious medievalism,

7 My aunt, an Atwood reader, once referred to an encounter between her daughters and some headscarf-wearing women in Gaza several years ago as a ‘Handmaid’s Tale moment.’

one which makes a joke of medieval studies in the service of the dark *jouissance* of sadistic imperialism and the contemporary torture chambers of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. Given this political divergence of definitions, it may be that neomedievalism is best understood as an aesthetic category.

The Campus as Neomedievalist Utopia

I'm back outside, at Indiana University, still looking at those smooth neomedieval limestone buildings with their turrets and '1921' or '1936' carved into their cornerstones. As someone who grew up in Oxford, England, this architecture speaks to me strangely: a kind of Disney or Vegas medievalism *ante-litteram*. Research tells me that the Collegiate Gothic style, pioneered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was an attempt to bestow cultural, historical (and racial) capital on North American university institutions, by mimicking the medieval buildings of Oxbridge, with 'timeless, pristine constructions' that 'seem to have added a thousand years to the history of Princeton' (Meyer, 2013). These buildings make 'a college "look like a college"' within a system of 'finishing schools for an American aristocracy of wealth and talent, and training for a refined imperial civil service that would carry "sweetness and light" along with the stars and stripes' (Patton, 1967, 7, 8), all wrapped up in an Anglo-Saxon myth. One that is punctuated, completed even, by elements of neoclassical 'Greek' life and architecture.

A neomedievalist architecture then (replete with heraldry, gowns and other ceremonial paraphernalia) can give us a framework through which to squint at the complicit intersections of politics, culture and academia. Complicity, or crossover and contamination, is central to the hybrid discourses of neomedievalism: Tolkien, Eco and Terry Jones all wear the double hat of scholar and aesthetic – even traitorous – manipulator of medieval materials. Work by the Confraternity of Neoflagellants [Neil Mulholland and Norman Hogg] (2013), the BABEL Working Group and The Petropunk Collective [Eileen A. Joy, Anna Kłosowska, Nicola Masciandaro, and Michael O'Rourke] (2013), for example, pleasurably straddle the intersection between scholarship and (counter)cultural production. Neomedievalism is going places, slithering even: its very slipperiness, its closeness to and collusion with the language of power, may then serve as a prompt for its own critical ability as a self-conscious neomedievalism, calling attention to its own complicities, to its own embeddedness within power, ideology, and the cultural and literary productions that adopt the medieval as a totalizing and essentializing other that (supposedly) disavows class, labor, technology, politics, empire. This is a neomedievalism aware and enthusiastic about its own ability to recognize and confess its weaknesses, expiating its complicities through critique.

Neomedievalism looks to the future, unravels time and disrupts teleology, makes new the old, celebrates the impossible, makes mockeries of truth, privileges beauty, shuns responsibility, feels ashamed of its lack of respect for the historical Middle Ages, and distracts and enchants with improbable and absurd assemblages – and yet, all of these seductions can be critical. There are many areas yet to be mapped: the literary science fiction neomedievalisms of feudal, post-apocalyptic and steampunk worlds (*Dune*, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *Riddley Walker*), dark fantasy manga (*Berserk*, *Claymore*), popular music (*mittelalter-rock*, goth/industrial, and metal, Chaucer and hip-hop), theories of the ‘techno-image’ and the new visual literacy (Vilem Flusser) and managerial strategy (*Kingdomality*). Our essay cluster hopes to indicate some possible further directions for neomedievalist studies at the intersections of politics, aesthetics, literary studies and cultural criticism: Donald P. Palmer’s ‘Don Quixote and the Remembrance of Things Medieval’ argues how literary medievalisms may act as cover for proscribed ideological critique. Daniel Wollenberg’s ‘The New Knighthood: Terrorism and the Medieval’ examines the far Right’s political uses of the totalizing medieval in contemporary Western Europe. Krysia Michael’s ‘Neomedievalism and the Modern Subject in T.S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*’ explores the possibility of reconciling fragmented modernity with the medieval. And my own ‘Neomedievalist Feminist Dystopia’ examines the neomedieval as tool for the critique of patriarchy.

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