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Magic Kingdoms beyond Disneyland:
Medievalism in George R.R. Martin's "A Song of Ice and Fire" and Mary Gentle's
"Ash: A Secret History"

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Abstract

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Much of the fantasy genre – in particular, much of the literature that defines public perception of the genre – takes place in worlds inspired by the Middle Ages, or at least by the common ideas and conceptions of the era. This thesis examines two works of fantasy – George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and Mary Gentle's *Ash: A Secret History* – that partake in a long tradition of medievalism in Western popular culture and whose authors have set out to subvert some of the genre conventions that relate to the use of medievalism.

The texts are analysed with regards to how they evoke and how they reimagine various images of the Middle Ages, including images of the era as previously portrayed in the fantasy genre. Narratology, especially historiographic narratology, is used to examine the texts on the story level, considering such aspects as archetypal characters (the knight, the lady), how events inspired by medieval history are integrated into the narrative and the author's aspirations toward a more realistic portrayal of the era. Complementing the story-level analysis is a literary-linguistic analysis which demonstrates the role played by stylistic choices in the process of evoking and reimagining the Middle Ages.

The thesis is concluded by a brief consideration of why the Middle Ages have come to loom so large in the minds of both fantasy authors and fantasy readers.

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1. Introduction

The Middle Ages have once again found a revival in the postmodern popular culture: films have seen King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table ride again, the Medieval Times restaurant chain fills its benches with men, women, and children eating meat with their hands while watching knights joust, the world championship in medieval longsword fighting draws competitors around the world to Gothenburg.¹ The Middle Ages is one of those eras of our past that is constantly revisited and reimagined, with certain elements drawing more attention than others, but all of it a part of a resurgent medievalism. In *Medievalism and the Quest for the "Real" Middle Ages*, Clare Simmons expands on Leslie J. Workman's (1927-2001) definition of medievalism as the "continuing process of creating the Middle Ages" by noting that this process entails cultural adaptation, adapting the material of the past to the use of the present day.² Knighthood and the cult of chivalry, the forbidding castles, the three estates, the kings anointed by gods, courtly love – these things have attracted attention from readers, viewers, and creators who find a resonance in these things with their present condition.

Given the popularity of the period and the close relationship between fantasy and myths and legends, it is hardly strange that so many authors within the fantasy genre have turned to medievalism for inspiration, whether their stories are set in constructed secondary worlds or more or less alternate versions of our own world's past. In his essay "Dreaming of the Middle Ages", Umberto Eco coined the term "fantastic neomedievalism" to discuss the particular way in which modern culture has appropriated the Middle Ages.³ Although Eco's "fantastic" was not specifically referring to fantasy,⁴ he did have time to briefly discuss (and dismiss) the "pseudo-medieval pulp in paperbacks, halfway between Nazi nostalgia and occultism" as he called the genre literature.⁵ Despite this dismissal from Eco, however, his discussion of the place of neomedievalism in popular culture highlights the very real influence the Middle Ages has in the present.

However, although the association of the period with fantasy is so well known as to seem cliché – knights and castles and maidens loom large in the imagination whenever the fantasy genre

¹ <http://swordfish.ghfs.se/>.

² Clare Simmons: *Medievalism and the Quest for the "Real" Middle Ages* (Routledge, London & Portland, 2001) p. 22.

³ Umberto Eco: *Travels in Hyperreality* (Mariner Books, Boston, 2014) p. 63.

⁴ Kim Selling: "Fantastic Neomedievalism: The Image of the Middle Ages in Popular Fantasy," in *Flashes of the Fantastic*, ed.: David Ketterer (Greenwood Press, Westport 2004) p. 211. Regarding the relationship between the two terms, this thesis will adhere to the definitions given by Brian Attebery in *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington, 1992, p. 3f) where he separates the genre of fantasy from the fantastic as a mode which simply represents the polar opposite to the mimetic mode; the genre of fantasy is generally found on the fantastic end of the scale between the two modes, but all literature is found somewhere on that scale.

⁵ Eco p. 62.

is mentioned – relatively little attention has been paid to examining the actual mechanics of the relationship between fantasy and medieval history. It is all well and good to say that the Middle Ages are a well-known period of history that appears to rouse the imagination of many readers (and writers) in the Western world, but when a genre such as fantasy has become so closely associated with a particular period of history a more in-depth consideration of the nature of this connection would appear to be a worthwhile pursuit. To fully explore the relationship between the Middle Ages and fantasy falls well outside the scope of this thesis and thus a more narrow focus will be adopted: the examination of medieval history in two particular works of fantasy where the authors have clearly positioned themselves in dialogue with the genre’s usage of the Middle Ages.

The first of these works is *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-) by George R.R. Martin (1948-), an in-progress series of epic fantasy in the vein of J.R.R Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. The second is *Ash: A Secret History* (2000) by Mary Gentle (1956-), a stand-alone novel which could be considered an alternate history in that it takes place in a version of our past but whose plot depends heavily on fantastical elements and as such it is often seen as historical fantasy. These texts will be introduced in more detail in “Material and Previous Research” which will also outline the relatively limited existing research of relevance to the topic at hand. In “Purpose and Method” the questions that will form the core of the analysis will be presented, providing the purpose of this study. In relation to this there will be a brief consideration of the methodologies being employed to conduct the research in question. Finally, the introductory section will conclude with “Theory”; a presentation of the theoretical frameworks selected for this thesis and how they will be applied to the material.

The analysis itself will open with a brief overview of popular and literary medievalism throughout history, giving a background to its current revival within (among other things) the fantasy genre. This will set the stage for the two main lines of inquiry which are discussed in “Evoking the Middle Ages” and “The Middle Ages Reimagined”. The former chapter looks at the reconstructed (and reimagined) Middle Ages as it appears in these texts, asking questions such as if there are particular elements that need to be present for a secondary world or alternate past to be perceived as medieval. The latter chapter examines the way that the Middle Ages are changed and reworked within fantasy and what the effects of this (partial) defamiliarisation might be.

The final section of the thesis is given over to the conclusions, where an overarching picture will emerge of the use of the Middle Ages as a core element in the shaping of the secondary world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the alternate history of *Ash*. Additionally, the intention is to connect the results of the analysis to the much broader question of why it is that the Middle Ages appears to

loom so large in the imagination of writers of fantasy. Though this topic is too broad to be answered using such a limited text-selection, it is nevertheless hoped that the preceding examination of the use of the Middle Ages will shed some light on this matter.

1.1. Material and Previous Research

George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* currently consists of five novels: *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1998), *A Storm of Swords* (2000), *A Feast for Crows* (2005) and *A Dance with Dragons* (2011). Two more novels are expected to complete the series, their publication dates as of yet unknown, but for the purpose of this thesis the lack of a conclusion is not considered an impediment as it has limited bearing on the aspects of the series that are being studied. The novels are told through multiple third-person limited perspectives which weave together to form the overarching narrative of the brutal dynastic struggles in the Seven Kingdoms, set against the backdrop of a returning supernatural threat in the far north and the fate of an exiled princess who wishes to win back her father's throne. The series is generally considered to belong to the epic fantasy subgenre due to both aspects of the secondary world and the scope of the narrative.⁶ It sets itself apart from many of its predecessors within the genre by a relatively limited use of magic and a grimmer and grittier look at a medieval-inspired secondary world. Indeed, it is often considered as having paved the way for a new style of fantasy, sometimes referred to as "grimdark".⁷ This departure from the previously prevailing trend in post-Tolkienian fantasy has repeatedly been stated as quite deliberate by Martin, who found himself dismayed at the "Disneyland Middle Ages" presented in these books, a sharp contrast to what he encountered in historical fiction.⁸

Mary Gentle's *Ash* was published as a single volume in the UK and as four volumes in the US (*A Secret History*, *Carthage Ascendant*, *Wild Machines* and *Lost Burgundy*). The novel is primarily narrated through a first-person perspective by the titular character, a female mercenary captain called Ash who has grown up believing she is able to hear the voice of a divine creature who guides her tactical decisions. There is also a framing story, consisting of the correspondence between a historian and his agent as he attempts to write a biography about Ash's life. As the novel progresses, he finds himself witnessing how history itself is changing as the two histories – "our"

⁶ Rainer Emig: "Fantasy as Politics: George RR Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*" in *Politics in Fantasy Media: Essays on Ideology and Gender in Fiction, Film, Television and Games*, eds.: Gerold Sedlmayr & Nicole Waller (McFarland, Jefferson, 2014) p. 86.

⁷ See <http://www.sfbok.se/extra/kataloger/grimdark.pdf>. While not yet an established academic classification along the lines of "epic fantasy" or "sword & sorcery", this catalogue put together by SF Bokhandeln shows that it is a viable classification for a book seller to employ. Additionally, the catalogue gives good examples of what kind of books are considered "grimdark".

⁸ James Poniewozik: "GRRM Interview Part 2: Fantasy and History", *TIME* April 18, 2011, <http://entertainment.time.com/2011/04/18/grrm-interview-part-2-fantasy-and-history/>, accessed 26.11.2014.

history, which is where he starts out, and the “alternate” history of *Ash* – begin to merge together due to events in the main narrative. While sometimes classified as alternate history,⁹ it can just as well be read as a historical fantasy (indeed, a case could even be made for reading it as science fiction) and it was selected as the second body of primary texts for this thesis on the basis of such a reading.¹⁰ Unlike *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the story does not take place in a secondary world, but the alternate medieval world of *Ash* is equally grim and gritty. In fact, Gentle has made very similar comments to Martin about her feelings regarding other medieval-inspired fantasy, speaking of how she “got very fed up of ‘medieval fantasies’ in which there are, plainly, off-stage, flush toilets and liberal democracies.”¹¹

The opinions of the two authors on what they felt was lacking in the genre’s particular brand of medievalism was one of the factors that contributed to the selection of these particular works for this study. It positioned the works in clear dialogue with the use of medieval history in other works of fantasy and it suggested that their use of the same would be quite deliberate. Indeed, there exist a number of interviews with these two authors where they discuss their views on history and on using real-world history in fantasy. Though this thesis will put the texts themselves at the centre of the study, using certain comments by the authors as points of departure for how to examine the texts offers interesting angles to explore the topic from and it would be a shame to neglect these possibilities.

However, this was not the only thing that recommended these particular choices. *A Song of Ice and Fire* currently occupies a unique position within the genre where the popularity of the books themselves and, even more so, the *Game of Thrones* TV series based on the books, has and likely will continue to result in the series being highly influential on other works within the genre. As such, it can be said to represent both an effective synthesis of (and commentary on) popular elements of fantasy and the beginning of a new trend within the genre. *Ash* was published at the same time as the third book in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, yet it is likely that it was conceived of without the influence of George R.R. Martin’s series as Mary Gentle had been at work on her novel for quite some time, including obtaining a degree in War Studies as part of her research.¹² It represents a separate path towards a similar integration of more gritty realism into a non-mundane setting. Given this, the two works seem quite suited to being compared and contrasted as part of the

⁹ Liz Bourke: “Sleeps With Monsters: Go Thou and Read Mary Gentle,” *Tor.com* May 23, 2012, <http://www.tor.com/blogs/2012/05/sleeps-with-monsters-go-thou-and-read-mary-gentle>, accessed 25-11-2014.

¹⁰ Veronica Schanoes: “Historical Fantasy”, in *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, eds.: Edward James & Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge & New York, 2012) p. 236.

¹¹ Rodger Turner: “A Conversation with Mary Gentle”, *SFSite.com* July 2000, <https://www.sfsite.com/10b/mg91.htm>, accessed 23.11.2014.

¹² *Ibid.*

process of investigating their use of medieval history.

Previous research involving either of these two authors is limited to say the least. Martin is beginning to attract some interest due to the popularity *Game of Thrones*, both in terms of texts focused primarily on the TV show and a few which focus solely on the novels. None touch directly upon the usage of history in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, however, though a few are worth mentioning to illustrate which aspects of the series have drawn attention: Rainer Emig's essay "Fantasy as Politics: George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*" considers the depiction of politics and power exchanges in the novels, Dagmara Zając's "'Tuneful Tragedy'" explores the aesthetics of horror in Martin's series, and Susan Johnston's "Grief Poignant as Joy: Dycatastrophe and Eucatastrophe in *A Song of Ice and Fire*" views the text of the series in relation to Tolkien's argument for the catastrophic as essential to fantasy. By comparison, Gentle remains unexplored as a writer, especially in regards to *Ash* (Veronica Schanoes's brief discussion of the framing device in "Historical Fantasy" seems to be the only academic discussion of the work at present).

Given this situation, one must look to explorations of the use of real-world history (medieval or otherwise) in fantasy in general – as opposed to in the novels in question – to find previous research of relevance to the questions posed in this thesis. Kim Selling's "Fantastic Neomedievalism" looks at the Middle Ages in the genre with reference to Umberto Eco's views on the resurgence of interest in the medieval era in popular culture. Brian Atteberry's article in *Modes of the Fantastic*, "The Politics (If Any) of Fantasy", also considers the tendency to the use of the Middle Ages by fantasists but draws primarily political conclusions from them.¹³ AJ Elias's "Defining Spatial History in Postmodernist Historical Novels" suggests that historical fantasies are part of a postmodern strategy that treats history as "open works".¹⁴ In addition to these, a recent dissertation by Caroline Finander – *Fantasy, Imagination and History: A Historiographical Study of J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings and Gene Wolfe's The Book of the New Sun* – examines what she calls "feigned history" in these two works of speculative fiction in order to study how they represent the historical imagination of their time. In the process of doing so, Finander has quite a lot to say about the medieval roots of fantasy while also connecting that interest in the Middle Ages to the trend of romantic historicism in the genre. Her dissertation's primary argument is that history in fantasy should be understood as an expression of the historical imagination rather than mythopoesis, and that this is representative of the contemporary historical consciousness.

¹³ Brian Atteberry: "The Politics (If Any) of Fantasy" in *Modes of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Twelfth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, eds.: Robert A. Latham and Robert A. Collins (Greenwood Press, Westport, 1995) p. 1-13.

¹⁴ Amy J. Elias: "Defining Spatial History in Postmodernist Historical Novel", in *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism*, ed: Theo d' Haen (Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1995) p. 108f.

Finally, looking at it in an even broader context, the genre of fantasy and the topic of world-building is definitely seeing growing interest from academics, and two more recent dissertations have to be mentioned in relation to that. The first is Stefan Ekman's *Here be Dragons: Exploring Fantasy Maps and Settings* (originally, *Writing Worlds, Reading Landscapes: An Exploration of Settings in Fantasy*) which uses maps in fantasy novels as the departure point for discussing the role of the setting in fantasy. The second is Ashleigh Ward's *Realising the Dream: The Story of Epic Fantasy*, a narratological study of several works of epic fantasy, which examines setting, character and structure. While these two works may not apply directly to the questions posed in this thesis, they have greatly informed its focus on examining the texts themselves rather than the genre as an example of popular culture and on exploring the construction of these texts with an emphasis on aspects of the setting and its unique importance to fantasy.

1.2. Purpose and Method

The overarching goal of the thesis is to examine the use of real-world history in a secondary and an alternate world belonging to two works of fantasy. In fantasy, the setting is often considered to be as important as the plot and the characters.¹⁵ In many such works the construction of that setting – the world-building, or cosmogenesis as Finander labels it – is a key element of the structure of the stories.¹⁶ Not only do real-world historical periods serve as an inspiration for the cultures of these created worlds – influencing everything from food to military tactics – but it can also inform characters and actual events, both in the present of the narrative and throughout the history of the constructed setting. This is of course especially true for alternate histories and historical fantasies, where the connection to actual historical events are a key part of the story-telling, but it is often of significance for secondary world fantasies as well, where history can serve as more or less obvious intertexts that are often integral to the narrative. And though the most obvious influences of real-world historical periods tend to be exercised upon the story rather than the discourse of fantasy novels, the latter is not unknown and this study intends to examine both levels of the narrative.

In this thesis, it is the use of medieval history in fantasy that will be explored, as the (Western European) Middle Ages are by far the most frequently referenced period of history within the genre. One might have begun with the question of why this is so – to explore beyond the assumption that it is merely a trope (or cliché?) of the genre, largely created through works

¹⁵ Stefan Ekman: *Here Be Dragons: Exploring Fantasy Maps and Settings* (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2013) p. 2.

¹⁶ Caroline May Finander: *Fantasy, Imagination and History: A Historiographical Study of JRR Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings and Gene Wolfe's The Book of the New Sun* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Western Australia, 2010) p. 7.

derivative of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* – but that consideration will be reserved for the conclusions, where it will be looked at in the light of the results from the two main lines of inquiry. The first of these focuses on: what elements are highlighted in the construction of these secondary and alternate worlds to bring to mind medieval Europe? The worlds being described in a work of fiction are sketched out rather than described in minute detail, which means that a process of selection must be taking place, where some elements of the Middle Ages are selected above others as contributing more to the image the author wishes to convey. What are the key references from Roland Barthes's (1915-1980) "cultural code" that authors make use of to evoke an image of the Middle Ages in the minds of the readers?¹⁷ The second could be said to examine the problem from almost the opposite angle: how are the familiar elements of the Middle Ages reworked within these imaginary worlds? Are there particular changes that stand out as significant and what appears to be the reason behind such changes? What can be said about the effect of familiar details being changed, whether those are cultural elements or story elements? For example, when storylines are inspired by historical events, yet take a different turn somewhere along the way, what is the effect on the story when expectations are defied? Both these lines of inquiry will be explored in terms of story as well as discourse, to investigate the construction of the narrative on both levels.

As the texts themselves will be the focus of the examination, the primary method employed in the course of the research will be that of the close reading. Additionally, a comparative approach will also be applied to studying these two bodies of texts, searching for commonalities as well as differences in their use of medieval history.

1.3. Theory

To explore the lines of inquiry outlined above, a two-pronged theoretical strategy seems best suited: Dorrit Cohn's model of historiographic narratology on the one hand, loosely applied to understand the particular qualities of the "fantastic neomedievalism" that informs both selected texts;¹⁸ and on the other hand a literary-linguistic analytical approach as a means to understanding the stylistic choices authors use to evoke and make use of the Middle Ages in their fictional works. Combined, the structural and textual aspects of medievalism in the source texts can be thoroughly interrogated as both the story and the discourse of the narrative are taken into consideration.

Historiographic narratology provides a theoretical framework to dissect and analyse the confluence between the historicity of the Middle Ages and the fictional confines of the fantasy novel. The term was established by Cohn in the course of her examination of arguments concerning

¹⁷ Roland Barthes: *S/Z: An Essay* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1975) p. 20.

¹⁸ Dorrit Cohn: "Signposts of Fictionality: A Narratological Perspective" (*Poetics Today* 11.4 2009) p. 777.

the similarity of fiction and history in narratological terms, where Cohn presented a refinement on the traditional narrative model as it applied to historiography. Recognizing that the traditional poetics of fiction exclude reference outside of the text – simply using the bi-level model of story-discourse that was broadly applied to all fictional narratives – and that this made historians find little acceptance for narratological theory in their work, she proposed that historiography has an integral third level, namely the material – the “more or less reliably documented evidence of past events”¹⁹ – on which historians drew to present their narratives. Historical narratives require such material to be historical, and reference to them is integral to the purpose of history. This distinguishes them from works of fiction which do not rely on concrete history to exist, and indeed can avoid reference to facts outside the text entirely. However, as Finander points out in her thesis, secondary world fantasy and historical fantasy – as well as, of course, historical fiction – do depend on the use of historical material in order to create a believable, coherent setting and as such historiography (including Cohn’s ideas about material) can be applied to explore such texts as well.²⁰

While works of fantasy cannot themselves be historical in this same sense, seen within the frame of the secondary reality which they inhabit the use of the veneer of historicity – including the use of feigned history as a material – is an important aspect of world-building. Although in its broadest implications this realization lies outside of the bounds of this thesis, a more narrow application of the principle of the importance of the material record to historiography can be used to examine the specifics of the expression of the Middle Ages within fantasy literature by focusing on the techniques authors use to refer to the medieval material in the course of their fantastical narratives. Of particular note is the importance of selection in historiography – the deliberate choosing, from the material, of specific details and events – in construction of history.²¹ Works of fantasy which seek to evoke the Middle Ages can also be shown to do something similar, as evocation requires concrete references that must be selected to compliment the narrative.

Where historiographical narratology provides a framework to understand the use of the historical material of the Middle Ages in the selected texts, Susan Mandala’s approach to a literary-linguistic analysis of works of fantasy provides insight into the stylistics of the genre and allows for an examination of the discourse to complement the examination of the story. Following her approach, lexical and grammatical analysis of fantasy literature reveals the ways in which stylistic choices by authors act to evoke another place and time. Significantly, Mandala posits that style can

¹⁹ Cohn p. 778.

²⁰ Finander p. 69.

²¹ Cohn p. 781.

serve to generate estrangement and the belief in a plausible other world that exists separately from that of the reader.²² Estrangement, or defamiliarisation, is a key critical concept in the study of the fantastic mode and the role it plays within the fantasy genre, as Attebery implies when he directly connects the wonder that fantasy engenders as simply being an alternative term for the same concept.²³ The use of archaisms – archaic forms of address, archaic grammatical structure, a vocabulary of words that are outmoded – are stylistic elements aimed at generating a sense of removal from the time and place of the narrative and of defining the characters as “members of earlier speech communities”.²⁴

However, archaisms are not the only elements of the discourse of fantasy that has an application to this particular study. As Mandala also discusses, the non-mundane aspects of fantasy worlds are often both contrasted against and introduced through the use of quite plain, direct language which makes these aspects seem utterly familiar from the perspective of the in-world narrators.²⁵ All in all, Mandala convincingly demonstrates that the discourse of fantasy novels plays a significant role in the construction of effective and believable secondary and alternate worlds and as such her approach plays an important part in this study.

²² Susan Mandala: *The Language in Science Fiction and Fantasy: The Question of Style* (Continuum, London, 2010) p. 29.

²³ Attebery 1992 p. 16.

²⁴ Mandala p. 94.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 95ff.

2. Building New Worlds from Old

The popularisation of medievalism is not a new phenomenon but rather a tradition with deep roots. Eco speaks of it as the “dreaming” of the Middle Ages, a process which has gone on for centuries and involves a “messaging up” of the era to “meet the vital requirements of different periods”.²⁶ Throughout the ages, it has motivated a great number of literary and artistic works. In the 19th century, Sir Walter Scott exemplified the fascination with the Middle Ages that came with the Romantic nationalism.²⁷ In the same vein, the Romanticism of the 18th century was greatly preoccupied with the idea of the chivalric culture of the past, leading to a revival of the concept, accoutrements, and other trappings of chivalry.²⁸ Indeed, even as early as the Renaissance one can already observe a glorification of certain elements of medieval culture, such as the figure of the knight.²⁹ The fantasy genre is thus only one of the most recent examples in a long line of cultural expressions that have mined the Middle Ages for images and ideas. The following analysis intends to examine how the genre – as exemplified by the chosen texts – both evokes and reimagines the ideas and conceptions of the Middle Ages, through story as well as discourse.

2.1. *Evoking the Middle Ages: Story*

The terms worldbuilding and cosmogenesis imply grand, all-encompassing constructions of both great width and great depth, yet even the most ambitious authors do not create more than a small fraction of all the information that defines our reality. And of that small fraction of information that the authors establish for themselves about their fictional worlds, only an even smaller portion will be encoded into the narrative and made visible to the reader. Hemingway spoke of a “gigantic mass of ice” where only the tip remains above the surface and this principle has very much come to define how fantasy authors view their worldbuilding.³⁰ Thus, the construction of a world and the presentation of said world within a narrative clearly involve a highly selective process in which an author determines which elements need to make it to the page to successfully insinuate the existence of a greater whole. One may therefore ask what elements the two authors being studied have chosen to use to indicate to the reader that their world is inspired by the Middle Ages. Additionally, one can also consider whether certain elements appear to be mandatory as “signposts” on the way to the Middle Ages and thus necessary for tapping into the resonances that the connection with the medieval imagery provides.

²⁶ Eco p. 68.

²⁷ Yoon Sun Lee: *Nationalism and Irony: Burke, Scott, Carlyle* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004) p. 11.

²⁸ Markus Bernauer: “Historical Novel and Historical Romance” in *Romantic Prose Fiction*, eds.: Gerald Gillespie, Manfred Engel & Bernard Dieterle (John Benjamins Publishing, Amsterdam & Philadelphia, 2008) p. 304.

²⁹ Alex Davis: *Chivalry and Romance in the English Renaissance* (DS Brewer, Cambridge, 2003) p. 2-3.

³⁰ Ernest Hemingway: *Death in the Afternoon* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1932) p. 192.

We will begin our examination of the texts by looking at the two most integral character archetypes of the Middle Ages, the knight and the lady, and in extension the central positions that they occupy in the chivalric culture with its tournaments, pageantry, and courtly love. Turning first to *A Song of Ice and Fire*, it soon becomes readily apparent that the question of knighthood, of the vows and obligations that it entails, is integral to a number of the characters. Some of them strive to live by the ideals of knighthood even in the face of overwhelming evidence that this will ultimately be harmful to them; others see their illusions of chivalry shattered and embrace an embittered, cynical outlook on life. The character of Jaime Lannister, known as the “Kingslayer” for murdering the king he was sworn to protect in the midst of a rebellion (and subsequently being pardoned by the new king), appears to care little for his tarnished reputation at the beginning of the story; indeed, he almost seems to glory in it. Yet, as he becomes one of the narrators in the third novel, *A Storm of Swords*, it is revealed to the reader that he is in fact quite conflicted about his past. He became a member of the order of the Kingsguard – once regarded as the epitome of chivalry and a “shining lesson to the world” (in many ways echoing the Knights of the Round Table) – as a young, newly made knight and was forced to witness the atrocities of the Mad King with his older brothers in the order forbidding him to intervene.³¹ He feels he was justified in killing the Mad King during the rebellion, yet now he has come to regret how this has harmed the reputation of the Kingsguard itself and he attempts to make some amends for this, having realised that while the blind worship of chivalric ideals that formed him in his youth clearly has its faults, a cynical rejection of such values is no less damaging. The effect of the latter is also clearly illustrated by the embittered Sandor Clegane, known as “the Hound” for his family sigil and his loyalty to the house he serves. He has rejected the institution of knighthood altogether as a reaction to the atrocities committed by his older brother, which include disfiguring Sandor himself as a young child by shoving his face into a fireplace. The fact that his brother is a knight has left Sandor unable to see anything but falseness in the vows and as he tells Sansa Stark, knights are simply killers, nothing else.³²

A Song of Ice and Fire takes the image of the knight as established by the chivalric romances and deconstructs it by pitting it against a more realistic world. Sansa begins the story by insisting that “a lady’s armour is courtesy”, yet it soon proves a paper shield and this holds true for the knights who attempt to uphold their vows as well.³³ Illustrating this with particular clarity is the young woman called Brienne of Tarth. Described as very large and very homely, the young woman is an oddity in Westerosi society; she has been permitted to learn to fight and desires nothing more

³¹ George R.R. Martin: *A Clash of Kings* (Harper Collins Voyager, London, 1998) p. 243.

³² Martin 1998, p. 552.

³³ Martin 1998, p. 37.

than to become a knight, which the rules of knighthood will not permit. Still, she strives to conduct herself according to the tenets of chivalry and shares much of Sansa's naivety about the world. In many ways she is the classical true knight of the narrative, though the image is warped by her gender making it impossible for her to fully step into that role, and while she has actual armour in addition to her courtesy, she finds herself poorly equipped to handle the realities of the Seven Kingdoms.

In contrast, *Ash* is a story where there are little in the way of illusions about knighthood. Like Brienne, the titular character is a woman in a man's world, and Ash's gender is what bars her from a knighthood as well. However, the similarities end there. Ash harbours no romantic notions about the glory of chivalry; she thinks about it in purely pragmatic terms, as something that she could earn that is less transient than money. It would simply be a way for her to advance herself in the world, to go beyond living from contract to contract as even the captain of a mercenary company does. When she is rewarded by Charles the Bold for her actions in the field, he specifically points out that he is unable to reward her with a knighthood due to her gender; instead he offers a marriage to one of his nobles.³⁴ Thus, it is clear that even the nobility see knighthood for what it truly is – social status, no more and no less. Within the main narrative, there's nothing in *Ash* that contradicts this picture, but the framing story does offer commentary on the image versus the reality of knighthood in the form of Pierce Ratcliff discussing one of his sources on the life of Ash and how the author speaks of Burgundy as a “bright dream of chivalry”³⁵ and how “Duke Charles's cult of an ‘Arthurian court’ is, strange as it may seem to us in our modern, smoky, industrial world, an attempt to reawaken the high ideals of chivalry in this land of knights in armour, princes in fantastic castles, and ladies of surpassing beauty and accomplishment.”³⁶ In *Ash*, the interplay between image and reality when it comes to knighthood and chivalry never becomes an element of a character or story arc, but the contrast between Burgundy of the stories and Burgundy of Ash's reality fills a similar role, playing with the idea of this legendary court which in the end turns out to be special because it is more mundane than the world around it.

In discussing the knight, we've already touched upon his essential counterpart: the lady. The medieval lady is a figure popularized in the modern era by the globally-popular Disney cartoons, to name the most looming example, and in particular the “Disney Princesses” which have become a focus of Disney's marketing towards young girls.³⁷ Bradford draws a connection between these

³⁴ Mary Gentle: *Ash. A Secret History* (Gollancz, London, 1999) p. 56.

³⁵ Gentle p. 35.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Clare Bradford: “The Medievalisms of Disney's Princesses” in *The Disney Middle Ages: A Fairy-tale and Fantasy Past*, eds.: Tison Pugh & Susan Aronstein (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012) p. 171-172.

figures and Heng's discussion of the "Constance" romances, in which women served as "a figural presence" who underlined the values and norms of medieval society.³⁸ In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Sansa essentially begins the story as something of a "Disney Princess" who fervently wishes for a chance to marry the beautiful Prince Joffrey. But he proves to be anything but a Prince Charming as he has her father Eddard executed and has Sansa herself stripped and beaten in front of the court for his amusement. Brienne, too, echoes fairy-tale like qualities; the homely girl is in love with the handsome King Renly and in a tourney she wins a place in his personal guard. But instead of having the ugly duckling become a swan who wins the king's heart, Brienne watches Renly die by sorcery and finds herself accused of the deed. The tropes of the chivalric romance are all there in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, but more often than not they are thwarted to reveal the darker side of human nature, and the darker side of medieval social constructs. However, the narratives would not function if it were not for the existing expectations built into the medieval imagery. In *Ash*, the figure of the lady is much less present due to the focus on a military setting. Though *Ash*, like Brienne, is a woman outside of the common roles for her gender, her path was never that of a noble lady. As an orphan brought up in a mercenary camp, she was likely destined to become a camp follower had she not become a fighter instead, and so she never harboured any romantic illusions about her place in society.

As seen by these portrayals of the knight and the lady, these texts often play with the two extremes of the image of the Middle Ages; one the one hand the image presented in the chivalric romances, on the other hand the image famously summed up by Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) regarding life in the Middle Ages being "nasty, brutish, and short".³⁹ What sets *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Ash* apart from many of their predecessors within the fantasy genre is the way both Martin and Gentle have embraced this latter view as well; indeed, for Gentle it is the dominant view of the narrative, whereas Martin constantly contrasts the two images. In *Ash*, the tone is set with the very first line which reads "It was her scars that made her beautiful." The narrative then continues to describe how *Ash* gained her scars, namely during her rape at the age of eight; Gentle plainly wants the reader to know from the very beginning that this is nothing like a chivalric romance. Indeed, in the framing story one of the early letters by Pierce Ratcliff states that his very intent is to provide a new translation for the 'Ash' documents that "...does not shrink from the brutality of the mediaeval period, as well as its joyfulness."⁴⁰ The novel certainly does not shy away from any of the horrors

³⁸ Geraldine Heng: *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (Columbia University Press, New York and Chichester, 2003) p. 192.

³⁹ Thomas Hobbes: *Leviathan* (Digireads.com Publishing, New York, 2010 [orig. 1651]) p. 56f.

⁴⁰ Gentle p. 7.

one might expect from a medieval battlefield and though the characters are shown to mourn fallen comrades, there is also a lack of sentimentality and what we might consider more modern, humanistic understandings about warfare. Indeed, though one character – Ash’s noble husband Fernando del Guiz – does express qualms about fighting and about Ash’s own actions in the course of warfare, he turns out to be (in the eyes of their society) a coward in large part because of his intrinsic horror at the brutality and violence that is accepted as normal by his peers and his wife.

Pierce Ratcliff’s quote about his translation of the ‘Ash’ documents applies equally well Martin’s intents with *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Though it is clear that Martin has a great love for the pomp and pageantry of the period, he has no qualms about tearing down the colourful banners and seeing them trampled in the mud. Towards the end of the first novel, *A Game of Thrones*, the main narrator – the honourable Eddard Stark, who looks very much like a long-term protagonist to the reader – is executed after being falsely accused of treason. In the second novel, *A Clash of Kings*, Tyrion Lannister (the main narrator in that book) is horribly disfigured after foolishly entering a battle with the visor of his helmet raised. And in the third novel, *A Storm of Swords*, the late Eddard’s wife Catelyn and their son Robb are brutally slaughtered at a wedding feast. But perhaps it is still the fourth novel, *A Feast for Crows*, which most clearly demonstrates the grimness of Westeros, and the way that grimness is drawn from the image of the Middle Ages that Hobbes quote sums up. The novel largely deals with the aftermath of the civil war of the first three novels and one of the narrators, the aforementioned Brienne, travels through a war-torn landscape and experiences the horrors that the war has visited upon the smallfolk (the commoners) in particular. This, even more than the often shockingly brutal ends of pivotal characters during the first three novels, really captures the darkest sides of the image of the Middle Ages.

Finally, concluding this section is a brief consideration of one other way that both authors evoke the Middle Ages in their novels: by referencing specific events of the era in their narratives. In the case of Ash this is of course a basic premise of the whole narrative seeing as the story is an alternate history at its heart. However, the device of the framing story makes it more relevant to the question of how fantasy authors evoke the Middle Ages through selected elements. The time and place of Gentle’s story – Burgundy in the 15th century under Charles the Bold – would be largely unknown for the average reader. Through the framing device of Pierce Ratcliff discussing his translation of the story of Ash, Gentle is able to provide scholarly footnotes which help to explain unfamiliar historical details while also providing a sense of academic legitimisation and an increased sense of mimesis. The framing device thus underscores the need for the readers to have some kind of familiarity with the material that inspires the story in order for the resonances to work

correctly. Martin, on the other hand, uses the events of the Wars of the Roses as a departure point for his narrative; there are shades of the Yorks and the Lancasters to be found in the conflict between the Starks and the Lannisters in the first novel, a fact that Martin readily acknowledges.⁴¹ However, as the story progresses, these elements become less apparent, suggesting that they serve mainly as a gateway into the story for readers. Once the reader is fully immersed in the fictional narrative, the sense of familiarity that comes with encountering a known story is no longer needed.

We will have reason to return to the role that actual historical events play in these narratives when we discuss how the two authors reimagine the story of the Middle-Ages; for example, Gentle uses the framing story not only to establish the reality that her story relates to but also to introduce the central twist of her narrative.

2.2. Evoking the Middle Ages: Discourse

We move now from examining how the narratives – the story – of the chosen texts evoke the Middle Ages to looking at the role played by the discourse in constructing these illusions of a bygone era. To do so, we turn to Susan Mandala’s *Language in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2010) in which she argues that style has been a largely neglected element in the study of these genres, for the most part being dismissed as weak or at best plain and uninteresting.⁴² She then sets out to examine specific aspects of style within genre novels and how they contribute to the narratives, demonstrating that on the one hand, discursive archaisms play a role in evoking pre-modern settings and on the other hand, language that appears plain has nevertheless been carefully chosen to complement the narrative and help establish the secondary realities of fantasy. For this section of the thesis it is the archaisms that will be examined, though we will return to the question of the “plain” language when the time comes to look at how the discourse also plays a part in the reimagining of the Middle Ages.

A complete analysis of the language of the chosen texts lies outside the scope of this thesis. Instead, a sample of common types of archaisms was drawn from the examples provided by Mandala and the texts then examined with regards to this selection. Beginning with simple lexical archaisms, these are represented in both bodies of texts through words such as *slain*, *bade*, *wont* and *anon*.⁴³ In general, lexical archaisms are more common in *A Song of Ice and Fire* than in *Ash* where they primarily appear in sections set apart from the rest of the text (*slain* is used in an earlier book

⁴¹ Mikal Gilmore: “George R.R. Martin: The Rolling Stone Interview,” RollingStone.com April 23, 2014, <http://www.rollingstone.com/tv/news/george-r-r-martin-the-rolling-stone-interview-20140423>, accessed 16.11.2014.

⁴² Mandala p. 15ff.

⁴³ *Slain*, see Gentle p. 36 and George R.R. Martin: *A Game of Thrones* (Bantam, New York, 1996) p. 55. *Bade*, see Gentle p. 389 and Martin 1986 p. 383. *Wont*, see Martin 1996 p. 464. *Anon*, see George R.R. Martin: *A Dance with Dragons* (Bantam, New York, 2011) p. 656.

about Ash's life that Pierce Ratcliff quotes from, *bade* is used twice in communications from the Stone Golem). It is also worth noting that the lexical archaisms appear to grow more common in the later volumes of *A Song of Ice and Fire* where archaic relationship terms such as *nuncle* instead of uncle and *coz* for cousin are introduced.⁴⁴ One subset of lexical archaisms that both authors use frequently is specialised terminology that belongs to the Middle Ages; knights ride *destriers* and *courseurs*,⁴⁵ their armour is made up of *pauldrons*, *vambraces* and *bevors*,⁴⁶ and the warfare involves using siege weapons such as *mangonels*, *catapults* and *trebuchets*.⁴⁷ Here it is *Ash* that stands out, using such terminology more frequently than *A Song of Ice and Fire*. However, this may be largely contextual, as most of the narrative in *Ash* takes place on or near a battlefield, and more general words that conjure up the material culture of the Middle Ages (from swords and horses to castles and doublets, and food items such as turnips for the poor and stuffed swans for the rich), are abundant in both sets of texts.

There are also a fair number of grammatical archaisms to be found in both bodies of texts, though as with the lexical ones *A Song of Ice and Fire* generally includes more than *Ash*. The examples that were searched for were once again taken from Susan Mandala and those found include uses of second person singular pronouns such as *thee* (notably, only in *Ash* and only in circumstances noted as particularly formal and in vows, prayers and songs),⁴⁸ impersonal expressions such as *methinks* and *it pleases*,⁴⁹ archaic prepositions such as *unto* in phrases like “*wearry unto death*”,⁵⁰ and older adverbials like *hither* and *whence* (where the context in *Ash* is a formal petition).⁵¹ Obsolete syntax such as verbs and subjects in clause final positions can also be observed in *A Song of Ice and Fire* with examples such as “*and splendid weapons they were*” and “*tall, it was*”.⁵² Additionally, numbers in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* – especially ages – are given in the form of *ten and six* rather than sixteen, following the Germanic pattern which used to dominate in English but which now survives primarily in set expressions such as the “four-and-twenty blackbirds” of the nursery rhyme.⁵³

⁴⁴ *Nuncle*, see George R. R. Martin: *A Feast for Crows* (Bantam, New York, 2005) p. 160. *Coz*, see George R.R. Martin: *A Storm of Swords* (HarperCollins Voyager, London, 2000) p. 18.

⁴⁵ *Destrier*, see Gentle p. 640 and Martin 1996 p. 2. *Courseur*, see Martin 1996 p. 124.

⁴⁶ *Pauldron*, see Gentle p. 15 and Martin 2005 p. 561. *Vambrace*, see Gentle p. 15 and Martin 2000 p. 537. *Bevor*, see Gentle 1999 p. 26.

⁴⁷ *Mangonel*, see Gentle p. 340 and Martin 1998 p. 248. *Catapult*, see Gentle p. 341 and Martin 1996 p. 154. *Trebuchet*, see Gentle p. 153 and Martin 1998 p. 248.

⁴⁸ Gentle p. 83.

⁴⁹ *Methinks*, see Martin 2005 p. 492. *It pleases*, see Gentle p. 55 and Martin 1996 p. 73.

⁵⁰ Martin 1996, p. 182.

⁵¹ *Hither*, see Martin 1998 p. 638. *Whence*, see Gentle p. 190 and Martin 1996 p. 242.

⁵² Martin 1996, p. 86 and Martin 1996, p. 7.

⁵³ Scott Shay: *The History of English* (Wardja Press, San Francisco & Washington D.C., 2008) p. 108.

Another element which Mandala brings up as key to maintaining the illusion of what she calls a past speech community is forms of address.⁵⁴ Nobles in both bodies of texts are always referred to by the appropriate title and in doing so the social structure of the societies is indirectly revealed as the rank of a speaker relative to the person they are addressing ultimately determines how they will address them. The same holds true for ranks within the mercenary company in *Ash*; though they are often more informal in how they address each other, ranks are still a constant reminder of the existing hierarchy. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Martin even replaces *Sir* instead of *Ser*, an older version of the word, though the effect of this likely falls closer to reimagining rather than evoking the Middle Ages as few are likely to be aware that this is not an invention by the author.⁵⁵ Related to the use of appropriate forms of address is the frequent use of epithets and bynames – both mocking and complimentary, such as *the Kingslayer* for Ser Jaime and *the Bold* for Ser Barristan – in *A Song of Ice and Fire* which calls to mind both historical and legendary practices. There are a few such examples in *Ash* as well (both invented ones and actual, historical bynames for characters such as the Dukes of Burgundy), but Martin makes use of this far more frequently than Gentle.

If we look beyond isolated words and phrases and turn instead to longer passages, we have already seen that some of the lexical archaisms in *Ash* appear in highly formal contexts; in these cases, we have whole passages presented in an archaic style. Such formal passages are not found at all in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, but instead the overall style of the text falls closer to what Shippey termed the intermediate style: it contains some archaisms but largely it achieves its goal of evoking the past through the avoidance of contemporary speech forms.⁵⁶ Shippey coined the term in discussing Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and, in particular, an example which Tolkien himself provided to argue (in one of his letters) that his language was more pseudo-archaic (this is what Shippey ends up calling intermediate) than archaic. To illustrate his point, Tolkien presented a passage from his books both in its original pseudo-archaic/intermediate form and rewritten in a true archaic style as well as a modern, informal style.⁵⁷ The intermediate style serves the purpose of creating distance and estrangement that “feels” as if it connects to the historic past, while still maintaining readily comprehensible modern grammar. It is not overly taxing for either writers or

⁵⁴ Mandala p. 80f.

⁵⁵ Adam Pulford: “Words Are Wind – the Language of Game of Thrones.” *OxfordWords* April 2014, <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2012/04/the-language-of-game-of-thrones/>, accessed 3.12.2014; see also “sir, n.” OED Online. Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁵⁶ Tom Shippey: *The Road to Middle-Earth: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, 2014) p 167.

⁵⁷ Humphrey Carpenter & Christopher Tolkien: *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. (HarperCollins UK, London, 2012) p. 240-241

their readers to have the novel in an intermediate style which simply obeys a few formal and slightly archaic rules rather than immerses itself fully in the idiom of the historic past.⁵⁸ In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the intermediate style together with a selection of lexical and grammatical archaisms serve to enhance the image of Westeros as a pre-modern society where different rules govern how people interact with and relate to each other.

But, as we see when looking at *Ash*, the intermediate style is not the only possible approach for a work of fantasy. As noted, the novel does contain some highly formal passages, but these stand out sharply from the rest of the text which is far more modern in style. This juxtaposition of different styles has its roots in the framing story device: the main narrative is presented as a translation that is purposefully made up-to-date and accessible in terms of the language used, with only selected passages preserved in a more formal style.⁵⁹ In this, Mary Gentle is having Pierce Ratcliff follow the approach of a modernising translation where the translator reworks the source text in order to produce a new text which linguistically relates the same way to the modern audience as the language of the source text did to the contemporaneous audience. A text that was written with deliberate archaism should retain that, while a text that was essentially in the vernacular of its time should be presented in the vernacular.⁶⁰ The few formal passages may thus be indicative of the “source texts” including then-formal qualities that were above and beyond the vernacular and in terms of the discourse they become a convenient way of effectively reminding the readers of the temporal distance between them and the story.

2.3. The Middle Ages Reimagined: Story

We have now examined how Martin and Gentle use story as well as discourse to place their narratives in secondary and alternate worlds that strongly resonate with our ideas and conceptions of the Middle Ages. As we go on to examine how they also reimagine these ideas and conceptions we must first reflect on the fact that there are multiple “Middle Ages” to which these narratives relate. History is written – it, too, is a created narrative – and as such there is no single, platonic version of the Middle Ages for these texts to relate to, just a multiplicity of differing, ideology-driven narratives that have shaped medievalism and so popular understanding to this day. These narratives are in a continuous state of evolution and flux, and for most readers they are assembled into a kind of a-historical popular understanding of what the Middle Ages entails. Additionally, there are the fictional accounts that use the Middle Ages to some degree or another, from Sir Walter

⁵⁸ Mandala p. 91ff.

⁵⁹ Gentle p. 7.

⁶⁰ Rune Ingo: *Från källspråk till målspråk* (Studentlitteratur AB, Lund, 1991) p. 70-71, p. 161-162.

Scott to J.R.R Tolkien and beyond, each inspired by these varying narratives of the historical Middle Ages but taking considerable creative license. In her introduction to *Medievalism and the Quest for the “Real” Middle Ages*, Clare Simmons argues that the usage can be of three kinds, which often overlap: the cultural adaptation of medieval narrative, form, and the “perceived codes of values”.⁶¹ Looking at fantasy as a genre, one can find all three kinds of adaptation represented. The works examined in this dissertation are prime examples of the exploration of the “perceived codes of values” and, to a lesser degree, of the cultural adaptation of medieval narrative.

Thus, when one examines how Martin and Gentle have reused and remixed these images of the Middle Ages, one must take all of these different narratives into account, looking both at how their novels relate to the historical Middle Ages and how they relate to the imagined Middle Ages, in particular among their predecessors within the fantasy genre.

The Wars of the Roses have always fascinated me, and certainly did influence A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE, but there’s really no one-for-one character-for-character correspondence. I like to use history to flavor my fantasy, to add texture and verisimilitude, but simply rewriting history with the names changed has no appeal for me. I prefer to reimagine it all, and take it in new and unexpected directions.⁶²

As we see, Martin sees the use of history as a way to enrich his secondary world and this extends to making use of actual events of the era in his narrative. However, for him it is necessary that the plot ultimately defies the expectations raised by the way it has resonated with known history. Narratologically speaking, the re-imagining of historical events becomes another path to the defamiliarisation and estrangement that is such a crucial part of fantasy. Elements of the story will at first appear familiar, sparking recognition and creating resonances, but as the narrative progresses it will develop along unexpected paths, creating a tension between the known and the unknown. As *A Song of Ice and Fire* begins, the parallels between the chief houses of the Wars of the Roses and the Lannisters and Starks of the novels introduce readers to the idea that some information can be sought in historical events. As the story progresses, less well-known incidents are echoed, such as the Red Wedding where Robb Stark is betrayed and murdered bearing distinct similarities to two bloody events of Scottish history, the Black Dinner and the Massacre of Glencoe.⁶³ These events are unlikely to be familiar to most readers, yet the use of such historical material still strengthens the mimetic elements of the story. While the political situation that brings about the Red Wedding has

⁶¹ Simmons p. 22.

⁶² George R.R. Martin: “Correspondence from November 27, 1998”, *So Spake Martin*, <http://www.westeros.org/Citadel/SSM/Entry/9508>, accessed on 11.17.2014.

⁶³ The Black Dinner took place in 1440 and saw the chief of Clan Douglas (which had grown too powerful) and his brother being seized, given a mock-trial and beheaded. The Massacre of Glencoe happened in 1692, in the wake of Revolution of 1688 and the Jacobite Uprising of 1689, and involved the killing of members of Clan MacDonald by soldiers who had been staying with them as guests for some time.

little in common with either of these events, what Martin drew from them were key details such as the murderers using the pretext of a feast of some kind to gather the intended targets and, perhaps most significantly, the idea that hospitality would serve as a kind of contract between host and guests. This is also the focus for an important part of how Martin reimagines these events: in Westeros, in particular in the North and among those who worship the Old Gods (such as the Starks), guest right is a sacred thing. Once host and guests have shared bread and salt they commit the most grievous sin if they offer any harm to each other. This is not something drawn primarily from the cultures of medieval Europe, but rather it connects most closely to the *xenia* (“guest-friendship”) of the Greco-Roman world. Such deviations, whether they are based on other eras than the Middle Ages or wholly invented, add up to separate Westeros from medieval Europe, making it clear that it is similar but far from identical. Additionally, drawing upon traditions that appear archaic even compared to the primarily medieval material serves to emphasize that some aspects of Westerosi society are very ancient indeed, adding to the temporal depth of the secondary world.

The Red Wedding is also a good example of another aspect of *A Song of Ice and Fire* as a reimagination, namely as a re-envisioning of not just the historical Middle Ages but the image of the Middle Ages as it has appeared in much of the fantasy that followed upon Tolkien. The brutality of the event can certainly be seen as a reflection of a desire to strengthen the mimetic aspects of the narrative by not shying away from the kind of atrocities that take place during conflicts and war, throughout history as well as today. But it can also be seen as a deliberate break with common tropes of the fantasy genre where the heroes of the story are often seen as safe from death at least until closer to the end of the story. Indeed, Martin has spoken of finding that much other fantasy takes place in the “Disneyland Middle Ages”, a place which for him has the superficial trappings of the era but none of the grittiness and realism of historical fiction and thus fails to fully immerse the reader in experiencing what life in such a society might have been like.⁶⁴ Hence the fate of Robb Stark, who despite his youth has been winning battles against seasoned commanders and seems destined to avenge the murder of his father, Eddard Stark. Instead, he is slaughtered at a wedding feast, the expected narrative dying with him.

In choosing to write a narrative of alternate history, Gentle has of course connected *Ash* even more closely to the material of history, with the events of her chosen era being completely integral to the structure of the story as opposed to making up smaller strands woven into a larger structure as is the case with Martin’s narrative. In that sense, it is perhaps less surprising that she would end up adhering to a more realistic depiction of the Middle Ages. However, Gentle’s comments on the

⁶⁴ John Hodgman: “John Hodgman Interviews George R.R. Martin”, Pri.org 2011-09-21, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2011-09-21/john-hodgman-interviews-george-rr-martin>, accessed on 24.11.2014.

matter make it plain that this was a deliberate choice, as she feels that fantasy sometimes lacks the necessary layers of mimesis to make the more or less fantastical tropes of the genre more believable:

For a start, they'd have to exist in a world where everything else (swords, mud, people's conversations, horses, rain, hot soup) behaves as it does in the world we're used to. The mimesis of action, if you like – a sword is a three-foot razor-blade, if you hack at someone with it, they probably don't counter with a high-pitched yell and a backflip. (If they do, you're in another kind of story!) People don't go days through rough countryside without their armour rusting, and without needing to take a crap behind a bush. Love doesn't just give you a romantic light in the eye, it can give you the feeling of being slowly sawn in half. All the things that get shoved behind the scenery in more artificial and stylized fantasy.⁶⁵

As we can see, this applies in equal measure to *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Ash*, since both authors make certain to set the fantastical elements of the narratives against a backdrop of solid mimesis. Thus, their reimagining of the “Disneyland Middle Ages” takes a similar path. However, when it comes to their use of historical events, the secondary world fantasy and the alternate history fantasy achieve narrative tension in different ways. Alternate history narratives create tension from having the reader actively wondering what the point of departure will be – that is, when does the history become alternate and why does it happen? As Gentle uses a relatively poorly known period of history for the average reader, the framing story is essential for providing that tension; through Pierce Ratcliff, the historian narrating the framing story, the reader learns where the history of the novel is deviating from real history. Gentle herself described it as follows: “So, in a sense, I had to use history – or the apparatus of the science of history – to create a branch on which the readers could sit. And then I could use the actual nature of history to saw the branch out from under them.”⁶⁶ The answer to why it is deviating, however, is not so easily given and that is where Gentle builds the bulk of her narrative tension with the two stories unfolding alongside each other. To begin with, Pierce Ratcliff is able to find explanations for the discrepancies between history as he knows it and the history contained in the documents that he's translating. But eventually what were small changes to dates and linguistic curiosities is followed by the revelation of Europe being invaded by a Visigoth army from Carthage in North Africa, an army which possesses animate stone statues to power its war machines. Between the main narrative and the framing story, Gentle not only builds up the tension of an alternate history that reimagines our past but she also provides indirect commentary on the nature of historical narratives, using a fantastical device to illustrate their transient nature in the face of new discoveries.

⁶⁵ Turner 2000.

⁶⁶ Nick Gevers: "The Joy of Knowledge, the Clash of Arms: An Interview with Mary Gentle", *Infinity Plus* 7.2000, <http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/intmg.htm>, accessed 25.11.2014

But though *Ash* draws heavily on a very scholarly medievalism, well grounded in research, Gentle's narrative also exemplifies how fantasy often draws on multiple aspects of medievalism at the same time, merging different views of the Middle Ages. One particular passage from the novel makes this especially clear: the hunt for the white hart in the wildwood as a means of choosing a successor to the dying Duke Charles the Bold. To Ash and to the Visigoths who have brought about Charles's ahistorical end, it seems part and parcel of the bizarre customary pomp of the Burgundians. However, it is something much more, namely the means by which the Duke's successor is selected. A journey into the wildwood becomes a journey into the miraculous: roses bloom in the heart of winter, the stars shine in a noon sky, and a white hart changes form to feature religious emblems amidst the tines of its antlers. It is one of the most fantastical passages in the novel, the estrangement of wonder felt not only by the reader but by the character of Ash. Even the concept of the unmaking of the hart – the term used for the ritual dressing – is turned on its head into the making of the hart, as it is revealed that the selection of the Duke's heir is done by turning the miraculous stag into a very real, very dead one. The fantastical powers of the blood of the Duke's lineage are in fact anti-fantastical: the ability to turn the miraculous mundane, to ground wonder in reality.

The entire sequence owes a great deal to the customs of courtly hunts as depicted in contemporaneous literature. Although there is no direct example of a hunt as occasion for king-making in the Middle Ages, the idea of magical hunts that serve a ritual purpose certainly exists. Of particular note is Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enid*, the first of his Arthurian romances which became a foundation for Arthurian literature in the latter Middle Ages. The very opening of that romance features King Arthur declaring that he will lead the court in a hunt for the white stag, "as is the ancient custom". Further, the court will hunt in the "forest of adventures", clearly a liminal space of wonder and an obvious direct antecedent to the wildwood of *Ash*. Not only was the historical Burgundian court obsessed with chivalry and chivalric romances, but a prose version of *Erec et Enide* was produced in the court of Philip the Good (father of Charles the Bold). Although the prose version loses de Troyes' suggestion that the hunt is an ancient and magical custom, otherwise it retains the liminal "forest of adventures" and other wondrous qualities of the original romance.⁶⁷

Thus Gentle takes the known obsession of the Burgundians with chivalric romances and makes an event that would have fit into the Middle Ages of the romances part of her narrative, grounding her story both in history and legend and in the process even highlighting the interplay

⁶⁷ John Tasker Grimbert and Carol Chase: *Chrétien de Troyes in Prose: The Burgundian Erec and Cligés* (DS Brewer, Cambridge, 2011) p. 27

between the fantastic and the mundane by making it, too, an element of the plot.

2.4. *The Middle Ages Reimagined: Discourse*

We've already seen that a key effect of the reimagining of the Middle Ages on the story level is the creation of estrangement, or defamiliarisation, stemming from unexpected changes to a narrative that to begin with seemed quite familiar. But if we now look at how the discourse can be used to reimagine the source material, we find that it offers its own ways of subtly warping the fabric of the world. Again we turn to Susan Mandala, who examines how the language of fantasy and science fiction may often appear plain and simplistic yet – or so she argues – it is used to great effect by writers within the genres, not the least to help establish and maintain the effective illusion of reality that a secondary or alternate world depends upon. Viewed in the light of our focus, the reimagining of the medieval source material, one can also consider this usage of language as a way of taking careful steps away from the primary reality and towards the secondary or alternate one.

One of the examples used by Mandala to illustrate her argument is drawn from the first chapter of *A Game of Thrones*, where the young narrator Bran is taken by his father Eddard to watch a beheading. This chapter was preceded by a prologue, in which another narrator met his demise as he encountered the Others, supernatural beings long dismissed as legends. Martin has thus shown his hand to the reader and revealed that the reality of Westeros includes magical elements. However, in the first chapter, he pulls back again, presenting a scene which draws heavily on the gritty realism previously discussed as one of the ways that Martin and Gentle evoke popular conceptions of history rather than of fantasy. Seven-year-old Bran has for the first time been deemed old enough to accompany his father as he rides out to personally dispense the king's justice, beheading a man with his greatsword Ice. His older bastard brother, Jon, even makes a point of noting that Bran must not look away as the execution is done and afterwards he is praised for doing well. The very idea of a young boy being expected to watch his father behead a man and being praised for doing so without looking away or flinching certainly calls to mind a general idea of earlier, more ruthless times, grounding the scene somewhere in the past.

However, Martin's Westeros is not medieval Europe, though in this chapter it is not supernatural beings of ice that serve to establish this, but rather subtle use of quite plain language. Mandala defines the key element as the deictic use of definite noun phrases; that is, noun phrases with definite articles that are used in such a way that it is clear the speaker understands the context even though it is not explained.⁶⁸ The first such in the chapter is in the opening paragraph, where it

⁶⁸ Mandala p. 99f.

is said that it is “the ninth year of summer”.⁶⁹ This is something that cannot be a true statement in the world that we know and yet here it is presented as a fact that needs no further explanation. The deictic use of the definite noun phrase makes it plain that for the narrator, this is something utterly familiar and in no way extraordinary. Or, as Mandala puts it, “readers are cast, linguistically at least, as already believing the incredible.”⁷⁰ Through the use of such phrases – many more follow in this first chapter – a new world is slowly constructed, on foundations that are both familiar and strange, and with simple and unassuming building blocks. The definite noun phrases can thus be said to both help in maintaining the illusion of the secondary world and in providing the points of departure from the medieval source material. Indeed, the example given above, “the ninth year of summer”, represents one of the most defining traits of the secondary world of Westeros: the seasons are highly irregular and each season can last for years, even lifetimes. That this foundational concept of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is introduced in this manner shows the importance of this discursive element to Martin’s story-telling.

Gentle takes much the same approach with *Ash*. As previously noted, the story begins with uncompromising grittiness as it describes the titular character’s early childhood in a mercenary camp. At first there is nothing to suggest that this is not a straight-forward historical narrative, albeit about a fictional character. But then religious elements are introduced and although we can see the inspiration from Catholicism, the details are different. Though not always presented as definite noun phrases, their usage is deictic, assuming an understanding of the context such as when the first section ends with “A little later in her ninth year, rumours went through the camp that there had been a Lion born of a Virgin.”⁷¹ No explanation is offered, although in the second section Ash witnesses the seemingly miraculous appearance of the Lion and, in the third section, we get a true definite noun phrase as Gentle describes how Ash prays for war “...the way other little girls her age, in convents, pray to be the chosen bride of the Green Christ.”⁷² Within the main narrative, these elements serve the same function as “the ninth year of summer” does in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. However, in *Ash* the framing story device allows Gentle to complicate the picture further. As we see from one of Pierce Ratcliff’s letters, his editor has commented on “the Green Christ”, complimenting him on the “literary distancing technique” of referring to fifteenth century Catholicism with such terms in order to avoid reader preconceptions about the era.⁷³ In his answer, he sets the record straight, noting that these terms are direct translations from the source manuscript

⁶⁹ Martin 1996 p. 14.

⁷⁰ Mandala p. 101.

⁷¹ Gentle p. 14.

⁷² Gentle p. 20.

⁷³ Gentle p. 33.

but dismissing them as “obviously false legendary materials”.⁷⁴ One might say that extradiegetically, elements such as “the Green Christ” mark Ash as fantasy and perform the role of establishing the alternate world as different and yet real. However, intradiegetically the narrator of the framing story is struggling to preserve the narrative as history, which adds a further element of narrative tension to the reading experience; is the reader supposed to believe the main narrative or the framing story? The fact that the letter speaks of reader preconceptions makes Gentle’s awareness plain; reader preconceptions are precisely what is at the centre of evoking and re-imagining the medieval material.

The discourse also plays a role in setting these two works of fantasy apart from many of their predecessors. Though Martin follows the example of many of his predecessors and includes a certain amount of pseudo-archaisms, he also uses a liberal amount of familiar curse words such as “fuck” together with invented curses such as “seven hells”, with the former being quite rare in earlier works of fantasy.⁷⁵ Gentle goes even further in this regard; indeed, she states her intent as follows:

I wanted her to sound as if she’d walked in off the street, not out of 1476. The variety of high fantasy that involves (as Lin Carter once titled a book) dragons, elves, and heroes, is fine when you want some distance between your reader and your characters; when you want them to partake of the mythic.⁷⁶

But rather than just modernising the language and providing no justification for doing so, Gentle again makes use of the framing story device and has Pierce Ratcliff explaining that he has chosen to translate the original texts into modern colloquial English, using contemporary educated speech and slang in the dialogue to illustrate social differences of the time. So, instead of having Ash saying “By Christ’s bones”, he has her saying “fuck” in order to convey an equivalent level of crudeness.⁷⁷ However, while “fuck” may very well have gone unnoticed as anachronistic to most readers without the framing story, even more telling of Gentle’s modernising of the dialogue is how Ash’s men routinely refer to her as “boss”. Where Martin’s language largely echoes a more formal mode of speech without actually adopting it, treading the careful balancing act between clearly pseudo-archaic and clearly modern that the aforementioned intermediate style involves, Gentle is almost fully transposing the dialogue Ash to a modern military setting. One might perhaps speculate that Gentle, staying closer to history in writing an alternate history fantasy as opposed to a secondary world fantasy, is able to move further away from a more archaic mode of speech and still effectively

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Jo Walton: “Knights Who Say 'Fuck': Swearing in Genre Fiction.” *Tor.com* December 1, 2008, <http://www.tor.com/blogs/2008/12/the-knights-who-say-qfuckq-swearing-in-genre-fiction>, accessed 25-11-2014.

⁷⁶ Gevers 2000.

⁷⁷ Gentle p. 34.

evoke the past than Martin is able to, given that his world already exists at a greater distance away from the historical Middle Ages. Story and discourse work together to evoke and reimagine and in each narrative there must be the right balance to create and maintain the illusion of the world that has been built.

3. Conclusions

As we have seen in examining these texts and the worlds constructed within them, there are clear and deliberate strategies involved in both evoking and reimagining the medieval material which serves as one of the key building blocks of these novels. It has become apparent that certain aspects of the Middle Ages are indeed integral to evoking the right resonances. At the same time, it has also become evident that there are aspects of the era (not uncommonly the same as those viewed as being integral) that are particularly ripe for being reimagined. The chivalric ideals – drawn more from other stories than reality – are essential, effective for conjuring up the Middle Ages whether they are deconstructed or not. More or less direct connections to actual historical events are also helpful for creating a convincing secondary or alternate world. But the process of evoking and reimagining the Middle Ages is not limited to the story level; the discourse also plays a key role. On the one hand, pseudo-archaic style and archaisms on both the lexical and grammatical level are used to identify the characters as members of earlier speech communities, establishing a temporal distance between them and the reader. On the other hand, subtle manipulations of the language are used to make fantastical concepts seem perfectly ordinary within the context of the secondary or alternate world. Finally, in the particular examples discussed in this thesis, language is also used to set the texts apart from many prior texts within the genre through the use of relatively modern curse words such as “fuck”.

It has also become clear that secondary and alternate world fantasies do not primarily take inspiration from the Middle Ages of historical processes, of social and economic shifts and changes. Instead, it is the Middle Ages where the great individuals shape history. Indeed, Martin has said as much himself: “I suppose I am still a believer in the now unfashionable “heroic” school, which says that history is shaped by individual men and women and the choices that they make, by deeds glorious and terrible. That is certainly the approach I have taken in *A Song of Ice and Fire*.”⁷⁸ With every chapter named for the character narrating it, the focus on the individual character journeys is readily apparent in Martin’s novels and Gentle’s “*Ash: A Secret History*” announces its intentions equally plainly in its title. As Finander points out, this is the approach that historical fiction takes as well, which is why it is often unpopular with academics regarding its use of history as it goes against the current trends in modern historiography.⁷⁹ The “signposts” used by fantasy authors in establishing a medieval environment would therefore appear to match those of historical fiction authors and older styles of writing history rather than more recent academic perspectives.

⁷⁸ Nick Gevers: “Sunsets of High Renown: An Interview with George R. R. Martin”, *Infinity Plus* 2.2001, <http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/intgrm.htm>, accessed 25.11.2014.

⁷⁹ Finander p. 39.

With that in mind, what can we say about the question of why a medieval-inspired world has become such a defining element of fantasy? How is it illuminated by how these two authors have built their new worlds with material from the old? Brian Attebery suggests that using a historical milieu plays a significant role in the estrangement process that is so important to fantasy since it imbues the text with a sense of temporal otherness.⁸⁰ Certainly, we have seen that estrangement is a key function of how the medieval material is used in these texts and it is achieved both through story and discourse. The elements that signify that the narrative takes place in a bygone era are comparable to the “once upon a time” of fairy-tales, albeit presented in a less condensed and immediate form, and serve to highlight to the reader that they have left the here and now of their own quotidian reality. But the world – even if we limit ourselves just to the Western world on the assumption that a genre dominated by Western authors will gravitate towards their own historical heritage – has plenty of history to choose from, so why is it that the Middle Ages dominate as the default “once upon a time” in the fantasy genre?

The impetus behind the medievalism has not been the same in each era, though a key part of this enduring fascination with the Middle Ages – or rather, the image of the Middle Ages – certainly lies in the chivalric romances and other narratives of the era itself. It would seem likely that this is also where we find the roots of its connection to fantasy, since the romances were in essence fanciful tales, with magic and damsels in distress.⁸¹ Looked upon in that light, it is hardly odd that the genre of fantasy would feel at home in the medieval milieu; it is a landscape already intimately familiar with wonder. As Jonathan Langford notes: “the medieval romance [is] a highly sophisticated literary form coming from a time not at all similar to our own in terms of basic beliefs about the universe, yet similar to modern fantasy in its use of the marvelous and in the sense of wonder it is meant to inspire.”⁸²

And, perhaps because of the continued revisiting of this era, it is also a period of history that feels both familiar and other, creating just the right tension between the known and the unknown to provide fertile ground for fantastical tales that thrive on that kind of dynamics.

⁸⁰ Attebery 1995 p. 2.

⁸¹ Heng “Introduction”.

⁸² Jonathan Langford: “Why the Academy Is Afraid of Dragons: The Suppression of the Marvelous in Theories of the Fantastic” in *Science Fiction, Canonization, Marginalization, and the Academy*, eds.: Gary Westfahl & George Slusser (Praeger, Westport, 2002) p. 61.

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