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Uprooting Medievalism: YA and the Future of Fantasy

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Introduction

J.R.R Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings*. "Dungeons and Dragons" and *Game of Thrones*. *The Witcher*. Medievalism[1] and medieval stories abound in our modern culture, with neo-medieval fantasy being one of the best-selling genres, consistently in the top five literary genres in America.[2] Games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Magic: The Gathering*, and even *Dungeon Mayhem* are increasing in popularity, while TV shows like *Game of Thrones* and *The Witcher* receive high-ratings on their channels, and music like Manowar's *Die With Honor* are gaining upwards of 1.4 million views.[3] We have to ask ourselves: Why is a genre rooted in the Middle Ages, a faraway time period, so appealing? One theory is that because we lack information on much of the literature and history of the Middle Ages, modern authors and creators are free to let their imaginations run wild and create fantastical elements that ensnare readers. For instance, there is absolutely no proof of dragons having ever existed, yet it is hard to find a neo-medieval game, TV show, or novel that has no reference to the mythical beasts. We, as modern audiences, get to enjoy these elements of the medieval world as far-removed

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[1] The Oxford English Dictionary definition of the term "medievalism": "Beliefs and practices (regarded as) characteristic of the Middle Ages; the adoption of, adherence to, or interest in medieval ideals, styles, or usages." "medievalism, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/115639.

[2] This is according to MasterClass and Bookstr. For more information, and other top-ranking genres see: Turner-Francis, Mahogany. "Book Genres That Make the Most Money." *Bookstr*. 6 January 2017. https://bookstr.com/article/book-genres-that-make-the-most-money/.
"8 Popular Books Genres: A Guide to Popular Literary Genres." *MasterClass*. 8 November 2020. https://www.masterclass.com/articles/a-guide-to-popular-literary-genres#8-popular-literary-genres.

[3] For more on neo-medieval game popularity, see: https://www.ordinaryreviews.com/best-medieval-games
For more on TV show views, see: https://www.theverge.com/2020/1/2/21046412/netflix-witcher-henry-cavill-games-books-fandom-binge-ip-competitors
The viewing for the music is based on the watch number for the official video, found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcsiQPdS-Sw

spectators. There is a sense of wildness, of unpredictability, and even of nationalism that medievalism sparks which allows the genre to penetrate our own culture.

It is clear that neo-medieval fantasy has changed the landscape of popular fiction —over the years, it has spread and created many subgenres, such as urban fantasy and even the creation of SCI-FI.[4] While fantasy tropes have permeated other genres of fiction in recent years, the genre of medieval based fantasy has not had as much growth itself. In this current study, I will specifically examine the intersection of neo-medieval fantasy tropes in 20th century medieval fantasy and recent young adult fantasy, and how these tropes are born from primary source medieval literature; I will specifically focus on the evolution of gender and sex in these three groups of literature.[5] Though neo-medieval texts, and the fantasy genre overall, are (in)famous for using gender stereotypes, it begs the question whether adhering to strict gender binaries is a recent phenomenon or whether the genre is explicitly taking these tropes from medieval literature. In other words, just how medieval is medievalism? And what do we, as a society, learn about the Middle Ages via medievalism? The concept of medievalism became popular in the 19th and 20th centuries, developing slowly into the neo-medieval fantasy genre that we read today. The Middle Ages were not a period of equality between the sexes by any stretch of the imagination, but perhaps surprisingly, primary medieval sources present readers with a wider range of female power and gender identity than it may initially seem. In the first section of this thesis, I thus examine the illusions inherent in the 19th century concept of medievalism that

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[4] This is based off the MasterClass subgenre list, which can be found here: https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-the-fantasy-genre-history-of-fantasy-and-subgenres-and-types-of-fantasy-in-literature#what-is-the-fantasy-genre-in-literature.

[5] As I use it in this thesis, medievalism is the act of taking elements of original medieval sources and culture, and importing them into more modern text and ideas. The concept of medievalism is important when discussing how Tolkien used medieval sources for his work. Neo-medieval fantasy, meanwhile, is used here for modern texts that have developed out of 19th and 20th understandings of the medieval world.

undermine the realities of the Middle Ages, including how the original medieval authors first blurred the lines of gender and heteronormativity.

The basic narrative structures and tropes that underpin neo-medieval fantasy change slowly, though there has recently been an increase in female protagonists due in part to the higher levels of female readership within the genre. But, as I argue in the second section of this thesis, there is still a lot of growth left to do. Allowing neo-medieval fantasy to be an oversimplification and bastardization of the original medieval source material is misleading — allowing the genre to adapt the real history's complexities creates a more diverse outpouring of readers, writers, characters, and plots. The young adult fantasy genre, I argue, has stagnated where more often than not stories are repeating themselves, and the main arc of most female protagonists is simply overcoming their own gender. Recent young adult authors have been trying to do away with this narrative structure to create more freedoms for their heroines, but there is still a reliance on patriarchal structures despite the stated goal of exceeding them. Though these stories aim to critique this specific structure, as we will see below, they typically end up confirming it.

I therefore ask the question: what does it mean for the future as more young adult[6] fantasy authors tackle this genre in our ever-changing world? Modern texts that adopt "medieval" ideas and storylines tend to be structured around the same tropes; these include courtly love, as often portrayed via a damsel in distress and her shining knight, or the concept of Us vs. Them, which pins the familiar and good against the unfamiliar and evil. These tropes are often black-and-white in their delivery, and therefore make this genre much easier to consume in different formats — film and TV, books, songs, role-playing games, etc. — which in turn

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[6] From here on, YA will be used to signify young adult literature.

increases their popularity among a wide demographic. The appeal of tropes that create

heteronormative gender binaries is certainly subjective to all consumers of medieval fantasy, but

it has real consequences that affect the way authors write — and these consequences are what

make discussing the intersection of gender in YA fantasy so important as it influences young

readers. More specifically, gender binaries within YA fantasy can limit the use of diverse

protagonists and storylines in new narratives. They in essence simplify the relationship between

gender and sex, so that the gender spectrum is almost nonexistent. I ultimately argue that both

major tropes (the damsel-in-distress and the use of Us vs. Them) force women into more passive

roles which then hinders their power as protagonists.

But there is hope! As more diverse authorship and readership engage with this genre, it is

forced to evolve in ways that surpass the capability of medievalism. Therefore, YA neo-medieval

fantasy authors must continue to re-evaluate what it means to craft a neo-medieval story instead

of relying on medievalism encouraged by 20th century authors such as Tolkien. By doing this, the

genre will flourish[7] with new materials, stories, and characters who are not forced into boxes of

an ahistorical medieval world. As all literary genres do, neo-medieval fantasy has continued to

evolve in plotlines and characters, but they are still deeply connected to earlier "medieval" tropes

that have shaped the genre into what it is. In the sections below, after looking first to primary

medieval source texts and examining how those bear out in 20th century fantasy fiction, I then

turn to Robin McKinley's YA novel *The Hero and the Crown* (1984) and Naomi Novik's YA

novel *Uprooted* (2015) to prove that with time,[8] and therefore more diversity, comes more

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[7] This is not to say that the Middle Ages were not misogynistic, or that the original stories were as progressive as is seen today, but as I will show, there is much more flexibility in terms of gender and gender expression which is mimicked and expanded upon in today's world.

[8] As proof of the evolutionary changes between McKinley's and Novik's novels, we can see how each author follows the call of power of their respective waves of feminism. McKinley focused more on women entering male-dominated fields and becoming more masculine themselves, while Novik focused

authentic representations of the combination of both the Middle Ages and our modern world that are no longer forced to adhere to genre norms.

"There and Back Again"; The Middle Ages, Tolkien, and Medievalism

Medievalism values and tropes had to start somewhere. The Middle Ages was a complicated period that, as I note above, is often simplified and exaggerated in neo-medieval fantasy. To better examine the Middle Ages and the basis of the modern genre, I have selected three case studies: *Beowulf*, *Lanval*, and *Silence*. My reasoning behind selecting these three medieval tales is twofold. Firstly, examining these medieval narratives allows me to highlight the evolution of thought in this period by analyzing stories that were written in the same region (Britain and France) but that came from three distinct periods in the Middle Ages. While three texts is also a small fraction of our extant medieval literature, these narratives will show in brief a shift in the representation of heroes/heroines so that I can then analyze the evolution of YA novels in the neo-medieval tradition. In that spirit, *Beowulf* is from the earliest period, around 800 CE, and *Lanval* and *Silence* are from later in the Middle Ages, respectively around the early 12th and 13th centuries. Secondly, analyzing these narratives shows the diversity that exists within the original content. *Beowulf* is a very traditional Germanic hero's tale, *Lanval* is a French romance, and as we will see, *Silence* is something else entirely. Because I argue that YA authors need to return to the original medieval source material, such as these three texts, it is important to see that with time and diversity of authors, there is a shift in what is expected, valued, and shared culturally.

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on the power of female bonding and staying true to yourself. For more on the waves of feminism, see the Stanford Encyclopedia on Philosophy: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-philosophy/#FemiBeliFemiMove.

One of the earliest texts we have in English is the epic poem *Beowulf*. This text has long been a mainstay of both the British canon and medieval scholarship for its Germanic heroism and patriotic ethos, and it has in part created many of the tropes from which modern medievalism borrows. The story follows the heroic Beowulf as he fights three monsters: Grendel, Grendel's mother, and finally a dragon. It is in this last fight with the dragon that Beowulf makes the ultimate sacrifice for his country, killing the evil beast and dying with honor. As the first British epic, the poem has above all been lauded as a traditional example of heroism and nationalism — a story that showcases a distinguished and fierce warrior with patriotic values as Beowulf yields his life for his people. But what makes this story of a tragic hero run so deeply through the veins of modern medieval fantasy and medieval scholarship?

At first glance, the key here is its simplicity. The idea of good and evil is clear within the poem, with Beowulf as the hero and Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon representing different facets of evil, and the paths of glory are laid out with a sense of triumph. J.R.R Tolkien has written extensively about the structure of *Beowulf* and the way in which the poem revolves around these monsters.[9] His specialty was in "Anglo-Saxon Literature" (now referred to in scholarship as Early English Literature),[10] and he was particularly interested in *Beowulf*; he wrote numerous essays on the poem and even created a translated copy.[11] His translation and

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[9] J.R.R Tolkien (1892-1973) had one of the most influential voices in the creation of the genre as it is now, but it is important to note that he was also a medieval scholar who taught medieval studies as a professor at Oxford University, during which time he actually wrote The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings series, both of which have made him a beacon of modern-day medievalism. For more information on Tolkien's influence on medievalism, and more information on the development of the genre see: Matthews, David. Medievalism: A Critical History. D.S Brewer, Cambridge. 2015.

[10] As mentioned before, medievalism highlights many issues between genders and races. The term "Anglo-Saxon" in medieval studies has been deemed a racist term which is no longer acceptable in the scholarly realm. For the rest of my paper, any reference to Anglo-Saxon literature will instead be under the name of Early English Literature.

[11] See, for examples on his essays: Tolkien, J.R.R. "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." London, Oxford University Press, 1936. See, for his translation of *Beowulf*: Tolkien, J.R.R. *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*. Edited by Christopher Tolkien, Mariner Books, 2015.

reading of the epic poem has long dominated the way it is read by students and scholars alike. As Tolkien argues in his article "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," the "Us vs. Them" is clear in *Beowulf*. The protagonist fights the evil monsters who torment his people, making himself a renowned hero and the monsters, as the "others" are inherently evil. Tolkien goes as far as to argue that *Beowulf* is a two-section poem rather than three, combining Beowulf's fights against Grendel and Grendel's Mother as one half of the poem focused on Beowulf's youth, and the battle against the dragon as an aged Beowulf (Tolkien, 6). This is important because Grendel's Mother, as a woman, represents two parts of the idea of "otherness": she is a woman, and she is a monster, both unfamiliar territory in this genre. But Tolkien's interpretations do not mean that all stories from this early period have the same ideologies or that they can be simplified the way *Beowulf* has been for so many centuries. I would argue that there is more to the story here; that the poem *Beowulf* is also self-critical. At the end of the poem, after Beowulf's death, for example, the narrator states, "the… people built a pyre for Beowulf,/… mourning a lord far-famed and beloved/… [but that their] nation [was] invaded/ enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,/ slavery and abasement" (Heaney, l. 3137-3155). The narrator here acknowledges that Beowulf's heroic tendencies left his people unprotected; they were slaughtered and forced into slavery, even while Beowulf was still being celebrated and mourned as a beloved warrior and king. This ending complicates the story as Beowulf's heroism seems to be criticized by the poet, at the same time that his bravery and desire to help is praised.

Recently, modern scholars and readers have likewise become more critical of the poem's patriarchal structure and views on alterity than Tolkien was, and many scholars refuse to accept the text as a straightforward superhero Germanic tale. Instead, scholarship in the past twenty

years has focused on the layers of misogyny, especially considering the fight against Grendel's mother, and also the way in which heroism is celebrated and critiqued in the poem. To better understand the turn of recent scholarship, I now turn to the way in which *Beowulf* deals with gender; in order to parse why Beowulf's fight against Grendel's mother is so crucial to the poem itself, we have to look at the historical context. As noted above, *Beowulf* was written in approximately 800 CE. During this time, the Anglo-Saxons had a tradition called "wergild,"[12] which indicated the gold-price that a man was worth. This was used to prevent families, towns, and nations from engaging in blood feud; in their honor code, if a loved one was killed, then the murder must be avenged. The two ways to do this were to either kill the murderer or have the murderer pay gold to compensate for the loss of life. In the case of this poem in particular, Beowulf killed Grendel, who had been storming the hall and killing the Danes there. Within the concept of blood feud, it was technically correct for Grendel's mother to avenge her son's death and kill one of Hrothgar's people, or demand gold. As she decided to avenge her son's death by taking a life, she was technically working within the bounds of her society, though women were not typically part of this tradition. However, as the story progresses, we see that Beowulf wins the feud by killing Grendel's mother instead of giving his life.

The interesting thing here is that the unknown author uses the word "aglæca" during the battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother. This word can have one of three meanings: "hero," "awe-inspiring one," or "monster."[13] In the Seamus Heaney translation, for example, which is one of the most common bilingual editions of the epic, this word acts as "monster" in

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[12] Bosworth, Joseph. "wer-gild." *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, edited by Thomas Northcote Toller et al., Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2014, https://bosworthtoller.com/35368

[13] Bosworth, Joseph. "ag-læca." *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, edited by Thomas Northcote Toller, Christ Sean, and Ondřej Tichy. Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2014. https://bosworthtoller.com/1252.

reference to Grendel's mother, and "hero" in reference to Beowulf. Specifically, line 1259 is translated as "monstrous hell-bride" in reference to Grendel's Mother (Heaney, 89). Readers and scholars alike do not know what the intention behind the word "aglæca" was, as the word is a *hapax legomena*, which means it only exists in one story, *Beowulf*. Since this is the only example of the word we have, the definition is more subjective. In other words, Heaney depicted "aglæca" as he saw fit, and his understanding does not mean that this is the only interpretation.

In her article, "We've Created a Monster: The Strange Case of Grendel's Mother," M. Wendy Hennequin discusses this exact phenomenon — how translators have actually succeeded in making Grendel's mother a monster when in fact the poem does no such thing. Hennequin asserts that scholars "dismiss, condemn, or demonize her [Grendel's mother] [which] derives from misogyny and cultural expectations of women" (Hennequin, 504). This is certainly true in Tolkien's case, who condensed the entire battle scene with Grendel's mother into a continuation of the battle against Grendel, rather than its own separate moment.[14] In our modern lenses, we can evaluate her as a distressed mother who we see is "grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge" (Heaney, l. 1278).[15] The loss of her only child is lamentable, and she sought revenge in a society-acceptable manner. In this scene, it is Beowulf who is the monster, hungry for fame and power rather than humble and honorable. *Beowulf* is much more complicated than it seems, and is especially more complicated than past scholars have allowed it to be.

Intentionally or not, many other medieval stories contained powerful examples of femininity and non-binary characters, challenging the strict notions of gender in the society

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[14]This is according to his essay "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." For more, see: Tolkien, J.R.R. "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." London, Oxford University Press, 1936.

[15] Many modern interpretations of Grendel's mother have since viewed her as a sympathetic character rather than a monster as she was originally depicted in translations. Authors have also produced materials depicting her as a worthy character, such as *The Mere Wife* (2018), a novel by Maria Dahvana Headley.

under which they were written — for instance, Marie de France's *Lanval* challenges gender stereotypes by flipping the roles of damsel in distress and knight in shining armor, while Heldris de Cornuälle's *Le Roman de Silence* challenges the very idea of what it means to be a man or woman; *Silence* ultimately seeks an almost non-binary ideal in today's language. As the earlier of the texts, I turn first to *Lanval*. *Lanval* is an Arthurian legend which ignites a conversation about female autonomy as the leading women, the fairy maiden and Queen Guinevere (King Arthur's wife), entirely dictate the narrative. Throughout Marie's lai, the women manipulate the men into doing their wishes through their beauty and sexuality. The text explicitly states that the fairy maiden "was so much lovelier [than any woman Lanval had seen before]/… Her body so well formed, so fair!" (Gilbert, l. 96-100). The fairy maiden, Lanval's mistress, lavishes him with gifts and blinds him with her beauty, with the understanding that he must not admit to his affair with her. Lanval is overjoyed to promise himself to her, saying "I know of nothing you might ask/ I would not honor as my task/… I will do all that you require;/ forsake all those I might desire,/ and never seek to part from you" (Gilbert, l. 123-129). By committing himself to the fairy maiden, Lanval and the maiden switch positions in society, leaving the maiden in charge of their relationship.

Meanwhile, when Guinevere is rejected by Lanval after propositioning him for sex, she forces King Arthur to hold a trial against Lanval for disrespecting her. When Lanval gives in and acknowledges that the fairy maiden exists during his trial at Arthur's court, she still arrives to save Lanval, even though he seemingly betrays her trust by revealing their affair. In fact, the narrator says that "when his [Lanval's] love… had come/ riding her palfrey, up behind/ leaped Lanval… /with her he went to Avalon/… she carried off this fine young man" (Gilbert, l. 638-644). This is a direct reversal of the knight rescuing a maiden, complete with Lanval riding

behind his mistress on her horse as they leave the court and return to Avalon. This is rarely seen in modern neo-medieval fantasy stories, as the men typically act as saviors or mentors to women, but here is a real medieval example that depicts the exact opposite. This also shows us that the concept of the modern medieval does not necessarily include the variability present in original medieval texts. Therefore, the simplified stories and simplified gender roles eliminated a lot of the richness and diversity that was really present at the time. Another crucial aspect to this story is that it was written by a woman in the 12th century, contrary to Michael Drout, a professor of medievalism and a medieval scholar, whose laments in his article "The Influence of J.R.R Tolkien's Masculinist Medievalism," that students are blindsided by the realities of the Middle Ages because they are not the same as the modern concept of the medieval, as they thought that there were no female authors or protagonists during this period (Drout, 26-27).

Marie's lai allows women to metaphorically be the men in the story through their behavior and actions; meanwhile, Heldris's story, *Silence*, depicts a woman literally becoming a man to achieve her goals. *Silence* tells the story of a young woman who was raised as a boy in order to one day inherit her father's property and money after the king forbade women from inheriting. Silence struggles with her identity as she goes between the two genders — in particular, the narrative follows how she feels about taking on two gender identities. Because she was raised as a boy, she feels more comfortable in stereotypical masculine roles, but also desires the gentleness of what she thinks womanhood is. There is a particular scene in this story that showcases Silence's dilemma where Nature and Nurture argue over which is more important in Silence's reality. Nature persuades Silence to be "afraid [her] sex will be discovered/… [and decides to] put all this behind [her]" (Roche-Mahdi, l. 2572-2575). Nurture, however, combats this idea by saying "I have succeeded very well/ in turning a noble child into a defective male"

(Roche-Mahdi, l. 2601-2602). This idea of a "defective male" is interesting because Silence is not allowed to be completely male or female as she is pulled in two different directions; she does not feel comfortable presenting herself as a woman, but also does not feel comfortable hiding herself as a man.

The very idea of Nature and Nurture arguing over who Silence is and should be is interesting; by nature and in terms of sex, the text makes it clear that Silence is a woman, but by nurture, Silence was raised in the eyes of society as a man. For Silence, which is more important? In the end of the story, she marries the king and becomes queen, but the gender spectrum is open to her in ways that cannot be changed. She acknowledges that she "was deeply disturbed about this [being a boy],/ for her conscience told her/ that she was practicing deception by doing this," but that she wholeheartedly agreed to continue hiding her identity so that she could inherit according to her father's will (Roche-Mahdi, l. 2497-2499). Her childhood was spent masquerading as a man while feeling like a woman, before she was forced to reveal herself to the king. Silence also enjoys her time as a man, as seen when she thinks about what it means to be a woman: "Then he [Silence] began to consider/ the pastimes of a woman's chamber/... and saw, in short, that a man's life/ was much better than that of a woman" (Roche-Mahdi, l. 2632-2639). This is a story that has echoes in modern texts, potentially telling the story of someone who (in today's terminology) could be an individual within the LGBT+ community. These are just three medieval stories out of many that challenge the black-and-white stereotype exhibited and exacerbated by neo-medieval fantasy.

For *Lanval* and *Silence*, like *Beowulf*, it is thus important that we open up space for thinking about how these medieval stories have since been perceived in our culture. *Beowulf* is

arguably one of the most well-known medieval stories and has a long history of scholarship,[16] but that does not mean it is the epitome of medieval writing. The story itself was written around 800 CE and is thus the oldest epic that we have in English. As noted above, both *Lanval* and *Silence* were written much later, in the 12th and 13th centuries, respectively. This time lapse between these narratives may in part account for the changing ideals from uncompromising Germanic heroic protagonists in *Beowulf* to the later texts' more fluid interpretations of gender, but it still does not mean that medieval society progressed to the extent that we see today. In current YA novels, we see more fluidity in gender expression as was presented by Marie de France and Heldris de Cornuälle, and less of the strict adherence to the traditional values emphasized in *Beowulf*.

Even though we have examples of medieval texts that break barriers and challenge gender roles, as seen in the above three texts, modern medievalism still has a stronghold on how we view the Middle Ages. Tolkien is often recognized as the voice of medievalism, as he had an enormous influence on how medievalism is written, read, and portrayed because of his massive successes with his *Lord of the Rings* series, which has earned him fame in literature, academic scholarship,[17] and on the big screen. Tolkien's personal experiences bled into his writing; his time served in World War I undoubtedly affected his views on masculinity, as he served alongside his fellow soldiers in one of the most devastating wars and saw firsthand how men were on the frontlines for their countries. This is prevalent in his novel *The Hobbit* as it has a

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[16] Most of the scholarship on *Beowulf* thus far has been published by white men, perhaps reflecting the story's deep connection to patriarchal ideas as well as a version of white supremacy or the exclusion of other voices of scholarship. For more information, see: Kim, Dorothy. "The Question of Race in *Beowulf*." *JSTOR*. 25 September 2019. https://daily.jstor.org/the-question-of-race-in-beowulf/.

[17] For reference, at the 2021 International Congress on Medieval Studies, there were eleven panels dedicated to Tolkien exclusively. See:
https://wmich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/u434/2021/medieval-program-2021.pdf

noticeable lack of female characters, but an abundance of men on both the good and evil sides.

Michael Drout's study "The Influence of J.R.R Tolkien's Masculinist Medievalism," for

example, discusses how deeply rooted Tolkien's work is in the construction of neo-medieval

fiction (Drout, 26). He talks about the male-dominated societies created in Tolkien's works and

how students are confused when they hear about female characters or female authors of this

period. The result of these patriarchal constructs, he argues, inherently stagnates the genre

through constant repetition of white-patriarchal values, which makes the genre a) harder to teach

to students and b) lacking substantially in the diversity that was actually present in the Middle

Ages (Drout, 26-27).

  Tolkien's stories have thus dominated the genre in ways that have both helped and

harmed. On one hand, his novels have helped to keep neo-medieval fantasy popular in our

culture by providing easily consumable plots that have had massive success on the big screen.

His ability to directly showcase one group of people as 'good' and the other as 'bad' has led to

his stories being very easy to consume without much philosophical inclinations. That is, his

stories appeal to a broader audience who want to enjoy a straightforward narration without

having to think too much about right and wrong themselves. But on the other hand, despite this

success, I argue that the sheer popularity of his fiction has caused the genre to grow stagnant as

plots and characters are typically expected to fit into easily identifiable boxes instead of

exemplifying the diversity and complications that the Middle Ages demands. The personal

prejudices and ideologies of earlier authors and scholars like Tolkien[18] implemented themselves

into the neo-medieval genre, which will inevitably force new YA authors to pull Tolkien apart

from fantasy as they move towards the future. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*

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[18] Michael Drout, for instance, criticizes Tolkien's hypermasculinity and attributes that to Tolkien's time
served in World War One (Drout, 26).

novels tell us who is good, who is evil, why we must be at war — they are, for the most part, straightforward and digestible. The fact that a seemingly-straightforward story like *Beowulf*, which is one of the basis of the neo-medieval fantasy genre as a whole, is actually more complicated makes 19th and 20th century works, such as Tolkien's, seem like a movement all on its own independent of the original source materials.

There is more scholarship on Tolkien and his cohort who helped develop the modern view of the medieval world than can be discussed here. Within Tolkien studies, which has now become its own genre, most scholars agree on the hyper-masculine emphasis present in Tolkien's medieval works, and how this view of the Middle Ages impacts modern YA fantasy writers, who often conform to the genre's tropes. Many have since specifically discussed how Tolkien's brand of medievalism can lead to blatant xenophobia and sexism. Jane Tolmie, for example, examines this lack of diversity in the genre; in her essay "Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine," she primarily examines new fiction that focuses on a female protagonist and she argues that the main fight for female characters in neo-medieval fantasy is defeating the patriarchy. Fantasy heroines have to overcome systematic oppression, despite the increase in both female authorship and readership. According to Tolmie, one of the reasons why the patriarchy is still present in female-centered fantasy books is because patriarchal values are so embedded in medievalism, thanks to the works of Tolkien and others of the 19th and 20th centuries (Tolmie, 146-147). Both Drout, mentioned above, and Tolmie assert that there is a substantial lack of powerful femininity, and diversity in general, that impedes modern YA novels in the neo-medieval fantasy tradition.

As my brief analysis of the three original medieval texts above indicate, there is a lot of diversity inherent in the Middle Ages that medievalism based in 19th century scholarship and fiction simplifies for modern audiences — moreover, this simplification is harmful to the current

YA neo-medieval novels circulating that base themselves on Tolkien-inspired medieval tropes and ideologies. There is still so much to uncover about the medieval world, and the people who lived during it. They were complicated in their own writings, and their own illustrations. The Middle Ages was a period of deeply religious, pious people, but it was also home to the creation of wild marginalia, where normal became abnormal and the world flipped upside down. The people in this time were not afraid to test boundaries and change societal expectations; one such example is a wide range of marginalia that depict animals assuming the roles of humans.[19] These hard to pin down characters and concepts seem to have been all but forgotten and excluded by Tolkien's neo-medieval traditions. And to forget about Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*[20] from his infamous *Canterbury Tales* is to eradicate a group of people who poked fun at themselves, who critiqued their own society, and who to some extent show the same level of diversity and complexity that society displays today. To exclude the complexity of this period is to misunderstand the tropes that have since become so popular. By examining the complexities of the original medieval period, YA authors can write more authentic, complex, and diverse novels that align with progressive modern readership in the genre.

On the issue of feminism and powerful heroines in particular, as this study seeks to illuminate the gender dynamics neo-medieval YA fantasy, Diana Marques's dissertation, *Power and the Denial of Femininity in Game of Thrones*, argues that women characters in neo-medieval fantasy must forfeit their femininity in order to be taken seriously as powerful figures; they must complete tasks expected of men while behaving like men, and this is what makes them exceptional to readers (Marques, 47). Similarly, in *Heroine's Journey: Gender and the*

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[19] An example of this is an image of an anthropomorphic rabbit killing a man in a hunting game. To see the image and for more information, see: https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-smithfield-decretals.
[20] This is a prime example of how medieval writers used their work to poke fun at themselves and their society, as a marriage between an old man and a young woman is critiqued, as is the idea of adultery.

Monomyth in Middle-Grade Fantasy, Alexandra Massey asserts that heroines fill the hero's role by replicating him and turning towards masculine traits, which she argues is not an accurate reflection of women (Massey, 5). She also suggests that traditionally women are passive and men are active, which creates an inherent issue when trying to establish a heroine, because heroes must be active — therefore, heroines must be masculine so that they can be active participants in their own stories (Massey, 47). Like Massey, I believe that the forced masculinization of heroines in modern fantasy is problematic because it continues to reinforce the belief of the gender hierarchy, where men and masculine attributes preside over women and femininity. The idea that women fantasy characters are not active, which has been long established even in medieval texts where women sometimes are not even named, is a misleading one. I therefore argue that to continue to have works of medieval neo-fantasy that champion this hyper-masculine approach to womanhood, we are limiting the growth of the genre.

The idea of strict binaries in gender roles in medievalism no longer serves or reflects the evolution of YA high fantasy in our modern world. However, it is crucial to note that while YA scholars acknowledge this need for change, most of the scholarship on YA fiction still does not extend to our present time and continues to reinforce the idea of sexism as an inherent necessity to the medievalism genre, even as it critiques it. An example of this is Maria Schiko Cecire, who notes in her essay "Medievalism, Popular Culture and National Identity in Children's Fantasy Literature" that medievalism as a genre creates an "Us vs. Them," where "Us" represents the good and "Them" represents the bad (Cecire, 339). This idea is meant to keep "Us" pure and "Them" as evil and takes place on an obviously unequal platform. Whether you have an "Us" and "Them" of explicitly different sexes, or it is taken in a more mythological sense as much of Tolkien's characters are divided by race, with "Us" and "Them" being different species entirely,

there is a divide between acceptable and good and foreign and bad. In this way, Cecire is reiterating the inherent necessity this genre has in dividing among both racial and gender binaries. The typical path taken by novels in this genre adopts the "Us vs. Them" trope, as it is one of the most popular tropes the genre has, which forces sexism to have a place in the narratives.

Similarly to Cecire, Irina Ruppo Malone asserts in her essay "What's Wrong with Medievalism? Tolkien, the Strugatsky Brothers, and the Question of the Ideology of Fantasy" that the "Us vs. Them" is directly connected to nationality; the "Them" is what is foreign, and in this way creates a sense of supremacy and purity for the "Us" that must be maintained within the genre (Malone, 205). This again displays an inherent inequality between what is familiar and what is foreign; in many ways, in the history of neo-medieval works, the familiar can be said to be masculinity and heroes, with the foreign being femininity or women as protagonists. While both Cecire and Malone critique the "Us vs. Them" trope, they mostly focus on why this trope exists and why it has managed to stay so popular. I argue in this study that while the "Us vs. Them" trope is obvious in its examination of nationality, and therefore good and evil; this trope can and should also be used to examine gender. "Us," according to the sources I list above, predominantly means straight, white, cisgender men, while "Them" is everyone and everything that does not fit into those categories, including women, non-cisgender people, people of color, and everything else deemed foreign by the driving forces of medievalism. By blurring the lines of "Us" and "Them," in terms of gender, it is possible to make diversity and inclusion that much more appealing and normalized to readers. No longer will readers expect a male protagonist or guide, but readers will be open to seeing what stories individual authors create in the neo-medieval world.

All of this scholarship seems to agree on two things: 1) the patriarchy established by Tolkien's medievalism directly influences the female representation in the YA fantasy genre and 2) the idea of "Us" and "Them," whether in regards to gender or race, have stagnated the genre by creating boundaries that cannot be crossed, thereby making the genre less diverse in both authorship and readership. The modern concept of the medieval, as we will see in the next section with earlier YA texts, took the sexist values of medieval texts and magnified these ideas, which forced sexism to be embedded in these stories even as they seek to critique patriarchal values. However, as we saw above, genuine medieval texts themselves are written by both men and women and are full of gender reversals, strange creatures, magic, and are so rich and diverse in their content. By returning to the medieval world instead of continuing to use Tolkien's binary medievalism, the potential of diversity in YA stories expands and the genre becomes more reflective of our modern world instead of staying in the artificially recreated past. Despite this, the tropes that are typical of modern medievalism continue to be popular for modern audiences as they include alluring themes: magic and magical creatures, violence, sex, and the atmosphere of a dark Middle Ages that requires world-saving. I think that breaking from these traditions is startling to modern readers, who then do not or cannot identify the work as being medieval neo-fantasy. Most medieval students anticipate Tolkien's works, or stories similar to *Beowulf*, not taking into account how much more depth the Middle Ages actually had. YA authors have to seek a change by evolving with societal and cultural changes rather than continuing to emulate medievalism works and tropes.

In my next section, I continue to argue that these patriarchal values and xenophobic ideologies of 19th and 20th century medievalism greatly hinders current YA neo-fantasy. My argument centers around two YA novels, *The Hero and the Crown* and *Uprooted*, and I suggest

that the progression of time between when these novels were published includes a shift in ideologies. This shift challenges the current scholarship by attempting to produce active, feminine heroines in contrast to the hyper-masculinity deemed necessary by the above arguments. *The Hero and the Crown*, written in 1984, contains a lot of sexism, unintentional or not; Aerin, the protagonist, is a foreigner in her own country because of her mother's blood. She is unwelcomed by her "pure" family members, and she is not crowned queen, despite proving herself capable, until after her husband permits her to have the title. Because of this, I argue that McKinley's novel is a prime example of the scholarship presented above which argues that fantasy novels are rooted in sexist ideas — this is also despite the book's clear goal to provide girls with a powerful female protagonist. *Uprooted* (2015), on the other hand, has almost no blatant sexism. Agnieszka, the heroine, does not directly combat a patriarchal society; as a witch, I argue that her authority and power exceed the gender boundaries established by older works in this genre. While she is not immune to sexual transgressions, and while this story does take place in a patriarchal society, overcoming her own gender is not the ultimate goal of the protagonist. Her story includes saving the kingdom from the evil Wood, not despite being a woman, but by being herself. With a thirty-one year difference between these two novels, a lot has changed and it is clear that this genre is going to continue evolving, especially if the bounds of modern medievalism is removed from the evolutionary timeline.

Past to Present: YA Evolution

I now turn to the YA novels and their evolution as they critique the patriarchal ideologies that have become embedded in the neo-medieval fantasy genre; specifically, this section will examine the ways in which the genre as a whole has developed the ultimate goal of offering more diversity and richness in plots and characters. Some YA novels have been more successful

than others in this attempt. Robin McKinley's 1984 novel *The Hero and the Crown* is an example of foundational 20th century YA novel within the modern genre that attempts to disrupt the patriarchal boundaries set forth by its predecessors; but as I argue below, this story ultimately gives in to the pressures of the long-established canon.

     The Hero and the Crown follows the story of Aerin, a princess born to a witch-woman into a family with whom she does not fit. She is rash, decisive, headstrong, and stubborn — she charges full-force into learning and practicing dragon-slaying, not content with just fulfilling her role as the king's daughter. Despite the protagonist being a driven young woman, from the beginning, the novel sets itself up to be a reimagining of all the male-dominated novels that have come before it. In other words, *The Hero and the Crown* seeks to provide a space for female-driven action that goes against traditional patriarchal systems. For instance, in the beginning the narrator tells readers that "No women rode in Arlbeth's [the king's] army. A few of the bolder wives might be permitted to go with their husbands,... those who could be trusted to smile… and curtsy… and even dance… But it was expected that no wife would go unless her husband asked her" (McKinley, 7-8). This quote reveals right from the start that women in this society are subjected to the whims of men, and that Aerin will likely have to overcome her own gender to be a successful heroine.

     Aerin, the young protagonist, is a princess who is destined to be more than her birthright, yet the narrative is driven by the fact that the protagonist being a woman is somehow a failure; this is shown at the start of the novel, and repeated multiple times throughout the narrative. We need look no further than the title; while seemingly a small difference, McKinley chooses to style her protagonist Aerin as *The Hero*, effectively comparing her to a pantheon of previous male heroes. This choice broadens the potential audience by not excluding male readers, but

when her aim was to provide a heroine for young girls to read and look up to,[21] this seems like a heavy price to pay to garner readership. Later in the book, when the narrator describes Aerin's birth, they state, "It is said in the City that she [Aerin's mother] died of despair when she found she had had a daughter and not a son" (McKinley, 147). This implication that Aerin's gender is the biggest hindrance to the success of the kingdom is confirmed when Aerin herself states that "[her] mother wasn't even permitted to be Honored Wife. Just in case she had a boy" (McKinley, 161). Aerin's mother was not given the title of queen, despite being married to the king, in case she had a boy; a boy would inherit the throne automatically, and the court did not want to risk a foreigner's son becoming king. This is a reiteration of the "Us vs. Them" trope directly referencing both the gender dichotomy, and the dichotomy between a foreign and a non-foreign citizen. The implication in this quote is that male is better than female, and native citizen is better than adopted foreigner, a reiteration of the ideas created by the modern concept of medievalism.

Men in this narrative take a lot of vital roles in guiding Aerin through her journey as a heroine. Aerin's relationship to men ultimately drives the plot forward, from romantic relationships to the strained relationship with her father. Aerin's father Arlbeth is elusive and perpetuates a tradition where his daughter will not inherit his crown. Her relationship with Arlbeth is almost nonexistent in the beginning of the novel, up until she is made a knight in his army and — after she proves her worth, "She carried the sword of the king" (McKinley 99). He then begins to have some semblance of a relationship with her, though he never comes to fully understand her as a daughter. Their relationship is awkward and strained at best, as when Aerin

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[21] Robin McKinley has given several interviews stating her intentions behind her writing. In fact, she has stated that Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* was her gateway into fantasy, but that "the lack of women doing anything but being beautiful and symbolic… bothered [her] from first exposure." For more, see: "Open Road Media Chats with Robin McKinley About Her Career and Winning the Newbery Award for THE HERO AND THE CROWN."

got sick and Arlbeth visited her, but "never stayed long" (McKinley, 27). This distance is compounded by the fact that Aerin herself does not know how to bridge the gap to her father; in the same scene where she is sick, the narrator states, "since she closed her eyes when he came near to… kiss her cheek… she never saw the anxious look on his face" (McKinley, 27). Though it is clear that both of them would like to have a deeper connection and stronger bond with one another, I suggest that their society prevents a close nurturing kind of relationship between father and daughter. The most Aerin was worth to Arlbeth, in terms of her position and station in life, is as a potential trading token for marriage. Their strained relationship, which is something that is clearly lamented but ultimately never resolved within the story, is directly a result of the country's social and economic structure, which in turn echoes the structure of feudal society within the Middle Ages and 19th century medieval fiction. The idea of strained relationships between parents and children, especially fathers and daughters, within this genre is an archaic concept derived from daughters only being useful as trade for higher status or money. This trope keeps women separated from men, even as women like Aerin seek to break these barriers.

The other important men in the novel, Luthe, Aerin's mentor and sexual partner, and Tor, Aerin's cousin and eventual husband, also serve as guiding posts for her journey. Within the structure of the novel, Tor and Luthe build Aerin into the hero she becomes; Tor trains her in swordplay and Luthe teaches her to unlock her magic capabilities. Aerin actively seeks out Tor's guidance and teachings, stating that she is "big enough now… [to] carry one of the boys' training swords," which prompts them to begin lessons; these tutorials "had to be at infrequent intervals… [but] after several months' time and practice she could make [Tor] pant and sweat as they danced around each other" (McKinley, 44). By seeking out Tor's help, she is restricted to male role models who build her as a warrior in a masculine tradition. This is also in part because

the women are only allowed to do what their husbands permit, which means there was a lack of women mentors for Aerin. No women were in Arlbeth's army, therefore it is implied that no woman except Aerin, as "the chosen one" can learn these traditions.

Later in the novel, when she meets Luthe and is dangerously ill after a brutal dragon-slaying, he first comments to her that he "can cure [her]" (McKinley, 148). This comment begins their trials together as he teaches her to use the magic she has inherited from her mother. Luthe tells her that "most of [her] kelar [magic] is her [Aerin's mother] legacy" and continues on that he, Aerin's mother, and even Aerin herself are not entirely human and therefore he is the best guide for her in this next phase of her life (McKinley, 157). In both instances, the men take Aerin's life and training into their own hands, and Aerin willingly submits to all of the wisdom and guidance they will bestow upon her knowing their advice can lead to her survival. The relationships Aerin forms with both men set her up to be a hero, but ultimately are harmful to the novel because Aerin is subjected to the whims and desires of men instead of being allowed to forge her own path towards heroism.

The fact that her life-guides are only men, instead of a character such as Teka, her nanny, is yet another way the novel is embedded in the patriarchal structures it seeks to dismantle. In fact, for most of the story, Teka annoys Aerin instead of proving to be a useful character that Aerin could learn from; Aerin even states that "Whatever [Teka's] going to say, [she's] thought of already" (McKinley, 13). This constant undermining of Teka's wisdom and advice for Aerin propels the two women to be at odds with one another so that Aerin never fully accepts her as mentor or role model. Once Aerin starts training her father's old wounded horse to prepare for battling dragons, and decides to practice her fire-repellent outside of the kingdom, her plan is met with reluctance from her nanny, who prizes femininity and order over change:

"Teka… did not like this plan at all. [She] was willing to accept that Aerin was a good rider, and might be permitted to leave… on her pony; but that she should want to go alone, overnight, with that vicious stallion… Teka… said that he was dangerous and Aerin couldn't be certain of her ability to control him. Aerin was ready to weep with rage…" (McKinley, 76).

In scenes such as these, Teka acts as a maternal figure who Aerin at times despises, as she seeks to develop her own place in the world. Since these two women cannot see eye-to-eye with one another, their relationship is also strained, as Teka tries to protect her young charge and Aerin tries to be an independent woman who is drastically more adventurous than her nanny. Where Aerin had the opportunity for female bonding and guidance, she instead chooses Luthe and Tor to guide her, since both of them are eager to see Aerin stand out from other women in her abilities with magic and weapons.

Despite saving her kingdom in the end from an invading army, and eventually marrying the future king Tor, Aerin is still not even worthy enough to be queen in her own right as Arlbeth's daughter. At the end of the novel, she becomes queen because "Tor… wanted to marry her as part of the celebration of his kingship, and have her acknowledged queen as he was acknowledged king" (McKinley, 240). This is crucial to the narrative because Aerin's happy ending is an isolated event, and the underlying political and social structure of the Damarian kingdom remains unchanged. It is crucial to note that no other women in the novel is able to rise up and change their position in society like Aerin does. The closest claim to woman-bonding is after Aerin kills a dragon, when "a girl… stepped up to catch Aerin's eye, and said clearly, 'We thank you'" (McKinley, 93). The narrator goes on to state "Aerin smiled… The girl grew to adulthood remembering the first sol's smile, and her seat on the proud white horse" (McKinley,

93). The little girl remembers Aerin as a powerful figure, but this remembrance does not cause any actions that create change and forward movement for other women in the story; it is a moment in time, or a blip within the story, that quickly fades. Aerin does not strive for equality for women, or even putting more women in power; she instead allows herself to be the only woman with a semblance of political power within the novel. She becomes queen thanks to her husband's influence, and we see no indication that other women in the story benefit from her experience and change of character. Moreover, without Tor's help, Aerin would have never received the title she earned. Thus, *The Hero and the Crown* is a book that promises to be a revival or female autonomy that gives young readers a powerful female heroine, but the systematic structures that keep men in positions of power remain.

Aerin is ultimately depicted as a rash, brutish, insecure girl who gets in the way more times than she is considered helpful. She is also explicitly compared with her cousin Galanna, who represents a more idealized feminine princess. As the narrator states at the beginning of the novel, "anything resembling hardship did not appeal to [Galanna] in the least" (McKinley, 8), which is a direct contrast to Aerin who only feels fulfillment by triumphing over physical hardships. Becoming an active agent in her own story requires Aerin to be a more masculine character, echoing the male heroic predecessors in neo-medieval fantasy instead of carving a new space for young women. This constant comparison is forced upon Aerin and Galanna by both the narrator and by the readers, who are clearly meant to side with Aerin; throughout the novel the two characters fight and the way in which they are viewed by other characters demonstrates that Aerin, and therefore masculinity, are better than Galanna and femininity. The narrator notes, for example, that "Aerin was by nature the sort of child who got into trouble first and thought about it later if at all, and Galanna, in her way, was quite clever" (McKinley, 23). This seemingly

generalized characterization of Aerin and Galanna is made harmful by the reflection that this society, as we have seen above, is a patriarchal one; in this quote, femininity is explicitly aligned with manipulation, cleverness, beauty, whereas manliness is more aligned with Aerin and her brashness and carelessness.

The ways in which McKinley describes Aerin and sets up her relationships to other characters replicates the idea that the protagonists of neo-medieval fantasy have to be men, or otherwise masculine, to be taken seriously in their positions. Galanna, for all her womanliness, is constantly mocked, such as when she has "one of her notorious temper tantrums over [the broken dishes]" (McKinley, 14). Thus, a novel about female empowerment backfires and becomes another tale of misogyny with a woman at the center, relying on the men around her to provide her with knowledge and help. Aerin has to be special (or 'the chosen one') in order to be able to act as a protagonist, otherwise her story would not be as important. Robin McKinley attempts to create a powerful female protagonist, and though her heroine did not break barriers other than her own within the story, it did pave the way for future YA authors to create more female protagonists. Where McKinley failed, others have since tried again.

One of the more recent neo-medieval fantasy narratives is Naomi Novik's 2015 novel *Uprooted*. Unlike McKinley's Aerin, I argue that Novik's heroine Agnieszka does not have to overcome her own gender in order to be taken seriously. *Uprooted* follows the story of Agnieszka, an unknown witch taken from her home to learn the art of magic so that she could ultimately defeat the evil Wood, a magical entity that has long been tormenting surrounding villages. Agnieszka, with the help of her best friend Kasia, and her reluctant friend Sarkan, team up together to bring peace to the kingdom. The majority of the novel is driven by women in power with little reference to the men in the novel — and certainly none of the men actively

overpower Agnieszka. Novik's novel more than anything is about the power of female bonds, which automatically forces the more patriarchal narratives aside. While Agnieszka is not free from the threat of societal pressures and misogyny, such as Prince Marek's attempted rape (Novik, 43), this is not the basis or heart of the story.

Within her novel, Novik begins by dismantling the apprentice-mentor relationship between a young woman and an older man, when Agnieszka's magic lessons with her would-be mentor Sarkan remain unsuccessful. Sarkan is entirely unable to help Agnieszka learn spells because their magic is fundamentally incompatible. This is made clear after "[Sarkan] spent the next hour interrogating [Agnieszka] as to every particular of how [she] had cast the spell, growing ever more upset" (Novik, 88). Sarkan's reliance on meticulous pronunciations and calculations is always juxtaposed with Agnieszka's emotional responses to magic, which prevent them from fully becoming mentor and mentee. Instead, they learn to respect one another as users of magic with varying abilities, and find that they are actually strongest when they work together.

We see this explicitly when Agnieszka is able to "align [their] workings… [by] envision[ing] his [magic] like the water-wheel of a mill, and [her's] the rushing stream driving it around" (Novik, 95). From this scene, Agnieszka and Sarkan use their opposing magic in conjunction with one another to create a more powerful dynamic that ultimately stems from respect for each other's differences. A little cliché, but Novik is able to emphasize that Agnieszka's magic trajectory is not dependent on men, even as her magic can weave together with others' magic. Perhaps more importantly, Agnieszka gets a female mentor in the form of Baba Jaga's old writings, a journal that she finds from a long-dead fellow magic user. After Agnieszka is able to make one of Jaga's spells work to save Sarkan's life, she demands to know

why he had not been teaching her from Jaga's book the entire time. He replies that "it's unteachable… Whatever her notoriety, in practice it's worth almost nothing" (Novik, 91). This is important because it shows that Agnieszka and Sarkan have fundamentally different abilities in magic; Agnieszka aligns better with Jaga, who "pointed [her] in the proper direction" without trying to take full control of her (Novik, 92). This woman to woman camaraderie is unfortunately more of a rarity in the neo-medieval genre, and is often overshadowed by pointed male leadership and guidance. While Sarkan sneers at the use of Jaga's book, the novel itself makes sure to paint Agnieszka's magic in a positive light. Sarkan himself is slow to change, as a fundamentally hierarchical man steeped in the traditions of the country, but his reluctance does not determine the power of Agnieszka's magic; he does, however, undergo his own character arc where he does change for the better, going as far as to apologize to Kasia for inadvertently causing her panic when she thought she was the chosen one (Novik, 195).

Not only is Agnieszka able to have a woman mentor, but she also has a female best friend and platonic soulmate. Kasia, Agnieszka's foil, is the guiding force for almost all of Agnieszka's personal growth as a woman and protagonist. Kasia is described as the "one girl who was far and away the prettiest, or the most bright, or the best dancer, or especially kind… Kasia was all those things" (Novik, 5). Meanwhile, Agnieszka is the complete opposite, declaring that "if [she] began to apologize for being untidy, [she]'d be apologizing for the rest of [her] life… But she didn't care: [she] didn't feel [she] owed… beauty" (Novik, 32). Despite these starkly opposing lifestyles, these two characters maintain and grow in their friendship with one another, as opposed to being enemies or forced to compete with one another for attention. This is a direct reversal of McKinley's two characters, Aerin and Galanna, where Aerin's masculinity is contrasted with Galanna's femininity. Instead of being at odds with one another, Agnieszka and

Kasia use each other's strengths and weaknesses to work together to ultimately defeat the Wood and save their kingdom. This is important too because as Agnieszka is elevated to a powerful witch who lives on her own in the now-saved Wood and has complete autonomy, Kasia is "name[d]... captain of [the prince's] guard" (Novik, 429). This friendship is central to the narrative, and is arguably the most important relationship Agnieszka has with anyone. She overcomes the obstacles she faces primarily with the help of Kasia rather than Sarkan.

The bond between Agnieszka and Kasia is so strong that it makes her heteronormative relationship with Sarkan pale in comparison. For instance, when Agnieszka believes Kasia's going to be taken by the Dragon (Sarkan's terrifying alter-ego at the beginning of the novel), she had "taken Kasia's hand… [and] was squeezing the life out of it, and she was squeezing back"; conversely, when Agnieszka is taken instead, "only Kasia moved; I looked back at her and saw her about to reach for me in protest" (Novik, 13). This is important because it shows that the love Agnieszka and Kasia have for one another exceeds their fear of the Dragon. Later, when Agnieszka briefly returns home, she encounters Kasia and relates that "we made a ridiculously unlikely pair… but our hands still gripped each other tight, truer than anything else between us" (Novik, 65). The most fulfilling moment in their friendship that cements them as deeply bonded is when Agnieszka and Sarkan work to save Kasia from the Wood. As they are completing the spell, Agnieszka and Kasia are able to see into one another's souls; Agnieszka laments that she

> "saw my own face reflected in her wide glassy eyes, and my own secret jealousies, how I
> had wanted all her gifts… All the times I'd felt like nothing, the girl who didn't matter…
> All the ways she'd been treated specially… There had been times I wanted to be the
> special one… I had to turn back to Kasia full of all my messy tangled thoughts and secret

wishes, and I had to let her see them… I had to see her, bare before me, and that hurt

even worse: because she'd hated me, too" (Novik, 140-141).

This scene delves into the main hindrance to female bonding in this genre; both women are

opposites and often contrasted against one another, which bleeds into how they actually view

each other. The word choice is powerful within the quote above — the hatred and shame that

comes with these lines is raw and one of the fundamental reasons why their relationship is so

strong. Moreover, it is also why Agnieszka's relationship with Sarkan is lesser when compared

to her relationship with Kasia. This moment of revelation allows Agnieszka and Kasia to grow in

their friendship with one another, and forgive each other. This soul-deep connection lasts for the

duration of the novel where the two learn to use each other's strengths to overcome obstacles

they face. There is also the hint that Agnieszka does not dream of a heteronormative life; she

states "It wasn't that I wanted a husband and a baby; I didn't, or rather, I only wanted them the

way I wanted to live to a hundred: someday, far off" (Novik, 103), but this is never explored in-

depth or with Kasia as a potential partner.

While the other women of the novel are not elevated the same way that Agnieszka and

Kasia ultimately are, all women began the novel with the ability to gain power and move up in

the world — two perfect examples being Alosha, a.k.a "The Sword," a powerful witch to the

king, and Danka, the "headwoman [of Dvernik]," who was in charge of Agnieszka and Kasia's

town (Novik, 11). Alosha in particular, like Baba Jaga's spellbook, is important in showing

Agnieszka who she could become with her magic; Alosha is the head of the magic-users in the

kingdom and declares that "A nation is people as well… More people than just the few you love

best yourself. And the Wood threatens them all" (Novik, 279). Agnieszka even comes to feel that

Alosha is a type of role model, demanding the guards to "'Go and get Alosha,' instinctively

wanting someone who would know what to do" (Novik, 306). These women are not at a predetermined disadvantage because of their gender as the women of *The Hero and the Crown* are, so they have less to overcome and less of a necessity to rise together against patriarchal bounds. Their society is not free from misogyny, but it is also not as deeply rooted in patriarchal beliefs which allows women more power and autonomy than not. Because of this, Agnieszka is not the "chosen one," but rather the power is more diffuse in this narrative which allows for other characters to shine.

There is more room for conversations about diversity in representation in these newer works, with less stereotyping because there seems to be more of an importance placed on characterization rather than strictly plot movement. It is important to note that, though there is obvious positive and progressive movement between *The Hero and the Crown* to *Uprooted*, that does not mean that Novik's novel is perfect or that her heroine is how every future YA novel should define theirs. There are still flaws here, such as the sex scene between Agnieszka and Sarkan in the middle of a major battle scene (Novik, 353-355), which detracts from the novel and the character growth of the protagonist more than it adds to it. Oftentimes stories will use sex as a means of uplifiting their female protagonists and giving them bodily autonomy, but this is not necessarily the case for *Uprooted*. Agnieszka had already proven herself to be an independent woman by handling herself at court and saving the young prince and princess after the kingdom was attacked from a Wood-contaminated book. The scene where she approaches Sarkan in the midst of a brutal battle goes against everything Agnieszka has proven herself to be. Rather, this scene feels like it is there because there is an audience expectation that there will be a heterosexual romance. McKinley also uses sexuality as a means of connecting Aerin to her two mentors, Luthe and Tor. Aerin and Luthe engage in an explicitly sexual relationship (McKinley,

206) and as Aerin marries Tor and becomes his queen, it is safe to presume that they also have an inherently sexual relationship. The use of sex as a connecting device rather than something imperative to the development of the heroine in her journey makes these scenes irrelevant to the story as a whole.

One of the most glaring differences that sets *Uprooted* and *The Hero and the Crown* apart is the narration style. Novik's novel is told from the first-person perspective, allowing Agnieszka to drive her own story and have autonomy over how she tells it. McKinley's novel is in the third-person and takes control away from Aerin, dictating her actions instead of letting Aerin lead her own novel. This might seem like a minute difference, but it affects our experience of the heroines' journeys. Novik's story allows YA readers to be the "I," to feel Agnieszka's pain and growth firsthand, while McKinley's book tells Aerin, and therefore the readers, what they should be thinking and how they should be feeling; this in turn, I argue, takes power from readers and the protagonist. Letting readers live vicariously through powerful heroines is the first step in navigating the development of more diversity and acceptance in this genre in its totality.

Both McKinley and Novik have helped pave the way forward for newer female protagonists in this genre, and in recent years there has been an influx in powerful women characters in the neo-medieval fantasy genre. Examples include: Tomi Adeyemi's Zélie Adebola from *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) and Jennifer Armentrout's Poppy from her novel *From Blood and Ash* (2020)[22]. Despite this increase in women authors, readers, and characters, and the continuing popularity of the genre itself, we still see remnants of the lingering effects of the 19th century concept of the medieval. This modern medievalism, as I have argued in this thesis, is based on the stereotypes of the Middle Ages rather than the "real" Middle Ages. This reliance on

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[22] Both of these novels are contemporary examples of the movement towards more powerful heroines that showcase the importance of female bonds within this genre.

stereotypes in turn creates false binaries for gender; most of these YA fantasy books still heavily center around heterosexual romances and have the female protagonist overcoming her gender as the chosen one to save the world. These are not inherently bad tropes, but the constant repetition of these ideals in this genre stagnates the possibilities of YA neo-medieval fantasy.

Looking Back to Move Forward

As we have seen with the evolution between McKinley's novel and Novik's novel, YA fantasy evolves according to cultural expectations surrounding women to create a female protagonist that will be relatable to modern audiences. Why then does Tolkien's style of fantasy continue to overshadow newer stories that adhere more closely to societal expectations now — especially when female readership for YA and medieval neo-fantasy is at an all-time high? Like Tolmie and Drout argue, Tolkien's texts and his brand of medievalism have become such a mainstay because his stories remain popular. Even people unfamiliar with medieval studies are interested in stories such as *The Lord of the Rings*. This popularity ultimately causes works like Tolkien's to overshadow newer YA neo-medieval fantasy that pushes more boundaries. Unfortunately, authors must write what will ultimately sell. We can see this now with texts like *Game of Thrones* and *The Witcher* that have been massively successful in penetrating pop culture and creating an enduring legacy. Both of these stories follow in the footsteps of *The Lord of the Rings* in how they shape the medieval world; both stories, for example, contain powerful women who are not only overshadowed by men but who also experience explicit violence within the patriarchal narratives. There is an audience demand that has fueled this genre and required certain elements to continuously be present within popular narratives: fantastical creatures, Us vs. Them in the form of a clear good-guy to root for and a bad-guy to hate, and some type of heteronormative romance. McKinley and Novik's novels have not had the opportunity yet to

become mainstream in our culture because the high fantasy genre in general is dominated by these stories that feature male heroes.

      To combat this issue of domination of one type of narrative, we have to open the space for new narratives by re-evaluating what medieval means. The issue with what it means to be "medieval" in current literature is that the fantasy genre has deep roots in white patriarchy and white supremacy that must be overcome in order to see a more progressive shift in YA neo-medieval fantasy as a whole. As I have shown, there have already been drastic changes in this genre from *The Hero and the Crown* (1984) to *Uprooted* (2015), and a continued interest in female-driven stories in this genre has propelled an influx of YA fantasy. The necessity to promote acceptance and diversity for young readers is twofold: firstly, this would give them more accurate representation across racial, gender, and all other boundaries, and secondly, everyone needs a role model. If these characters continue to be black-and-white, singular representations of life repeated like Tolkien and his cohort have perpetuated, the readers will grow to see this as the mirror for life[23] and not expect the diversity that is really there.

      The Middle Ages gave life to what is now known as medieval high fantasy, but as I have shown above, the medieval period was more complicated than modern medievalism implies. *Lanval* and *Silence* are two of the more obvious examples of gender-bending and shifting ideologies, but even mainstays like *Beowulf* are being reinvestigated as a more complex story than originally thought. There were blurred lines in these stories, especially in regards to gender, that got pushed aside when powerhouses such as Tolkien dominated the field. In this thesis, I have ultimately argued that we need to rework the genre in a way that is structured for continual

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[23] An example of this is prevalent in many white supremacy movements, including the Charlottesville riots, where they used medievalism symbols to promote their ideologies. For more information, see: https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2017/medievalism-white-supremacy-and-the-historians-craft.

growth, instead of allowing the gender and racial boundaries of 19th and 20th century medievalism to continue dividing readers and preventing it from being an accessible YA genre to modern audiences.

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