PALACKÝ UNIVERSITY IN OLOMOUC
FACULTY OF ARTS
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND AMERICAN STUDIES


SEEING THE MIDDLE AGES THROUGH TRANSNATIONAL
LENSES IN AMERICAN COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS


DISSERTATION


BY
ELIZABETH ALLYN WOOCK


SUPERVISED BY
PROF. PHDR. MARCEL ARBEIT, DR.


OLOMOUC, CZECH REPUBLIC
MARCH 2020

I, Elizabeth Allyn Woock declare that this dissertation and the work presented in it are my own and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that where I have consulted and quoted from the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed. I have acknowledged all sources of help in bibliography. Part of the research for this dissertation was funded by two grant projects: IGA_FF_2019_037 "Youth literature in British and American culture: criteria, forms, and genres (Literatura pro dospívající mládež v anglické a americké kultuře: kritéria, formy, žánry) in 2019, and IGA_FF_2018_037 "From literature to film, television series and comics: new forms of British and American literary" (Od literatury k filmu, televizní sérii a komiksu: nové podoby děl anglické a americké literatury) in 2018.

    Signed:                                     _____

    Date:                                       _____

# CONTENTS

# ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines different manifestations of medievalism in anglophone comics produced primarily since the year 2000. Medievalism appears in the form of settings, character attributes, character tropes and story tropes. While aiming to produce a comprehensive catalogue and analysis of more popular comics featuring medievalist female characters with a religious calling, this project also considers the comics where just such characters are conspicuously absent, in an effort to map their presence and use utilizing a framework of the Actor-Network theory. On a final level, the dissertation considers what these comics mean to fans in different communities, by considering Fan Theory.

This dissertation looks at case studies of simulacra of place as in the medievalization of space such as castles, monasteries, and crypts; and medieval tropes, such as the chivalric rescue., medievalist tropes of character and story, as well as ideological simulacra. Focusing on medievalist characters, there is a study on nun characters in comics, and argues that nun characters are a set trope, and are necessarily medievalistic. Following this and building on the trope of the nun character, pagan priestesses, witches and also magical beings are examined. In contrast to the comics which highlight female protagonists, there are also popular comic book series which have female characters, who are Pagan or have some religious marker, but which emphasize the historicity of the comic.

More abstract forms of medievalism are identified in the comics, such as brutality and misogyny in the guise of historic accuracy and medievalist authenticity. On the opposite end, comics which fall further into the fantasy category often present more equal roles and include queer representation of characters. When considering fan communities and their use of medievalism in comic, this dissertation also considers the medievalist memes, comics and graphics of white supremacy and ideologically radical groups.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

# INTRODUCTION

Medievalism is not a true representation of the Middle Ages but rather a contemporary interpretation of what modern people think is medieval and, as readers and creators, our imagination of the Middle Ages is much more complex and personal than it would seem at first glance. This dissertation is looking at the broad question of medievalism in comics, and how the presence of medievalism affects the presentation of stories and characters. Specifically, it reflects how medievalism or a medieval setting changes the presentation of female characters, and even more narrowly, female religious characters. Religion in the medievalist comics ranges from the concrete—Pagan, Christian, and Jewish faiths (with almost no mentions of Islam appearing in any of the comics)—to the fantastical, including magical beings and witches. Medievalism also differs between different comic book creators and is received differently by consumers.

The first chapter of this dissertation is a summary of the most important literature and methods applied in this research project. This section can also serve as a quick orientation for readers who may be unfamiliar with one or more fields of study which this project draws from. The study of medievalism is already an interdisciplinary field, and despite having narrowed the focus of research on comics and graphic novels, this project reaches heavily into Fan Studies. Several technical terms which will be used throughout my work are defined in this section for clarity.

The first case study looks at medievalism in general, as it appears in three comic book adaptations of Franz Kafka's *The Castle*. The medievalism of *The Castle* is multi-medial, in that it appears both within the story and the visual presentation of the story. The depiction of the eponymous castle is examined, as is the Gothic subtype of medievalism, which is most strongly present in the graphics of the adaptations. The theory that Kafka wrote the story as an adaptation of the medieval grail myth of *Parzival* also comes into play, as the comic book creators present their own medievalist theories about the original inspiration for the unfinished novel.

The second case study looks at two comic series, *The Leather Nun* and *Lips Tullian,* which are illustrated by two of the artists who were introduced in the previous chapter—the American illustrators Robert Crumb and Spain Rodriguez, and the Czech illustrator Kája Saudek, who was directly inspired by American comics and the work of Robert Crumb. This chapter examines medievalization of medieval space, such as castles, monasteries, and crypts; and medieval tropes,

such as the chivalric rescue. The comics by Crumb and Rodriguez make the nun characters perverse, while Saudek presents them as romantic prizes.

The fourth chapter focuses on nun characters in comics and argues that nun characters are a set trope, and a necessarily medievalistic one. This chapter draws on primarily Anglophone comics of European or North American origins; because of the globalized nature of the comic book industry, examples from manga-style comics are considered as well. The nun trope is not only a character, but she comes with established story tropes and settings, which also have medieval roots, but have been adapted to suit modern audiences.

Just as the chapter on nuns seeks to describe and analyze the trope as it appears in modern comics, the fourth chapter applies this process to Pagan and witch characters. The two types are addressed together, as some comics treat them as being interchangeable. Chapter 5 looks at religion from a different angle, including Pagans and witches, or otherwise magical beings, and their relationship to medievalism in comics. There are four comics in particular which are introduced in the first part of the chapter—*Heathen, Rat Queens, Hemlock,* and *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*. In contrast to the comics which highlight female protagonists, there are also popular comic book series with female characters, who are Pagan or have some religious markers, but which emphasize the historicity of the comic.

The second part of the chapter introduces the *Northlanders* and *Black Road* series, both of which were created by Brian Wood, and released around the same time. Both of these series position themselves as being historically accurate in the details, if not in the story itself. Though they employ medievalism, more fantastical elements—such as living gods, magic, and witchcraft—do not appear in the series, because of the attempt to present a realistic medieval storyworld. Nun characters also do not appear, because both series focuses on the Norse Pagans. It is essential to introduce these comics, because they provide a rich contrast to the other comics which do not try to present themselves as being historically accurate, a characteristic which proves to correlate with other factors, such as depictions of brutality, and white nationalistic thought. The aim here is not to point out anachronisms, but it is important to pick out the parts of the comics which use history to validate or provide a false precedence for an ideologically unsavory rhetoric.

The final section of Chapter 5 moves away from the introduction of the comics and begins to draw on the collected corpus of comics and graphic novels for analysis. One such reoccurring element in these medievalist comics which emphasize historicity is the presence of brutality,

especially brutality of a misogynistic type. This is problematic, especially when these comics stand out in sharp contrast to comics which accept or even play with the notion of anachronistic medievalism, which tend to be very inclusive and female-positive. The implications of this—brutality and misogyny are historic, while inclusivity and feminism are only attributes of a fantasy setting—can lead to real world actions, which is examined in greater detail within the final chapters.

The topic of medievalism in media is urgent for today's scholars, creators, and readers. In recent years there has been a surge of interest in medieval content, and while some of these works show a forward-looking use of medievalism, others are utilizing medievalist content to promote white nationalism and misogynistic arguments. Even in 2017, the *Economist* published a report documenting the Alt-Right's enthusiasm for medievalist memes,[1] but historians have known this unfortunate correlation for a while. In an interview soon after the now infamous Alt-Right rally in Charlotte, North Carolina, Australian scholar Helen Young pointed out that the connection between racism and the study of medieval history has been well established for almost two centuries. I also noted the use of medievalist imagery by the Alt-Right and more extreme groups, and thus this was unavoidably included in my research, which originally sought to only examine the presentation of women in medievalist comics, not knowing that medievalist comics would overlap with race-as-biology and that white supremacy would be involved. I took heart, as historian Helen Young stated:

> We've mostly stopped talking about that discourse of race in classrooms and research, but changing—saving—medieval studies will take more than silence. We need to work at change; it does not happen by itself or without effort in medieval studies any more than it does anywhere else. Our core business—teaching, research, service—they are all places where we can work collectively and individually to make not just medieval studies more inclusive and more diverse.[2]

---

[1] See "The Far Right's New Fascination with the Middle Ages," *Economist*, January 2, 2017. https://www.economist.com/democracy-in-america/2017/01/02/the-far-rights-new-fascination-with-the-middle-ages (accessed March 20, 2020).

[2] David M. Perry, "How Can We Untangle White Supremacy From Medieval Studies? A Conversation with Australian Scholar Helen Young," October 9, 2017, https://psmag.com/education/untangling-white-supremacy-from-medieval-studies (accessed March 20, 2020).

This dissertation will be relevant for medievalists, scholars of medieval History proper, scholars interested in fandoms and Audience Studies, and, of course, those involved in the study of comics and graphic novels. I hope that even the casual reader will be interested in the surprising ways that nuns, witches and Pagan women appear in comics and graphic novels—a phenomenon which the layman would be forgiven for overlooking, when there is such a wide, under-researched or even unresearched, production of such comics.

Therefore Chapter 6 looks at the effects of comic book medievalism in the real world, or rather how real-world medievalism appears in comics, focusing on the Alt-Right movement as it appeared in the years 2016–2019 and their medievalist media. This chapter uses methodology from Fan Studies to make connections between the appearance of medievalism in people's political and social activism in the Alt-Right, as well as the recent creation of Alt-Right media, such as the *Based Stick Man* comic or the webcomic *The Iron Pill*, and how medievalist content can be used to recruit and indoctrinate participants in the movement. This chapter also considers how medievalism is used to frame the ideology, which is being indoctrinated, and how the medium of comic books is a uniquely effective format.

The seventh chapter returns to a more uplifting topic, and looks at the history and present of medievalism in comics as a positive source of support and inspiration for women. The eighth chapter ties into this and looks specifically at how certain fandoms of comic books, such as *Red Sonja* and *Rat Queens*, create positive models for fans, and how creators have helped these comics evolve over time to keep up with modern social trends, leading towards greater inclusivity and a sense of agency for female readers and fans, and modelling healthier relationships and social arrangements for all.

A general warning: this dissertation contains images from comics and media which are graphically sexual or violent in nature, contain nudity, hate symbols, and scenes of rape and torture. If this is disturbing for the reader, I recommend that they download the text with images removed. Images are used to provide support and evidence for the text, but it is possible to read and understand the text without them if needed.

# CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE AND METHODS

This chapter will introduce the background of the dissertation theme, in order to best familiarize the reader with the approach and foundation of the main ideas and arguments.

## COMICS STUDIES

The format technically includes cartoons, comic strips, comic books, graphic novels, web comics, and a wide range of experimental formats, and as Neil Cohn has proven,[3] the working definition of "What is a comic?" is a fraught as trying to define what a book is, or what a film is. For the purpose of this text, the term "comics" will be used to signify sequential graphic art which incorporates text to create a narrative; it is a narrow definition tailored to the fact that the corpus is made up of serialized classic comic books and graphic novels (sometimes appearing also as web comics), and there are no instances of truly experimental formats used for the purpose of this research project.



**Figure 1** A vintage Charlie Chaplin comic, unfettered by copyright enforcement.

Simply summarized, although Egyptian hieroglyphics, the Bayeux Tapestry, or later narrated illustrations from the eighteenth or nineteenth century are oft cited as the first comics, comics proper really start with *The Yellow Kid* (1895),[4] representing a format which spilled over into comic books—which originated as collections of strips published elsewhere—like *Funnies on*

---

[3] See Neil Cohn, "Un-Defining 'Comics,'" *International Journal of Comic Art* 7, no. 2 (October 2005): 236–48.

[4] The character Mickey Dugan, commonly called the Yellow Kid, was created by Richard Telton Outcault in the end of the nineteenth century, as part of *Hogan's Alley*, a newspaper comic strip about adventurous city children in the *New York World*. The character later moved to the *New York Journal*, appearing in the series *McFadden's Row of Flats* (October 18, 1896–January 10, 1897), *Around the World with the Yellow Kid* (January 17, 1897–May 30, 1897), and *Ryan's Arcade* (September 28, 1897–January 23, 1898).

*Parade* (1933)[5] and other strips from the early part of the twentieth century. The concept of image and word was in no way new or innovative, but rather the format of serialized and mass-produced pop culture graphic narratives, which demarcate the Golden Age of comics, from the 1930s to 1950s, representing a departure unique to the modern era. The Golden Age saw the creation of superheroes, such as Superman and Batman, in addition to boys' and girls' comics, political cartoons, and comics based on silent film stars such as Charlie Chaplin. Comics based on films or film stars had a very loose interpretation of copyright, as seen in Figure 1.

Early analysis of comics include Martin Sheridan's *Classic Comics and Their Creators* (1942), and David Kunzle's *The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825* (1973), but comics studies really launched with Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), which successfully combined the perspectives of consumers, critics, and the artists themselves, as Eisner was uniquely positioned to offer his take on each of these roles. Subsequent landmark texts include M. Thomas Inge's *Comics as Culture* (1990) and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993)—McCloud himself in a similar approach as Eisner in his role as both creator and critic—and fellow artist Robert C. Harvey published *The Art of the Funnies: An Aesthetic History* (1994) and *The Art of the Comic Book* (1996) with an academic publisher.

Both Roland Barthes in *Rhetoric of the Image* (1964) and Umberto Eco in his 1964 book *Apocalittici e integrati* (Apocalyptic and Integrated) addressed the theory of comics early on. Specialized theoreticians include Neil Cohn, Thierry Groensteen, Hannah Miodrag, Barbara Postema, Hillary Chute, and many others, who have moved definitions for sequential art and the terminology for discussing comics further. Comics creators continue to offer their analyses, including Trina Robbins, Neil Gaiman, and Robert Crumb. Many academic journals focus on the study of comics, the most prominent anglophone journals being: *The Comics Grid*, *European Comic Art*, *ImageText*, *iNKS*, *International Journal of Comic Art*, the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *SIGNs* and *Studies in Comics*. *Critical Inquiry* released a special volume in Spring

---

[5] The *Funnies on Parade* was an experimental proto-comic book made up of collected reprints from newspaper comic strips, published in 1933 by Eastern Color Press. The books were folded down broadsheets in a nine-by-twelve-inch format, making an eight-page gnomic book. This format was picked up in 1935 by National Periodicals, producing original comics for the content, which was called *New Fun Comics*, which is arguably the first comic book as we know the format today.

2014 dedicated to Comics and Media, and journals such as *Image [&] Narrative* or the *Journal of Popular Culture* occasionally include work from comics scholars.

Comics studies has developed since the 1980s into a fully-fledged field. The current texts for the study of comics include both this and Heer and Worcester's *A Comics Studies Reader* (2008), Duncan and Smith's *The Power of Comics: History, Form, & Culture* (2015), Duncan and Smith's *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* (2011), as well as a slew of supporting networks and sites that offer bibliographies such as ComicsResearch.org, the *International Association of Word and Image Studies*, *The Comics Studies Society*, and new organizations and resources are appearing each year. Currently, the study of comics stretches over many different disciplines, such as cognitive science (with research on subjects like multi-modal reading), art history, literary sciences, pedagogy, communications science, media, and popular culture.

Regarding female characters in comics, there are a few volumes which address this topic specifically: Lillian Robinson's *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes* (2004) looks at classic comics and the role of feminist superheroes in the twentieth century, while Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010) goes beyond this temporal scope to look at also underground comics and independent artists. Mike Madrid's *Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (2009) takes a wider view of female characters in comics and considers their visual presentation, a tradition in American comics which results in the depiction of nun characters as explored in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, as well as Deborah Elizabeth Whaley's *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (2016). Much can be drawn from studies on female characters in film and other pop media, such as Gladys L. Knight's *Female Action Heroes: A Guide to Women in Comics, Video Games, Film, and Television* (2010), Jeffery Brown's *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (2011) and his later volume *Beyond Bombshells: The New Action Heroine in Popular Culture* (2015).

## MEDIEVALISM

Medievalism is the key element of the content contained in comics, the format which is under examination in this dissertation. When discussing specific terminology related to the study of medievalism in comics, *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms* (2014), edited by Elizabeth Emery and

Richard Utz, was indispensable. Medievalism is described as "developed in the nineteenth century as a way of describing an engagement either with the historical period known as the Middle Ages or with what was perceived as belonging to this historical period."[6] This dissertation is interested in the interplay between what is known about the Middle Ages and what is perceived as belonging to the Middle Ages, in the form of simulacra which appear in comics and graphic novels. Simulacra, taking Gilles Deleuze's concept within the framework of the medieval, is summarized by Lauryn Mayer as "not a degraded copy of a copy, but the product of the encounter of disparate elements and cannot be defined in relation to the paradigm."[7] Mayer ties this with Jean Baudrillard's "Precession of Simulacra," which presents simulacra as a result of consumerism in late capitalism producing "mediatic images and signs (films, videos, television, the Internet, brands, etc.) with no referent but themselves," which I will extend to include medievalist simulacra in comic books and graphic novels, and Umberto Eco's theory of hyper-reality, within which "we become unable to tell the difference between reality and simulation; or rather, this difference becomes ultimately irrelevant."[8] The popular media propagation of medievalist simulacra, those notions about the Middle Ages which are more real than the real, appear both graphically (as in the famous chainmail bikini of the comic book character Red Sonja), or textually, as in the nun escape stories which appear in comics such as *The Magdalena* (which is explored in Chapter 4). The term "neomedievalism" is intended to draw a distinction between Victorian medievalism, and contemporary medievalism; however much of the medievalisms used by comic book creators are in fact drawing heavily from Victorian influences so I have not found a need to specifically use the term. Moreover, "neomedievalism" is used more commonly in cultural studies and sociology, for example referring to the transformation of international relations and economics in the prediction of a "New Dark Age," building on the definition proposed by Umberto Eco.[9] Because of the use of the term "neomedievalism" in this context, I will not be using it in this dissertation for the sake of clarity.

---

[6] Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, eds., *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 2.

[7] Lauryn S. Mayer "Simulacrum", in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, eds., (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 225.

[8] Mayer, 25. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 1–42; and Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1990).

[9] See Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1990).

There is no formal taxonomy for what constitutes a medievalist character, a medievalist building, or a medievalist story, but medievalisms can be delineated through their codification in specific media, wherein the character trope or story setting can be traced to a source in modern media rather than a truly medieval origin. The collective monograph *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*[10] provides many examples demonstrating the variety of different medievalist simulacra which have matured in contemporary media, including the characters of the Arthurian knights and the Viking warrior tropes as filtered through the lens of heavy metal and progressive rock music, or the "fur-wearing barbarians, wily thieves, and sage wizards, often encountering orcs, giants and the occasional displacer beast"[11] which have been standardized in the game *Dungeons & Dragons*. The medievalist storyworld, in for example *Dungeons & Dragons*, can be described through an approach to creation rather through finite features. Marshall describes what he calls the fundamental secondary world in the fantasy game as "medievalist" in the sense that it "seems to use the Middle Ages as an ingredient repository, but that direct connection deceives;" the storyworld becomes closed into itself as its reliance on the real Middle Ages is increasingly irrelevant and "it moved away from its fantasy origins and its adoption of medieval influences to become an autopoietic system that generates its evolving secondary world out of its own elements."[12] This prolonged process of replacement of the medieval with the medievalist, until the storyworld becomes self-referential in its medievalist simulacra, is a phenomenon seen in comics and graphic novel storyworlds as well. The medievalist simulacra in popular media is of equal value and primacy as characters, buildings, and stories of direct medieval origin, and for the unaware these simulacra seem more real and believable—and more authentic—due to hyperreality.

The distinction between what is medievalist (that what is constructed outside of the Middle Ages, comprised of simulacra and confirmed through the lens of hyperreality) and what is medieval (that which designates something originating in the Middle Ages, with its origins confirmed through primary evidence or research) becomes an essential factor when examining

---

[10] See David E. Marshall, ed., *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007).

[11] David Marshall, "A World unto Itself: Autopoietic Systems and Secondary Worlds in *Dungeons & Dragons*," in *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*, ed. David E. Marshall, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 171.

[12] Marshall, "A World unto Itself,"172.

how fans, consumers, and creators of comics and graphic novels employ medieval content to relate to real-work, contemporary phenomena, as is shown in Chapters 6, 7, and 8. Medievalist simulacra are mislabeled as medieval history in the context of historical fiction, and the assumption of authenticity has been found to be of great importance to fans and creators of these comics and graphic novels.

Outside of the medium of comics and in the context of literature studies in general, medievalism is arguably not a branch of medieval studies, but rather a historiography of approaches to medieval studies. Norman Cantor's landmark *Inventing the Middle Ages* (1993) outlined the most influential minds and their approaches to analyzing medieval material: the range of medievalisms is reflected in the proliferation of medievalisms in popular media. Medievalism is, in sort, the study of the study of the Middle Ages, focusing on attitudes, approaches, and interpretations of medieval source material, or material such as simulacra which are believed to be medieval. In *Medievalism: A Manifesto* (2017), Richard Utz demonstrates the range of application of the study of medievalism, ranging from text to architecture and popular media. Utz also offers an annotated bibliography of studies regarding medievalism in the appendix of his volume but from comics and graphic novels scholars only Chris Bishop is included.

Scholarly works, related specifically to literary and art, dealing with historical medievalism within the medium of comics and graphic novels are few. The most essential sources related to the topic of this dissertation include Chris Bishop's *Medievalist Comics and the American Century* (2016), in particular the chapters on the *Red Sonja*'s main character and Brian Wood's *Northlanders* series, though Bishop takes different approaches to each of the series than I use in this dissertation; my interest is to explore how the application of medievalism translates to fan ideologies in the real world. Bishop looks at the graphic evolution and historiography of *Red Sonja*, while he focuses on the visual stylistics and genre of *Northlanders*, arguing that the series draws heavily on manga visual language in the presentation of its main protagonist. Though it is indirectly addressing medievalism, Julia Round's *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* (2014) provided an excellent methodological model for approaching Gothic material in comics from various angles. There are no full books currently in print dedicated to research on religious women, such as nuns, in comics, or on witches and Pagan women in comics. These are currently the only monographs which look at medievalism specifically in the format of comics and graphic novels. There is also an attempt to create an international, online corpus of medieval (but not medievalist exclusively)

comics, called the Medieval Comics Project, which is sponsored by The Association for the Advancement of Scholarship and Teaching of the Medieval in Popular Culture, which emphasizes Arthurian legends and medieval texts adapted to the comics format. Models of theory and methodology regarding the study of medievalism in comics and graphic novels, with a focus on the depiction of female religious characters, had to be drawn from other fields of media studies, or studies focusing on other time periods or genres. There are some more complex studies related to fans and medievalist simulacra, but these do not explore fans and medievalist comics specifically, which is a lacuna I sought to partly fill within this dissertation.

In order to create a background for theories of medievalist ideologies and their transfer to fans, I consulted Michael Cramer's *Medieval Fantasy as Performance: The Society of Creative Anachronism and the Current Middle Ages* (2010), which relates to the real-life practices of consumers and creators of medievalist materials, and was relevant for looking at how fandoms act out medievalist simulacra. *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages* (2014), edited by Daniel Kline, and similarly *Neomedievalism in the Media: Essays on Film, Television and Electronic Games* (2012), edited by Carol Robinson and Pamela Clements, look at medievalist simulacra in popular media such as television and the interactive media of games, though the term "neomedievalism" is applied loosely here. There are also three relevant texts related to medievalism in film in particular: Kevin Harty's *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern and Asian Films about Medieval Europe* (2nd ed. 2006), Nickolas Haydock's *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages* (2008), and *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema* (2007), edited by Lynn Ramey and Tison Pugh, which helped inform an approach to female medievalist characters in comics. Film is particularly relevant to the study of comics books and graphic novels because it incorporates sequential graphics and visualities into the approach of criticism. The primary difference, however, is the forced speed of sequence in film, and also the cinema environment, both elements of which are not reproduced in comics. Similarly, film cannot address the issue of action in the gutter between frames.

## FAN STUDIES

The final chapters of the dissertation consider the consumers of comics and consider how the comics they read affect their behavior, or vice versa, how popularity among fans can create waves of change in the comics industry. There are texts related to the ideology of comics such as *Comics:*

*Ideology, Power, and the Criticism* by Martin Barker (1989), and *Comics and Ideology* by Matthew McAllister, Edward H. Sewell Jr., and Ian Gordon (2001, 2006), though these do not address medievalism and medievalist ideologies. There are no studies on the ties between medievalist comics and ideology *per se*.

In order to get closer to the consumers of comic I turned to the field of fan studies. There are several standard texts to get oriented in fan studies: I consulted Paul Booth's edited volume *The Companion to Fandom and Fan Studies* (2018) as an introduction to the study of fandom, as they occasionally mention comic book fandom; Melissa Click and Suzanne Scott's *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom* (2017); Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington's *Fandom: Identities and Communities in the Mediated World* (2007); and Kristina Busse's *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (2017). I found Cornel Sandvoss' *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (2005) the most useful, as it often mentioned comic book fandoms among the examples, and focused on the relationship of the fandom with consumption and the creation of fan ideology and identity. There are many articles written about individual comic book fandoms, but these generally related to classic comics of the superhero variety, and there was no text that related to medievalist comics which could be used as a source for this study. Also used in this research project were Nicholas Abercombie and Brian Longurst's *Audiences* (1998), Mat Hills' *Fan Cultures* (2002), and Henry Jenkins' *Culture* (2006), which describe the role of media in society and fandoms though not focusing on comics specifically.

MEMES

One of the dominant types of online graphic mediums are memes, originally described by Richard Dawkins as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation,"[13] but in digital media they have become a type of simple image-text graphic, similar to single frame or limited frame comics, and branching out into various subgenres, including humor-driven political memes, a phenomenon described by Limor Shifman already in 2014.[14] The scholarly community is still debating whether

---

[13] The idea is expounded up in Richard Dawkins' first book, *The Selfish Gene*, although Daniel Dennett's characterization of memes as mind viruses is very perceptive to the current media form. See Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); and Daniel C. Dennett, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017).

[14] See Limor Schifman, "May The Excessive Force Be With You: Memes As Political Participation," in *Memes in Digital Culture* (Boston: MIT Press, 2014), 119–50, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bs14s.12 (accessed March 20, 2020).

memes are comics, but it is a fact that comics become memes (such as the Pepe character, [15] *Rage Comics* memes, and webcomics by KC Green, like Staredad), while the faster-moving online community has widely agreed that memes are indeed comics. For example, writer Keith Pille cites Scott McCloud's definition of comics (*Understanding Comics,* 1993) as an image juxtaposed with text or other images in a deliberate sequence, intending to convey meaning. [16] Indeed, there are single-frame comics and multi-frame memes, and the designation of meme or comic often refers more to a means of distribution (online chats and websites versus traditional publishing) rather than a visual format. Because many of the comics considered for this research project are digital productions, webcomics, or memes, especially in Chapter 8 regarding Alt-Right comics, it is necessary to consider memes because they represent what is identified by James Willmore and Darryl Hocking as a very democratic form for amateurs to create conversational medium which are able to react to the minute-by-minute developments in society and culture. [17] The difference between memes and comics is rather the process of formation, which Bradley Wiggins and Bret Bowers describe in their analysis of the "memescape" [18] as starting as spreadable medium (which can react quickly to current events), which then turns
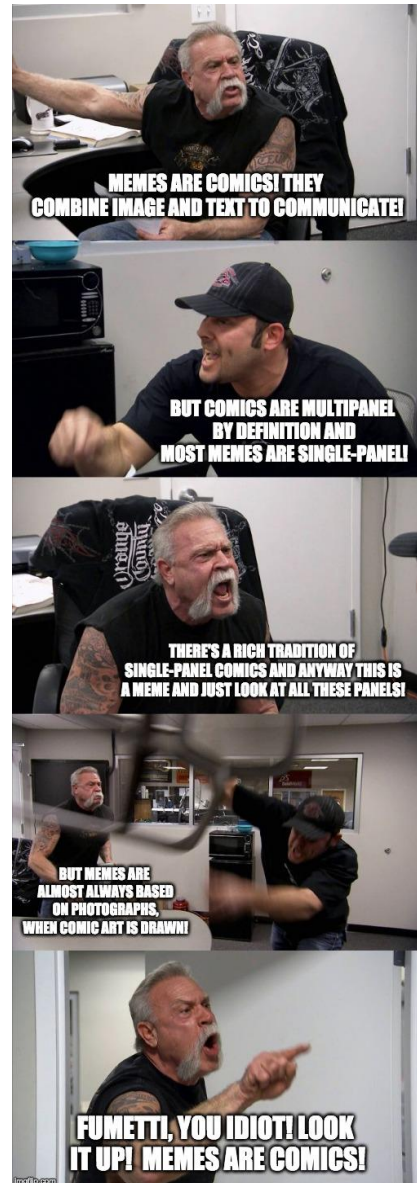


**Figure 2** American Chopper Meme © Keith Pille 2019

---

[15] See George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). Hawley summarizes it in the following way: "Alt-Right is, like Pepe, vulgar, irreverent, ironic, and goofy. Despite its innocuous name, the Alt-Right is also, at its core, a racist movement."

[16] See Keith Pille, "Memes Are Comics, and We're Living in a Golden Age," Comics MNT, accessed September 12, 2019, https://www.comicsmnt.com/?p=2518 (accessed March 20, 2020).

[17] James Willmore and Darryl Hocking, "Internet Meme Creativity as Everyday Conversation," *Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture* 2, no. 2 (2017): 140–66.

[18] The "memescape" is a colloquial term designating the contemporary online ecosystem of graphic meme production, circulation, and consumption. It is an ecosystem, in that memes have their own lineage, species, and genre, and can be inter-referential; knowledge of previous permutations of a meme, or copying another meme, can be key to understanding a meme.

into an emergent meme, and finally is accepted through popularity as a full-fledged meme, which they separate into a unique genre.[19] Anastasia Denisova has looked at memes and their political context in greater detail in her very recently published book *Internet Memes and Society* (2019), and Bradley Wiggins attributed to the discussion in *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture* (2019).

Though there are no secondary sources specifically focused on the theme of medievalism and ideology in comics, as related in particular to the portrayal of female religious characters, I have created an approach to this in an interdisciplinary fashion. This dissertation aims to collect and describe occurrences of medievalism in comics, identify its relation to nuns, witches or Pagan female characters, or comment on the conspicuous absence thereof; to analyze these comics in terms of the choices the creators make in order to use the comics format to present ideologies or approaches to the Middle Ages; and examine how fans are evidenced applying medievalist ideologies, as transmitted through the format of comics, to real-world actions.

---

[19] See Bradley Wiggins and Bret Bowers, "Memes as Genre: A Structurational Analysis of the Memescape," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 11 (December 2015): 1886–906, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814535194 (accessed March 20, 2020).

# CHAPTER 2: MEDIEVALIST SIMULACRA IN COMICS

This chapter looks at the application of medievalism in comics which are not specifically intended to contain medieval content, but rather use medievalist elements to express secondary ideas or subversive notions. Though the two comics were created around the same span of years and the artists are connected in several ways, the two works themselves present different approaches to using medievalism as a vehicle for communication, occasionally intersecting through shared symbolism and story. These two comics demonstrate the strength of medievalist content to over-power historic medieval content with pop culture medievalist media, arguably because of the potential of medievalism to communicate in ways that actual medieval references cannot.

The two comics that this chapter focuses on were not selected because they demonstrated a certain phenomenon, but rather unignorable connections arose while studying the two comics in separate research projects. The utility of focusing on them as a contrasting pair became apparent, as they both present a unique lens by which to approach questions about the functions of medievalism in comic books. What is most striking is not the comparative element, but rather how deeply they are connected, referencing each other while executing two different paths to reach the shared communicative goal of subverting norms.

## The Leather Nun

The first comic originated in the United States. *The Leather Nun*[20] was published in January 1973 by Last Gasp, and each story was written and illustrated by a different author: Roger Brand (pages 6–43), Robert Crumb (pages 17–20), Spain Rodriguez (pages 21–24, 44), Jack Jackson (aka "Jaxon," pages 25–31), Pat Ryan (pages 32–35), and Dave Sheridan (pages 1–16). This chapter will focus on the chapters of *The Leather Nun* titled "The Adventures of R. Crumb Himself" starting on page 17, written and illustrated by Robert Crumb,[21] and "The Leather Nun 'Gets Hers,'" written and illustrated by Spain Rodriguez



**Figure 3** *The Leather Nun* title page.
© Last Gasp Eco-Funnies 1973

---

[20] Roger Brand et al., *Tales from the Leather Nun* (Berkeley: Last Gasp Eco-Funnies, 1973).

[21] Robert Crumb, "The Adventures of R. Crumb Himself," in *Tales from the Leather Nun* (Berkeley: Last Gasp Eco-Funnies, 1973), 19–20.

starting on page 21,[22] although the whole comic is relevant for the argument made in this chapter. Robert Crumb (b. 1943) is a prolific comics creator, credited with being a pillar of the underground comics movement of the late 1960s and 1970s including *Fritz the Cat*, *Mr. Natural* and collaborations on several zines. He continued with his signature illustration style throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but is still primarily known for his work before the 1980s. "Spain" Rodriguez was born as Manuel Rodriguez in 1940 (d. 2012), and got his start in the 1960s working in New York City contributing to the *East Village Other* and published his own series called *Zodiac Mindwarp*. He later co-founded the United Cartoon Workers of America and worked across the board for underground comics publications. This collaboration plays on the salacious illustration style of the two author-illustrators, and *The Leather Nun* was crafted with the intention to shock and awe with a hint of historicity, satirically advertising "vintage porn" on the title page. Its references to historically accurate buildings and objects, however, the presentation of the nun characters have been altered to serve the authors' whims.

In "The Adventures of R. Crumb Himself," the story opens with an image of Crumb on an armchair, with a thought bubble saying "I think I will go for a walk . . ." [23] He decides to get some professional training (for reasons unclear) and finds the National School of Hard Knocks. He is picked up by a robust nun and thrown in front of three men representing various state institutions who spend three frames beating Crumb's character. As part of his beating, he is set up for an impromptu castration at



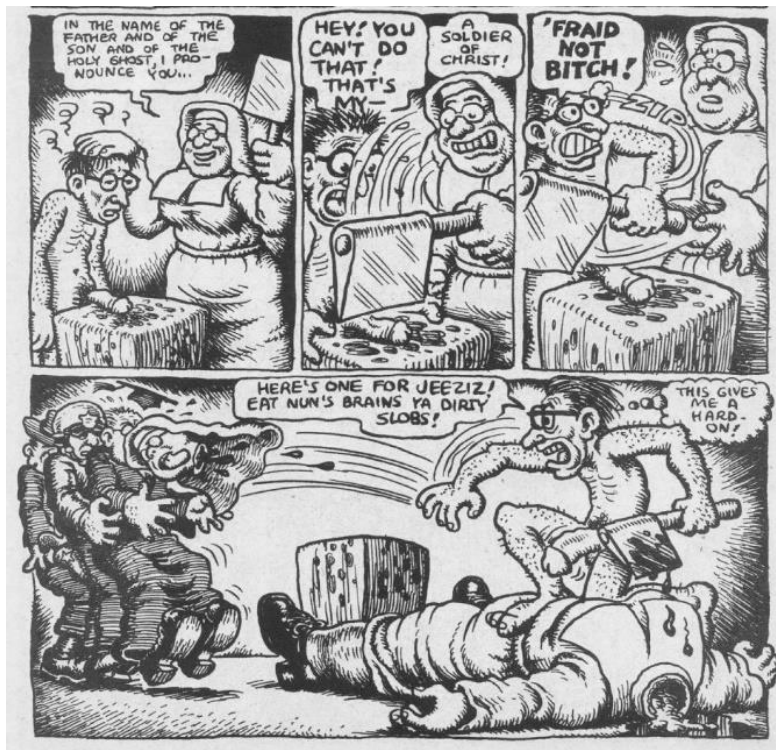**Figure 4** Detail: the nun's beheading (*The Leather Nun,* 19). © Last Gasp Eco-Funnies 1973

---

[22] Spain Rodriguez, "The Leather Nun 'Gets Hers,'" in *Tales from the Leather Nun* (Berkeley: Last Gasp Eco-Funnies, 1973), 21–24.
[23] Crumb, "The Adventures," 17.

the hands of the nun, dramatically set up with a butcher's cleaver on a dirty chopping block. Crumb's character wrestles the cleaver from the hands of the nun, chops her head off, and, throwing it to the three men who had been beating him, exclaims: "This gives me a hard-on!"[24]

Crumb's character runs away, without pants but having found a shirt between frames, and bombs the School of Hard Knocks (now illustrated with a Nazi swastika and a dollar bill on its façade). Running from the explosion, still pantless, he finds another school: The School of Hard Knockers ("knockers" being slang for breasts). A visibly excited Crumb calls out "Hi gurls!! Where do I enroll? *Slaver drool!*" (misspelling of "girls" in the original) as he hooks his arms around two "gurls," grabbing on to their breasts. The chapter ends with a personal narrative caption from Crumb himself simply stating: "So I'm a male chauvinist pig . . . nobody's perfect . . ."[25]

This leads into the chapter by Spain Rodriguez. It echoes the previous chapter in that it follows a male focal character (there is not really any protagonist or antagonist) as he interacts with the nun. The opening sets the scene with a child walking by the exterior of The Cloisters, hearing only a sliver of the debauchery going on downstairs, in the fictitious crypt of the building.



**Figure 5** Detail (*The Leather Nun,* 23) © Last Gasp Eco-Funnies 1973

---

[24] Crumb, "The Adventures," 19.
[25] Crumb, "The Adventures," 20.

A splash page with the title and credits follows the introductory page, and the story proper begins on page 23, initiated with a monologue spoken by the nun from the title page, who is very scandalously dressed.

Inexplicably three frames later, the nun finds a man in the crypt (who is for some reason shirtless), and immediately accuses him of blasphemy against God. Apparently, the man is a meteorologist, who attributed bad weather to Lucifer rather than being the wrath of God. This frame is interesting, because the man immediately conflates the abuse of the nun with feminism, and the illustrator creates an extra narrative caption to label the interaction as a late medieval church procedure, presented as an authoritative "editor's note." The nun threatens to put the man into the Iron Maiden torture device, and the man gives in to repent. At the end of his ordeal, labeled simply as "later" with a narrative caption, the nun proclaims the man "the perfect Catholic!"[26] as he walks away whipping himself with a chain, and, satisfied with her work, goes to relax. She "presses a secret notch in the wall" next to a large statue of the crucifix, which causes a phallus to emerge from the statue of Christ, which the nun suggestively climbs up to, looking over her shoulder to tell the reader: "It's ok. We're married."[27]

LIPS TULLIAN

The second comic considered in this chapter is *Lips Tullian*[28] (the Czech title is *Lips Tullian, nejobávanější náčelník lupičů*), a Czech series written by Jaroslav Weigel and illustrated by Kája Saudek, published in weekly installments in the Czech magazine *Mladý svět* (Young World) during 1972. Kája Saudek was born in 1935 in Prague and engaged in a career in the arts along with his photographer brother Jan Saudek. Saudek's Jewish heritage plays a more prominent role in the next chapter, but for the sake of this chapter, I will only summarize that he was first and foremost a prominent comic book artist known for his strips and series printed in popular magazines, poster art, and paintings.

The *Lips Tullian* series is set roughly around the seventeenth century, though freely borrows from all eras, ancient to modern. It follows the misadventures of the eponymous hero as he chases damsels, fights bandits—though he himself is one—and then chases even more damsels while occasionally being chased himself. Despite the vague temporal setting of the story world in

---

[26] Rodriguez, "The Leather Nun 'Gets Hers,'" 24.
[27] Rodriguez, "The Leather Nun 'Gets Hers,'" 24.
[28] Kája Saudek and Jaroslav Weigel, *Lips Tullian* (Prague: Albatros, 2010).

this series, historic references and especially visual historic references are spread over a wider timeline; this chapter will consider specifically the medieval, or rather medievalist, elements which appear in the series, from the vantage of both story and illustration.

*Lips Tullian* is loosely based off the series of the same title released by the publisher Alois Hynek in 1894,[29] and opens with the hero, Lips, being publicly punished. He is whipped and branded with a "H" (for the word "*hanba,*" in English: "shame;" the scar itself rotates of its own accord into an "I"), and he rebels by uprooting the very stake that he is tied to and running off. The stake is shaped like a giant pencil, and with the pencil to write his own story, Lips escapes. Two important characters are introduced in this episode: Hilda, a noblewoman who aggressively pursues Lips, and Hedvika, who is aggressively pursued by Lips Tullian. Hilda launches a search after the escaped Lips Tullian, thus initiated the series.[30]

I will briefly summarize the relevant points of the plot so that I can focus on individual episodes in the analysis without needing to review the larger story for each instance. In the series, Tullian (called "Filip") comes across the lovely and innocent Eliška (introduced in Episode 2) who Tullian decides to marry, and a slightly more sinister lady-bandit from the same band which Lips Tullian leads, Berta (introduced in Episode 4), who immediately becomes jealous of Tullian and plots ways to split him from his new fiancé, which complicates the plot further as Eliška also becomes a target of pursuit. Lips leaves the band of bandits, and Berta and Hilde are seeking Lips. In the interim, Lips meets and falls in love with Hedvika.

In Episode 7, "The Beautiful Novice," an unnamed nun (in full habit, despite the title identifying her as only a novice), is being followed by two lecherous monks, who plan to attack her, into the nondescript depths of the monastery-castle hybrid building. As noted by Norman Holland and Leona Sherman, in the Gothic genre a castle here is a symbol of the heroine's body, combining "the heroine's fantasies about the castle with the fears that her body will be violated."[31] The men attack her, but suddenly finding strength to fight off her would-be rapists, the nun pushes them off and runs off into the dark, falling through a random hole in the floor. She falls through into the lower levels of the crypt, where Lips Tullian is passing through in his escape. He recognizes her as "his Hedvika," and they kiss in the crypts, only for Hedvika to spook and run

---

[29] Saudek and Weigel, *Lips Tullian,* 4.
[30] Saudek and Weigel, *Lips Tullian,* 7.
[31] Norman Holland and Leona Sherman, "Gothic Possibilities," *New Literary History* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1977): 281–82.

away. At this point, not only is Tullian pursued, but he continues to pursue Hedvika, with many adventures on the way.

Hedivka is nearly killed by Berta, but survives and ends up captive in a gypsy camp. Tullian goes to rescue Hedvika, and while searching for her in the gypsy camp he finds and frees three other girls who have been tied up there. He fights off the whole band of gypsies (which appears in the series as much a racialized artifact of the 1970s as one would imagine) and takes all four girls away on a horse back to the camp of his bandits. When Hedvika is revived, she and Tullian rekindle their romance, which infuriates Berta, and so Berta seeks out a witch in Episode 29, "The Love Potion I." This episode is illustrated in macabre pomp, with a decrepit witch, terrifying witches' familiars, an animated bat skeleton, and the witches working table is even outfitted with chicken legs—referencing the legendary Slavic witch, Baba Yaga. Episode 30, "The Love Potion II," ties up themes of the darkest Gothic adventure, and psychedelic 1970s pop culture imagery. The scenes are completed with caldrons, bats, snakes, graveyards, back cats, goblins, an owl, and a full, yellow moon appearing as if at the witches very fingertips. Berta receives a love potion with complicated instructions, which if followed improperly will lead to death. Berta swears that "in just a week, Lips Tullian will be mine!!!"[32] Back at Tullian's home, where he is living happily with Hedvika, Berta poisons Hedvika's bedside water jug with the intentionally incorrectly portioned love potion, which promptly kills Hedvika.[33]

Crushed, Tullian buries Hedvika in a glass coffin, Episode 35 "The Glass Coffin," carried through the woods in a procession by what look to be dwarfs and one extremely tall man who must walk in the adjacent creek in order to be of equal height. The funeral procession with the dwarves carrying the glass coffin looks very similar to the scene of the funeral procession through the woods in Disney's film Snow White and the Seven Dwarves.[34] Berta's love potion causes the wrong man to fall in love with her in the end.

By the end of Episode 50, the untitled last episode, Tullian is still in love only with Hedvika, and the four women who had pursued him (Tereza and Katerina of Freundberg are introduced in later episodes) make a toast and say goodbye as all the characters gather round in a

---

[32] Saudek and Weigel, *Lips Tullian,* 71.
[33] Saudek and Weigel, *Lips Tullian,* 72.
[34] Walt Disney, et al, *Snow White and the seven dwarfs,* (Burbank, Calif: Walt Disney Enterprises, 2001), film.

banquet dinner. It is revealed that the witch secretly gave Hedvika a cure during the night after her funeral, and Lips Tullian bids a happy ending to all his readers.

The series was published originally in Czech, and to date there is no collection of *Lips Tullian* translated into English. Both the writing and the illustrations contain plays on words or puns—too numerous to list here—many of which are very temporally and culturally specific. The episodes also contain various references to Saudek's contemporaries, including public personas, and Saudek's personal friends and family. Obvious advertisements for the magazine and other products appear as well. The magazine *Mladý svět* (Young World) was targeted at a younger audience, but *Lips Tullian* contains a large amount of very adult, sexual content, which would seem out of place in a youth magazine today. The character of Lips Tullian briefly returned to *Mladý Svět* in 1974, in the *Black Filip* (Černý Filip) series, but was not published beyond its seventh instalment.

# ANALYSIS

For the sake of this chapter I will focus on Episodes 21, 22, and 23. Previously in Episode 21, "Berta's Mission," Tullian asks the bandit Berta to get his beloved Hedvika out of the nunnery where she is living and bring the girl back to him. Berta, who is clearly very attracted to Tullian and would like to have him for herself, agrees to the mission with thoughts of revenge to motivate



**Figure 6** (Lips Tullian Episode 23, *On the Edge of Death*) © Saudek, Weigel 1972.

her. In Episode 21 "Berta's Plot," takes Berta finds the nunnery. Berta bribes her way into being accepted as a novice; appropriately clothed and armed with a dagger, she goes to find Hedvika. The nunnery has become a site of action, and the nun's story (a rescue plot, which is typical of the nun trope, as will be explored in Chapter 4) is at the center of focus for several episodes.

In Episode 23, "On the Edge of Death," two women are competing for the affection of the hero, Lips Tullian: the beautiful, blonde and very naïve Hedvika, and the dark and sinister Berta, who sports a dramatic unibrow. Hedvika has given up on life and love in previous episodes and has run away to be in a nunnery. Berta thought that this would make Tullian available to her, but the hero still pines for the fairer maiden, so Berta decides that it is time to plot Hedvika's murder. Several weapons are considered: a dagger, poison, a noose, crucifixion. When stabbing does not go as planned, Berta follows Hedvika as she climbs up to the tower to dramatically long for her love, Filip, but Berta catches her there and throws her from the tower.

Berta, though not always in nun's costume can be quite intimidating and goes through great lengths to get Lips Tullian to sleep with her. In Episode 30, titled "Love Potion II," Berta consults a witch and gets a nefarious potion to use on the hero. The visual elements of the episode are Gothic—the evil witch with her Renaissance style garb, the graveyard, the black cat, Berta's glowing red eyes—meanwhile the bottles which the potion is dispensed in are hilariously modern and medical looking.



**Figure 7** Detail (*Lips Tullian,* Episode 30) © Saudek, Weigel 1972.

The two comics—*The Leather Nun* as a stand-alone comic book and *Lips Tullian* as a collected series—feature several elements that link them, including the application of unintentional medievalizations, the direct influence of one comic book scene on the other, and similar themes arising directly or through their attempts to be subversive. Neither of these comics were initiated as serious medieval projects, nor were they intended to be parodies of serious research. Neither comic really sticks to a medievalist agenda so much as they apply medieval tropes and symbols as it suits the authors and artists. The unintentional medievalisms—which would be indistinguishable from references to evidence-based reconstructions of medieval artefacts or culture to both an author who has not specialized in medieval history or an uninformed reader—say volumes about the aims of the authors, in the same way a Freudian slip reveals the inner preoccupations of a speaker. These medievalisms are distinctly different from the work of eager amateur historians in that they are loosely worked into the comic book environment at the creator's convenience and rely on being more firmly grounded in pop culture references than evidence.

Even though the Middle Ages took place far from Crumb's native Philadelphia or Rodriguez's New York upbringing, European American heritage draws on medieval Europe in the construction on their own culture. In order to secure physical manifestations of this heritage, it is enthusiastically imported, or at least reconstructed, for North American consumption. Americans go through the financial and physical effort to bring physical evidence of the Middle Ages from Europe to American cities. These pieces are intended to be authentic and historic. When a physical artefact cannot be procured, efforts are directed to the domestic creation of hyperreal artefacts. This can be seen in the reconstruction of ancient architectural monuments, kitschy private castles, and Renaissance festivals that can be found throughout the United States. These are presented as meticulous reproductions, as real or realer than the originals, bordering on hyperrealism through their mass-produced excess and reliance on what is readily identified by the masses as "real," rather than giving in to the ambiguities and uncertainties that necessarily make up historic research. British scholar Julia Round, in her 2014 book *The Gothic in Comics*, demonstrates how this plays out in quite the same way in comics.[35] I would like to build on her research to show that in comics the visual background of the story world can validate the historicity of an object or idea, even when the following frames very clearly stray from any semblance of historical accuracy, because the validation itself is very powerful. As Nicolas Haydock examined the role of authenticity in his

---

[35] Julia Round, *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 83.

2008 book on film, *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages,*[36] in order to create the impression of sought-after authenticity, creators go through great pains to validate an artefact, whether it is imported or fabricated. As Haydock demonstrates, the presence of historical accuracy can even comprise the hype and identity of a comic book or film, as the efforts to be accurate are used in publicity.[37]

In *Lips Tullian,* Kája Saudek makes explicit visual references to a Disney-styled, fairy-tale castle with a fantastical crypt in the lower levels, and while the exterior of The Cloisters shown in *The Leather Nun* is presented as authentic, the interior is similarly fictionalized to feature a crypt. Firstly, why does the Czech illustrator, who has access to genuine medieval castle structures in the very city he lives in and even more in the region around him, make use of a foreign, pop culture artefact? The Czechs have a fantastic wealth of medieval heritage, well preserved even these days, ranging from the early medieval foundational myths of the Czech people, the Great Moravian Empire, to vampire legends in the countryside, King Charles IV and his role in developing the city of Prague, or Rudolph II's circle of alchemists and curiosities. The medieval history of the Czech people features heavily in the basic education system and everyday lives of modern citizens, who engage in school trips to significant medieval castles, are tested on the history of military and diplomatic deeds, and have access to living museums and regular public re-enactments of traditional festivals or events. These points are part of the public education program and the average Czech should have basic knowledge of famous medieval places, personas, and events. For children, in particular, the Middle Ages are reimagined again and again in the form of fairy tales which are filmed at authentic locations and based on folktales rooted in medieval or peasant culture. These films, their ideologies, and their philosophy make up the bread and butter of childhood imagination, just as superhero cartoons and their accompanying moral codes are fed to children in North America.

Significantly for Kája Saudek, the Middle Ages were also being produced in North America. Disney's rendition of the Snow-White story was screened in Czech Republic in 1938,

---

[36] Nickolas Haydock, *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 7.

[37] See Haydock, *Movie Medievalism*.

premiering at the Aleš Cinema on Wenceslas Square on August 16[38] and Helena Diesing reports that this was viewed by the young Kája Saudek and his brother.[39] Kája Saudek commented many times about the impression that this film left on him, and very similar imagery and references to Snow White appear in the *Lips Tullian* comics in the form of the castle from the film, appearing at the opening frame of the first installment, "Svatba" (The Wedding), through a band of dwarfs carrying the glass coffin of a fallen heroine through the woods in the last frame at the end of Episode 35. The costume design of the characters swings between modern hippie and late medieval. By preferring the American manufactured medievalism to its local conception, which would thus be tied to Czech identity, Saudek visually detaches his story from its Czech setting and realigns it more internationally.

The medievalism which appears in *Lips Tullian* and in *The Leather Nun* is not the classic medievalism of the Victorian period, but a type of pop culture neomedievalism, which falls within Lauren Mayer's definition of simulacrum. She describes medievalist simulacra as being built on the symbols and tropes of the past so thoroughly that all the nuance of historic research has been replaced with a militant amateurism which demands accuracy and is thus comfortable with the constructed nature of recreations because it provides a firmly established and agreed upon packaging of the Middle Ages.[40] Thus, the playfulness of neomedievalism is both self-aware of the artificiality of its constructs and yet unable to see beyond them, using simulacra as both the representation of the medieval and a parody of medievalism.

In the context of this chapter, simulacrum is the primary medium of medieval content in comics, which is described by Lauren S. Mayer as "not a degraded copy of a copy, but the product of the encounter of disparate elements, and cannot be defined in relation to a paradigm."[41] Disney's Snow White castle was conceived as a composite of famous and picturesque European castles, which were not necessarily themselves studied in their original medieval form, but in their modern construction, and then was repeated in so many permutations that the symbol of "medieval castle" became standardized, which makes it much more real than an actual medieval castle in the eyes of

---

[38] See J. H., "Před 80 lety sněhurka zbořila skepsi vůči kreslenému filmu," *Česka televize, ČT24*, 12.2017, https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/kultura/2339668-pred-80-lety-snehurka-zborila-skepsi-vuci-kreslenemu-filmu (accessed March 20, 2020).
[39] Helen Diesing and Tomáš Prokůpek, *Kája Saudek* (Prague: Arbor vitae, 2013), 17.
[40] See Lauren S. Mayer, "Simulacrum," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, eds. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 223.
[41] Mayer, "Simulacrum," 225.

the public. The simulacrum of a medieval castle is used by Saudek in addition to the actual medieval castles that he sometimes uses to represent specific locations with known landmarks.

The two comics share three different repeated simulacra: a castle-cloister-crypt hybrid building, the nun character, and a chivalric rescue. The three elements play dominant roles in the stories of the two comics and as visual components of the page. I will describe each simulacrum and then examine how it is applied in each of the two contexts.

The first simulacrum is a type of setting. It is distinctly a medieval building on the visual level, composed of Romanesque and Gothic architectural elements freely mounted beside one another and exaggerated to highlight the components which are most striking for a modern audience; that is columns, narrow windows, stone building material, turrets and towers, and high walls. However, without further reference to real architectural norms, this structure is described as comprising a castle, a cloister (or a castle which happens to function as a cloister), and in the lower levels a crypt. The conflation of castles being used to house monastic communities, or that either castles or cloisters (the area of a monastery which provides the housing and day-to-day buildings for the monks) should have a subterranean crypt is presented in both comics without further explanation or justification, allowing readers to assume that this arrangement is normal. The appearance of this architectural oddity in both comics, in addition to other medievalist comics, provides the range of circulation and repetition to codify a fabrication into simulacrum.

**Figure 8** (*The Leather Nun,* 21) © Last Gasp Eco-Funnies 1973.

The opening frames of *The Leather Nun* chapter "The Leather Nun 'Gets Hers'" (Figure 8) go through great pains to validate the authenticity of the building by taking careful note of the origins of the buildings. Though this information may satisfy the North American desire to vet historic objects in order to increase their credibility, and thus cultural value, the origin story is itself a fabrication. The idea that the stones of the building were flown over and reconstructed from an original medieval building in Europe is a more direct certificate of authenticity than the real story, which requires the knowledge of several key people and multiple phases of designing and building the museum,[42] The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Cloisters (known commonly as "The Cloisters") in Upper Manhattan, which houses the museum's medieval and renaissance art collections.[43] However, the origin story presented in *The Leather Nun* is simulacrum in the sense that it has been repeated among students visiting the museum, through tour guides, by history and art enthusiasts, for so long that any other explanation seems like a falsification.

Immediately after the authenticity of the building is established, the comic veers into fantasy, visually moving from the heavily vetted exterior to an expansive and imaginative interior. Any visitor to this site could confirm that a vast underground chamber such as the one pictured in the comic could not possibly exist underneath such a diminutive building, yet the reader is shown an expansive crypt attributed to that building. In the case of *The Leather Nun*, the work done in validating the building seems to prepare the reader's credulity to be stretched for the presentation of the crypt which is found after entering. Even visually on that page, the layout of the frames so that the exterior is "above" ground and the interior is "below," while the two scenes seem to carry on simultaneously, emphasize the formal, historic facade with a secret, corrupt crypt at the core. Here, the ostentatiously vetted exterior is created to contain an interior filled with simulacra which fuel the story.

The castle-cloister-crypt hybrid in *Lips Tullian* appears similarly constructed while fulfilling a different role. Kája Saudek has illustrated the exterior of these buildings with detail, placing them elegantly in the center of dramatic landscapes; it seems that the choice to use this setting was at least in part aesthetic. There is no need to validate the castle to the reader, because

---

[42] Though it is the author's experience than many visitors and locals believe a sort of urban legend that the building was transplanted as a whole, the correct history is described on their official website https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/history (accessed March 20, 2020).

[43] See "History of the Museum," accessed November 18, 2019, https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/history (accessed March 20, 2020).

the various castle versions either directly reference the castle in Disney's *Snow White*, or famous Czech castles, such as the Prague Castle and Karlštejn. However, the decision of which skin to apply follows a pattern of preferring fantasy over reality. Real castles are referenced only out of necessity when a specific place is referenced, such as depicting the Prague Castle when the characters are near Prague. Meanwhile, more action takes place in the castle simulacrum, which is more flexible, and can be illustrated to contain space for monastics as well as the ever-present crypt. Buildings which outwardly appear as castles are used to house nuns, bandits, or royalty, and can have great halls, churches, mysterious corridors and stairways, or towers inside them. As Julia Round examined the theme of the crypt in Gothic comics,[44] here too the crypt appears as an element of the building's medievalist, Gothic simulacrum.



**Figure 9** Detail (*Lips Tullian* Episode 7) © Saudek, Weigel 1972.

The crypt serves as a setting for all dark, mysterious, and deviant acts. It provides the artists an opportunity to decorate the background with skeletons, weak torches, spider webs, and ominous statues. The crypt is also where illicit sexual acts occur. In *The Leather Nun*, as a comic more focused on sexual deviance than *Lips Tullian*, all the action takes place in the crypt, and all the

---

[44] See Round, *Gothic,* 92–111.

action is either violent or sexually explicit. Using the crypt in a similar way, in *Lips Tullian*. As mentioned in Episode 7, "The Beautiful Novice," the female protagonist is chased down to the crypt by a pair of monks threatening rape, only to be rescued by the Lips Tullian himself in the following episode "In the Company of the Dead" (Episode 8), at which point the sexual element changes tone to become romantic rather than aggressive.

Both comics connect the crypt scenes with a nun character. The nun herself is simulacrum in the sense that her habit is vaguely Benedictine but without any adherence to the actual rules,



**Figure 10** Detail (*Lips Tullian* Episode 8) © Saudek, Weigel 1972.

and her role as a sexual object is always emphasized while any attempt to depict her life as a nun is omitted. Her religious vocation is rather a provocative barrier to the realization of her heteronormative sexual potential than something that she has dedicated herself to in earnest. The abstraction of her monastic habit is enough to indicate the identity of the character as a nun, despite

being only simulacrum, and thus communicate to the reader her supposed chastity. The nun simulacra appear more titillating in *The Leather Nun,* as the nun herself is the driver of overt sexual deviance, engaging in suggestions of sado-masochistic bondage and shown in states of undress, while it is only used as a foil to the romantic aspirations of the hero in *Lips Tullian*. Just as the medieval crypt is a simple instrument in communicating the notion of a place for dark and secretive deeds,[45] the nun is also symbolic of a particular medievalist simulacrum of an ideal of a supposedly

---

[45] See Round, *Gothic,* 56.

pure, untouched, and pious female.[46] The purpose of focusing on this particular medievalist simulacrum will be discussed further on in regard to the choices of the creators.

The final simulacrum is a narrative element, that of the chivalric rescue, which is a medievalist story trope described by Susan Griffin in her 1996 study on the history of nun escape narratives, which started to appear as popular reading in the Victorian era, but which continued to be reused throughout the twentieth century.[47] This is built on the medievalist trope of a knight or hero saving a damsel in distress. In *Lips Tullian* this is carried out directly, as Lips rescues his love interest from two perverse monks. The situation in *The Leather Nun* is subverted, however, in a way that only functions in reference to the reader's knowledge of the original simulacrum, making it truly neo-medievalist. The male character from the two episodes of *The Leather Nun* examined in this chapter is the opposite of a knightly hero, appearing weak and small, and in constant shock and wonder; he is the one who needs to be saved, and ultimately rescues himself from castration and other threats posed by the nuns. There are still damsels in distress in the sidelines (for example: a naked woman being tortured by the eponymous nun), but the knightly trope is reversed.

While *The Leather Nun* very conspicuously references and subverts standard simulacra (the ridiculously campy crypt, the perverse nun, the helpless male protagonist), *Lips Tullian* plays up the standard simulacra to create a subversion of social norms of the 1970s within his own graphic language. Saudek accepts and utilizes the expectations of the male and female leads; Lips Tullian is tall, dark, and muscular, his love interest at the beginning of the story is the ideal waifish blonde of the hippie era. The story and settings are technically within the scope of typical Czech fairytales. However, even as the love story plays out exactly as it should on paper, it is delivered wrapped with sarcasm. Within Saudek's body of work outside of *Lips Tullian*, he draws himself— as well as his personal heroes—as lean and scrappy, while his parody of the male ideal is represented as brawny Aryan airheads. On that spectrum, Lips Tullian falls into the latter category, and his character is written as a shallow, narcissistic simpleton, who always lands on his feet as a hero should but lacks honorable motives for his adventures and succeeds through brute strength, and a lot of help from his female admirers, rather than through his own ingenuity.

---

[46] It is common knowledge that medieval nuns could also be widows, unwed mothers, or women seeking to retire from public life, not just young virgins.

[47] See Susan M. Griffin, "Awful Disclosures: Women's Evidence in the Escaped Nun's Tale," *PMLA* 111, no. 1 (January 1996): 93–107, https://doi.org/10.2307/463136 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Likewise, Lips's love interest is an innocent, adolescent-looking blonde with long, ironed hair, and a complete lack of agency in her own life. She is a typical fairytale princess but exaggerated to the logical limits of that trope. She stands in stark contrast to the female protagonists of Saudek's other works, who are busty, energetic, and a little sinister. Saudek drew the women involved in his personal life this way as well, emphasizing their boundless hourglass figures, wild eyes, uncontrollable hair, and strong sensuality, such as using his wife Hana Saudková as the model for the *Super Hana* series. These types of female characters appear also in *Lips Tullian*, but they are affable antagonists, who try to foil the female lead's plan and trap the hero for themselves. They are technically the villains, but they are much more engaging than the heroine, and take up significantly more space in the story, both visually on the page and narratively.

In a larger scholarly survey on ideology in Czech comics, Vít Schmarc argues that medievalist simulacra were used by film makers to produce propagandistic fairy tales and also in comics such as *Lips Tullian.*[48] The presentation and subtle rejection of medieval simulacra was one of many ways for Saudek to use the comic platform to communicate his anti-regime ideology and escape oppression, at least for a time. Schmarc points out how Saudek used a similar strategy in his comic adaptation of the popular TV show "30 případů majora Zemana" (The 30 Cases of Major Zeman), in which he exaggerated the comic book escapism so much that the ideology that the series was outwardly aiming to represent became trite and artificial in the comic world, to the point where this covert act of rebellion attracted the attention of authorities.[49] Tomáš Prokůpek notes in his biographic research on Saudek's work that Saudek's own interest lied in Americanism,[50] and the wild-eyed women represented the freedom and adventure he saw in Western movies, which he had adored since childhood. His first wife, who had dark hair and shockingly large eyes, was nicknamed 'the Indian,'[51] and that female ideal stuck with him and in his illustrations throughout his career.

---

[48] Vít Schmarc, "Unreliable Lines of History: Czech Comics 1922-2012," in *Signály z neznáma: Český komiks 1922-2012 (Signals from the Unknown: Czech Comics 1922-2012)*, ed. Tomáš Prokůpek (Prague: Arbor vitae, 2012), 196.

[49] See Schmarc, "Unreliable Lines of History," 210.

[50] Tomáš Prokůpek, "Dreams Under the Hooves of Totalitarianism," Signály z neznáma: Český komiks 1922-2012 (Signals from the Unknown: Czech Comics 1922-2012), ed. Tomáš Prokůpek, (Prague: Arbor vitae, 2012), 269.

[51] Diesing and Prokůpek, *Kája Saudek,* 78.

In *Lips Tullian*, which was discontinued in 1973, Saudek occasionally incorporated Americanism in his comic illustrations more openly. Faint busts of Batman and Superman can be seen outlined in the clouds in the first frame featuring a fairy-tale castle, appearing in the eighth frame of Episode 44. The scene shows a hero bravely riding up to the castle to rescue the maiden in despair and the presence of the American superheroes aligns the medievalist simulacrum of a chivalric rescue. Here the medievalist simulacrum is supported by referencing the American superhero genre, linking the fairytale rescue with a modern model of heroics.

It is not enough to define and examine the codes used in these two comics. The real subject of inquiry is why both artists utilized the same simulacra, selected from the wide range of all the possible medievalist simulacra, and what function do they perform during the consumption of these comics by the intended ideal reader, using Round's examination of the Gothic in comics as a model.[52] I would like to focus on the use of nuns because they necessitate the castle-cloister-crypt simulacrum and are exclusive to it. The castle-cloister-crypt simulacrum in these comics is constructed to contain the nun character and to be entered by the male protagonist, as well as being the site of the chivalric rescue in *Lips Tullian* and the male protagonist's self-rescue in *The Leather Nun*. What work do the nuns and their surroundings perform for the consumer of these comics?

Though the Middle Ages, as approached by scholars, are not described as homogenously white, medievalism in the form produced by popular media historically is. The medievalist setting is a path around modern political correctness, describing the role of the perception of purity in medievalist literature. Amy Kaufman argues that the whiteness of the simulacra is so deeply embedded that it is unquestionable, as doing so would seem to be an attack on "fidelity to the past."[53] Kaufman further notes that the historic authenticity of "nineteenth-century American medievalism was often code for white male authority, female submission, and the disappearance of people of color who could be 'cleansed' out of the southern gentleman's paradise just as they appear to be absent from Western medieval narrative."[54] It returned as a counter weight to the suffragette's movement, and the reappearance of this type of medievalism in the era of the civil rights in the 1970s America bodes ill in several ways. Alternatively, medievalism could be used to tie publicly accepted tropes to nods at American popular culture under the nose of Communist

---

[52] This approach was also used by Julia Round (2014) in examining the Gothic in comics.
[53] See Amy S. Kaufman, "Purity," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 205.
[54] Kaufman, "Purity," 202.

authorities. Medievalism in these two comics functions as a path to communicate a more unseemly ideology to the ideal reader.

Louise D'Arcens argues that one of the applications of medievalism is a "nostalgic corrective to modernity." [55] In this function, the medievalist content is not only a fictive presentation of the past, it is aware of its disconnect with the present. By conspicuously placing the medievalist simulacra in contrast to the modern world, the author can elicit a value judgement from the ideal reader, playing on the reader's anxieties about modernity, as Louise D'Arcens puts it. Kaufman notes that this tactic was applied by not only medieval romantics, but also by the Ku Klux Klan, Nazi Germany, and fundamentalist sects of religious movements, all of which imagine the medieval era as a pristine space in which whiteness and masculinity assume a prevalence naturalized by the soft focus of medievalism's pseudo-historical lens.[56] Or, as Nickolas Haydock frames the practicality of this in the modern era, "movie medievalism is history in a hurry, driven by the nostalgia of popular culture, as well as the commercialization of paranoia in global capitalism."[57]

Although the objective of this chapter is not to point out historic inaccuracies, it is necessary to emphasize the difference between the medievalist conception of racial demographics and the scholarly understanding of diversity in the Middle Ages, and why these two perspectives are significantly different. It is common knowledge that the different cities of Europe were well connected to the southern and eastern Mediterranean through trade, travel, and communication throughout most of the Middle Ages. However, medievalism sees this differently, preferring to reconstruct medieval people as homogenously Caucasian, preferably of a fairer tone, extended to an unspoken but understood racial purity and purity in social norms, including roles for men and women. For an American publication, the lack of diversity could be excused by the temporal setting, as false as the belief was, thus detouring around the progress of the Civil Rights movement to place non-whites in the public eye or female characters in any role beyond that of a sexual object.

The assertion of whiteness as a historic norm is tied in with the role of the nun character. By using a medieval setting, the creators of the comic are allowed to apply what they perceived as

---

[55] Louise D'Arcens, "Presentism," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 185.

[56] See Kaufman, "Purity," 199.

[57] Nickolas Haydock, *Movie Medievalism,* 5.

medieval norms regarding gender. As Susan Casteras describes in her study of the historic portrayal of nuns, perceptions of gender in the Middle Ages were primarily informed by the Pre-Raphaelites and Romantics who applied their Victorian social norms to heavily skewed medieval imagery and literature.[58] The medieval chivalric romances became a convenient way to strengthen the divide of the sexes into two spheres: the weak yet saintly female in the domestic sphere and the male acting as the champion of the family in the rough and corrupt public sphere. By confirming their own social norms through medievalism, the Victorians left an extensive and artistically exquisite trail of medievalisms behind them, which proved more enduring in the popular imagination than innovative research that attempted to clear up those misconceptions in the twentieth century. Beloved of the medievalist gender roles is that of the knight, the pinnacle of masculine heroism. The medievalist knight is in constant pursuit of a lady, to woo and rescue her, and if she is taken by another or dies, to find another lovely object of affection. This archetype is not a family man, or a nation builder, or a scholar; just an adventuring philanderer.

As the medievalist model presented submissive women and manly men, it attracted the types of people who wished to maintain a patriarchal social order. In a time when the role of men in society and their role in private relationships with the newly emancipated female population (however, the concept of the emancipation of women was different in Czechoslovakia due to the Communistic principles of the inclusion of all citizens in the work process), a return to a social order which placed men back on top could be found attractive by some readers.

I argue that is understood and turned on its head in both the comics. In *The Leather Nun*, the male character is cartoonishly meek, small and weaker than the archetypal knight, and entirely sexually unappealing in an exaggerated manner. The knight exists as the mirror image against which a perverse opposite can be created. In *Lips Tullian*, the eponymous hero is brawny and handsome, pursues women in a knightly fashion, but, as previously mentioned, appears as a bit of an airhead. Saudek displays obedience to the trope, as the medieval hero is one of the tropes utilized by propagandistic media, as cited in Schmarc, only so long as he can thumb his nose at it while playing along. While neither artist embraces the knight as their own hero, they install the medievalistic understanding of chivalric society to put their male character in the forefront and establish an expectation of submissive females in the background.

---

[58] See Susan P. Casteras, "Virgin Vows: The Early Victorian Artists' Portrayal of Nuns and Novices," *Victorian Studies* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 157–84.

As Kaufman notes: "White male identity, medievalism reveals, is symbiotic: its power is elevated by white female vulnerability. The inverse was also held to be true: female independence and autonomy were thought to weaken men."[59] The reversal of this trope in *The Leather Nun* plays a double role in making space for sexual deviance as well as expanding the general Gothic theme of the crypt as described in Round, by introducing the "monstrous woman" as castrator, which is described by Cristina Santos in her study of female magical beings in literature.[60] While the creators of *The Leather Nun* acknowledge this formula to construct an opposite, and thus perverse, environment, Saudek applies it full-heartedly. The female characters appearing in *Lips Tullian* can go so far as to be evil and scheming, but they are never a match for their male counterparts, and they always fall under the romantic spell of the hero.

Finally, the medievalist context provides permission to engage in graphic violence. As Haydock dissects it, the application of the "medieval" in pop culture media connotes that which falls outside of civilized society.[61] It is thus unsurprising that both comics go beyond adventurous fight scenes and instead torture appears frequently as an element of the medieval in these comics, without explanation. These scenes appear appropriately in the crypt, where all that is dark and forbidden is allowed to take place, according to the standards of the simulacrum. If the perception of the authentic Middle Ages as inherently violent, building on Haydock and applying Kaufman's theory of purity, then if follows that some form of violence must be included to add credibility to the depiction. Both *Lips Tullian* and *The Leather Nun* include graphic visuals of the torture of especially female characters, which is gratuitously exploitative and, again, indicative of the interests of the ideal reader.

Round applies David Punter's theory of the Gothic in literature to comics, and the medieval appears here too as "a response to social trauma—a subversive and critical way of addressing problems in society."[62] During the reconfiguration of the social sphere in the United States with both the continuing effects of social movements and the sexual revolution, Czechoslovakia was also in the throes of extreme stress from when the Prague Spring was quashed by the Soviets and the Normalization period was initiated. Comics built on medievalist simulacra become a refuge

---

[59] Kaufman, "Purity," 201.
[60] See Cristina Santos, *Unbecoming Female Monsters: Witches, Vampires, and Virgins* (London: Lexington Books, 2017).
[61] Haydock, *Movie Medievalism,* 8.
[62] Round, *Gothic,* 55.

for the ideal reader in this time; on the one hand confirming the standing of white males who may be feeling their traditional position in society threatened, while on the other hand acting as a vehicle to communicate subversive ideology by pitting neo-medievalism against the established medievalist tropes. In this process, the simulacra become more real than any legitimately researched information about the Middle Ages, and Pam Clements, in her examination of the conception of authenticity in medievalism, notes that the question of authenticity becomes secondary to the importance of the function of simulacra for the consumer.[63]

The application of medieval simulacra was not limited to these comics alone. In American media there was a significant rise in interest in the Gothic around the 1960s and 1970s. The inclination to set stories in crypts with occultist mysteries implied in the background could be seen in other media, such as regular showings of horror films on television.

There is one final element at play here, which does not pose a comparative point, but ought to be noted: the role of Americanism and American medievalism as it appears in *Lips Tullian*. Rather than avoiding the perceived decadence of Western culture (as Schmarc explains),[64] Saudek embraced it and applied it where he could. It is unclear if this was an infatuation with American culture itself, or if American culture was the only obvious symbolic tool that was positioned as a countercultural reference point and influence in Saudek's world. In the case of *Lips Tullian*, his references to Disney or Batman and his subversion of fairy-tale tropes within his presentation of a historic story world were not so much an infantilization of the material, but a communication of ideology, while at the same time he was stating that Lips Tullian is *not* supposed to be read as a Superman.[65]

To summarize, both comics make use of medievalist elements: the castle, the cloister, the crypt, and the nun. For all these elements, simulacra prove more powerful than readily available medieval material that has been vetted by research. However, rather than holding static meaning, these simulacra deliver a range of meanings dependent on context and usage, perhaps harnessed by the author as an accidental manifestation of cultural currents which the artist freely expresses. In this case, even though neither comic makes expressed intentions to address medieval or medievalist materials, an examination of the medievalist elements can help create a deeper and

---

[63] See Pam Clements, "Authenticity," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, eds. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 23.

[64] Schmarc, "Unreliable Lines of History," 198.

[65] See J. T. and Kája Saudek, "Lips Tullian Není Superman," *Mladý Svět*, August 5, 1972.

more complex interpretation of the work and reveal how much medievalism is applied in popular media, and to what effect.

## CHAPTER 3: SIMULACRA OF PLACE: ADAPTATIONS OF KAFKA'S *THE CASTLE*

This chapter looks at another set of comics which now integrate medievalism in the process of adapting Franz Kafka's novel *The Castle* (*Der Schloss*, 1926) into comic book, with illustrations again by Crumb and Saudek, and a third illustrator: Jaromír Švejdík. In addition to the medievalism of the original text's adaptation of the grail quest, medievalism appears as a part of the transcoding process[66] of the literary text to a visual language, and a shift in explanation of the origin of the story from which Franz Kafka supposedly adapted his novel from, from one medieval myth to another.

### *THE CASTLE* AS A MEDIEVALIST *BILDUNGSROMAN* BASED ON *PARZIVAL*

Though there are many interpretations of Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, I would like to focus on John Winkelman's conclusion that the unfinished novel represents a *Bildungsroman*, or educational journey, as the reader follows the progress of K., the protagonist of the novel, in Purgatory as he tries to resolve the sin of pride which he manifests throughout his meetings in the village and his probably death by suicide which is implied throughout the text,[67] as will be examined in more detail in this chapter. Winkelman is working from the original German text, and builds on Max Brod and has been confirmed by more recent scholars such as Jonathan Ullyot,[68] who link of *The Castle* to Wolfram von Eschenbach's thirteenth century work *Parzival,* which is a medieval epic poem on the grail theme. Von Eschenbach's poem is based on the earlier medieval *Perceval; ou le conte du Graal*, the unfinished romance by Chretien de Troyes, and the grail myth in general.[69]

The Castle is a novel set in a village which is dominated, both physically and figuratively, by a Castle—I will proceed to write this with a capital "C" to signify the weight of the building, the idea, of the Castle, which is almost a character in the novel. The story follows the character K., a stranger to the village, in his mission to get into the Castle and speak to Count Westwest. K. is joined by two assistants, Arthur and Jeremiah, and becomes engaged in a romantic relationship with Frieda, a barmaid who is also the former lover of the Klamm, an official from the Castle who

---

[66] Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 7–8. Defined as "a shift of medium . . . or genre . . . or a change of frame and therefore context."

[67] John Winkelman, "An Interpretation of Kafka's 'Das Schloss,'" *Monatshefte* 64, no. 2 (1972): 115–31.

[68] Jonathan Ullyot, "Kafka's Grail Castle," *German Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2010): 431–48.

[69] See Juliette Wood, *The Holy Grail: History and Legend* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012).

is K.'s contact person. The story opens with K.'s arrival to the village, where is it ambiguously written whether K. has been invited or not, and K.'s exact reason for being in the village is obscure. K. stays at the town inn, and is notified that he is to report to the Mayor, who offers him a position as a school caretaker. K. seeks contact with the Castle in various ways: he uses his lover Frieda to get closer to Klamm, he makes the acquaintance of Barnabas, who is a messenger of the Castle, K. tries to walk up to the Castle, he tries to take a carriage there, and he tries to gain contact with any secretary or official associated with the Castle administration. K.'s efforts are derailed by his poor working relationship with the school teacher, under whom K. has been subjugated, and K. is distracted by visits with Barnabas's family, where he learns of their interactions with the Castle, which lead to their public shame. All of K.'s efforts to get into the Castle fall short, and K.'s cold utilitarianism towards his assistants and his lover Frieda are laid bare and criticized, and the novel concludes before K.'s relationships are repaired, or K. manages to reach the Castle.

Winkelman makes an excellent argument for *The Castle* to be read as a *Bildungsroman*, inspired by the grail quest story, a conclusion that he comes to by closely reading the text rather than applying a contemporary theoretical framework, such as Marxist, feminist, or post-modernist theories. As he explains in his article, the eponymous Castle acts as an abstract authority challenging K. to purge his soul of the sin of suicide. Winkelman theorizes that the possible conclusion of this story would see K. as casting aside his pride and arrogance to gain salvation for himself and the other unredeemed souls trapped in the village, which represents Purgatory. This interpretation accounts for the otherworldliness of the village: the discomforting temperatures, the permanent dark winter, the bridge one crosses to arrive, the seemingly infinite boundaries of the village, and the slippery inaccessibility of the Castle itself.

This theory accounts for K.'s inexplicably rude behavior towards others, the way he uses people for his own gain, the complex side story about Barnabas, a villager who holds the honored position as castle messenger, and his family, and the revelations regarding the relationships between K. and representatives of the castle (K.'s assistants, the Major, Klamm, etc.). Most importantly, this interpretation provides an explanation for the implied lie of K.'s position as a land surveyor and his reasons to be in the village at all, in light of his later confession to another profession and answers the question as to why he is there, why he cannot return home and why he unflaggingly seeks better footing in relation to the Castle and, ostentatiously, with Baron Westwest. In the comic book adaptations examined in this chapter, those details from the book

which would support Winkelman's interpretation are omitted or reframed to support the interpretation of the adaptors, who remake the story to serve their ideological stance.

The evidence which Winkelman provides to support the "*Parzival* in Purgatory" theory is summarized in the following four paragraphs:

-   K. was clearly never summoned by anyone, nor is he a surveyor. He interprets the Castle's acceptance of his improvised lie as a challenge. K. even admits that it is a lie.[70] K. was most likely a tailor in his past life, as evidenced by his knowledge and interest in the Landlady's dresses.[71]

-   The village is spatially endless and has an unknown number of inhabitants, one must travel a long distance and cross a bridge to enter. There is a castle official for each villager this implies that the number of officials is infinite to accommodate the endless village,[72] and the village is radically unrelated to the world that K. knows, which is often commented on. The journey made to get there is rather qualitative than spatial.

-   Many villagers are sick or old. The lively villagers are those in a similar "suicide" situation as K.; Winkelman sees this as an indication that K. is in the realm of the dead. It also explains why K.'s betrothal to Frieda would be valid when it seems that he has a wife and children "at home."[73]

-   K. laments "If only I were here by accident, not on purpose,"[74] Winkelman suggests that the bridge crossing which opens the story can be understood in that K. has crossed the river Styx without permission (death without God's leave). It also explains the villagers' insistence that he does not belong there, and their avoidance of him as someone bad. There is also the possibility of wordplay; as Erich Heller pointed out, 'surveyor' is '*Vermesser*' in German, a word which echoes the noun *Vermessenheit* or 'hubris,' the sin of pride which is committed in the act of suicide.[75]

---

[70] Franz Kafka, *The Castle,* trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York, NY: Schocken, 1951), 246; I also compared this with: Franz Kafka, *The Castle: A New Translation Based on the Restored Text By Franz Kafka*, trans. Mark Harman (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1998), 308; Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. Anthea Bell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 274.

[71] See Winkelman, "An Interpretation," 120.

[72] See Winkelman, "An Interpretation," 121.

[73] Kafka*, The Castle,* trans. Muir and Muir, 28.

[74] Kafka*, The Castle,* trans. Muir and Muir, 37.

[75] Erich Heller, "The World of Franz Kafka," in *The Disinherited Mind* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1952), 169.

Winkelman's interpretation provides a rebuttal for all others. Should this be interpreted as a story of disillusionment with bureaucracy? No: K. himself admits that he is not really a land surveyor, and the attentions of the castle are aimed at his moral (not professional) reformation—to gracefully lower himself before others as the school grounds keeper, to be empathetic and kind towards his assistants, to see Frieda as a person and not just a means to an ends—nothing is done in regards to his appointment as a land surveyor. There is open reflection about K.'s failure with each of these challenges, and models of the choice to seek forgiveness or not are clearly laid out in the long chapter describing Amalie's act of pride, and her parents' hopeless endeavors to seek forgiveness on her behalf (and her refusal to bend), which leads to the downfall and prolonged suffering of the family. Winkelman warns against ideological interpretations, saying:

> Since it is an absurd novel—so they think—it must be a novel of the absurd, in other words a reflection of the absurdity of the world we live in. But all that is absurd is their interpretation of the novel and their implied interpretation of the world—an interpretation definitely not shared by Kafka.[76]

If *The Castle* is a *Bildungsroman* set in Purgatory, and an adaptation of the medieval romance *Parzival*, then it is itself a medievalist work. The Middle High German poem treats the themes of humility, compassion, sympathy, and the quest for spirituality, acted through the lens of chivalry. The story cuts off before K. finally reaches his goal and finds his way into the castle, to obtain his Holy Grail: an explanation as to why he exists and what his purpose is, which is universal human question. However, *The Castle* does show K. circling closer towards finding a way to redeem Barnabas and his family, and to redeem himself, in the eyes of the other villagers, and thus in the eyes of castle.

## ADAPTATION ISSUES

A comic book adaptation of Franz Kafka's *The Castle* faces a range of issues in the adaptation process: how the story world (or heterocosm, as Linda Hutcheon terms it[77]) is adapted, the balance between fidelity to a well-known original, and indigenizing the story to a modern medium and modern audience.

---

[76] Winkelman, "An Interpretation," 118.
[77] Hutcheon and O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 14.

*The Castle* contains language describing how hard it is to actually see things, and though it contains references to modern inventions, such as electric lights and phone service, the setting is rather unhinged from time. This leads to a range of complications for how to illustrate what is described as impossible to see. Having encountered similar issues in adaptation projects, in the introduction to the graphic adaptation of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, Art Spiegelman (1986, 1991)[78] explains that he began a quest to join some serious novelists to provide scenarios for skilled graphic artists and thus turned to adaptations of popular literature. This process led to a collaboration with Paul Auster, but Spiegelman saw problems with using *City of Glass*:

> For all its playful references to pulp fiction, *City of Glass* is a surprisingly nonvisual work at its core, a complex web of words and abstract ideas in playfully shifting narrative styles. (Paul warned me that several attempts to turn his book into a film script had failed miserably.)[79]

Indeed, Kafka is also "nonvisual" in the sense that the complex descriptions are meant to leave the reader afloat in their own interpretation, one example of this being the lack on any concrete description the bug in "Metamorphosis," despite the constant presence of the bug himself and descriptions of the reactions that the bug causes. Hutcheon notes that absence and silence are powerful in text, but a challenge to the adapter who must dramatize that which is not there,[80] which is no less in the case in Kafka's text, which is verbose in its description of absences. How does Kafka, then, describe the Castle? This is the main question of the novel, both for readers and characters—although the characters never pose the question quite so directly—focusing instead on more immediate goals which invariably involve the Castle. In the famous opening of the novel, the Castle is ominously present even in its absence:

> It was late evening when K. arrived. The village lay under deep snow. There was no sign of the Castle hill, fog and darkness surrounded it, not even the faintest gleam of light

---

[78] Art Spiegelman, "Introduction," in *Paul Auster's City of Glass*, ed. Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli (New York: Avon, 2004), i–ii.

[79] Spiegelman, "Introduction," ii. [Parenthesis in original.]

[80] Hutcheon and O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 71.

suggested the large Castle. K. stood a long time on the wooden bridge that leads from the main road to the village, gazing upward into the seeming emptiness.[81]

Which is translated by the Muirs more poetically as:

The Castle hill was hidden, veiled in mist and darkness, nor was there even a glimmer of light to show that a castle was there. On the wooden bridge leading from the main road to the village K. stood for a long time gazing into the illusory emptiness above him.[82]

One subcategory of medievalism is the Gothic (referring to medievalist conceptions of the late medieval period specifically), which has been visually codified in comics as being connected with the dark, monstrous, shifting, and ruined. The description of the Castle hill as hidden, "veiled in mist and darkness," suggests an element of secrecy and perhaps deceit in the Castle's presentation. Does the Castle inhabit an "illusory emptiness"[83] or is it merely an empty illusion? Despite the darkness, K. is clearly aware of the Castle. Indeed, why else would he stand for a long time gazing into the darkness above him? The Castle is the fundamental goal of K.'s quest from its beginning. Because the Castle is the focus of the opening scene, it forces illustrators to make concrete decisions about its visualization.

The next morning K. sets out from the Bridge Inn and sees "sharply outlined in the clear air and made even sharper by the snow[84]" ("clearly defined in the glittering air,"[85] as the Muirs have it). This clarity, however, is deceptive. At first, "distant prospect of the Castle satisfied K.'s expectations," despite its appearance as "a rambling pile consisting of innumerable small buildings closely packed together." [86] But in the following paragraph, upon closer approach, K. is "disappointed in the Castle; it was after all only a wretched-looking town, a huddle of village houses, whose sole merit, if any, lay in being built of stone; but the plaster had long since flaked off and the stone seemed to be crumbling away."[87] The Castle's appearance is decidedly at odds

---

[81] Kafka, *The Castle,* trans. Harman, 25. Note, Anthea Bell does not capitalize the word "castle" in the translation, but Mark Harman does, as do the Muirs.
[82] Kafka, *The Castle,* trans. Muir and Muir, 4.
[83] Kafka, *The Castle,* trans. Muir and Muir, 4.
[84] Kafka, *The Castle,* trans. Harman, 30.
[85] Kafka, *The Castle,* trans. Muir and Muir, 9.
[86] Kafka, *The Castle,* trans. Muir and Muir, 9.
[87] Kafka, *The Castle,* trans. Muir and Muir, 9.

with its power and authority in the village. But, regarding the Castle, appearances are always deceptive and subject to revision.

K. reflects on his former life (which would be his earthly life before the suicide, according to Winkelman) and the sacred occupied a well-defined place in relation to the human community: the church tower is rooted in the "earthly," yet soars "unfalteringly" heavenward, with "a clearer meaning than the muddle of everyday life."[88] This description suggests a cosmic order well justified by the spiritual nobility symbolized by the church tower. The novel contrasts this idealized symbol of a church tower from K.'s past with the Castle's tower in the novel's present:

> The tower above him here—the only one visible—the tower of a house, as was now evident, perhaps of the main building, was uniformly round, part of it graciously mantled with ivy, pierced by small windows that glittered in the sun—with a somewhat maniacal glitter—and topped by what looked like an attic, with battlements that were irregular, broken, fumbling, as if designed by the trembling or careless hand of a child, clearly outlined against the blue. It was as if a melancholy-mad tenant who ought to have been kept locked in the topmost chamber of his house had burst through the roof and lifted himself up to the gaze of the world.[89]

There is a definite hierarchy between village and Castle, but the exact nature of the Castle's authority remains obscure. Significantly, the boundary between the village and the Castle is hard to define. Schwarzer, the son of an under-castellan, reminds K. upon his arrival of the fact that "whoever lives here or passes the night here does so, in manner of speaking, in the Castle itself."[90] And the schoolteacher remarks: "There is no difference between the peasantry and the Castle."[91] Yet, when K. sets out to reach the Castle on his first day in the village, it recedes, like the horizon to the traveler, ever farther into the distance. Communication with the Castle is difficult if not impossible. The Castle fits into Leona Sherman's definition of a castle in literature as an amorphous space which may "accept many different projections of unconscious material" and

---

[88] Kafka, *The Castle,* trans. Muir and Muir, 9.
[89] Kafka, *The Castle,*trans. Muir and Muir, 9–11
[90] Kafka, *The Castle,* trans. Muir and Muir, 4.
[91] Kafka, *The Castle,* trans. Muir and Muir, 10.

further that it "threatens shame, agony, annihilation—and desire."[92] Kafka's castle is seemingly everywhere and nowhere, more threatening precisely through its inconsistency, again building on the impression of a dark, shifting, Gothic monstrosity.

There is one final issue with attempting a visual adaptation of the text, and this arises from the translation choices which lead to the use of the term 'castle' as opposed to a less medievally charged, and more correct, translation. In Czech, a language in which Kafka was also proficient, "*zámek*" has a similar play on words, meaning both a palace and a lock. The translation of *der Schloss* to the English word "castle" is simply incorrect; in Central Europe these two words designate substantially different buildings, both historically, architecturally, with different implications in the usage of the building. Had the first translators, Willa and Edwin Muir, been more sensitive to at least the building type implied by the word *der Schloss*, they would have translated it as 'palace,' 'chateau,' or 'manor,' but it has been noted that their competence in Czech and German were rudimentary and heavily aided by dictionaries and poetic license.[93] I would personally argue for the term 'chateau' because that appears most often in the English translations of such buildings found in this area, which would be called *der Schloss* or *zámek* in local languages.[94] The play on words would be lost, but at least the type of building and all the associations with it would be preserved. Yet, they did not, and the title *The Castle* stuck not only as the name of the book, but necessarily as the term used for one of the most important inanimate characters of the book.

Reportedly, the Muirs spent less than four years in Central Europe before undertaking the translation, in which case they might have been ignorant about the unique characteristics of these two types of buildings as they appear in the region. In the Muirs' own Scotland, structures designated as castles, palaces, manors, and chateaus overlap much of the same cultural connotations—they share similar building styles, appearing semi-fortified with turrets, gatehouses, crenellated parapets detailing the walls, and so forth, and are primarily mid- to late-medieval

---

[92] Holland and Sherman, "Gothic Possibilities," 282.

[93] See Mark Harman, "'Digging the Pit of Babel': Retranslating Franz Kafka's 'Castle,'" *New Literary History*, Special issue, *Problems of Otherness: Historical and Contemporary*, 27, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 298.

[94] For example, the building at Mikulov in Moravia, which is called "chateau" in English. Resting on a low rise between larger hills with the town skirting it, it was built around the original medieval castle by the Liechtensteins. Despite its origins as a 'castle' site, its designation has correctly changed to reflect the change in its form.

construction works. Additionally, all these different types of buildings can be found in isolation outside of towns and village centers. Perhaps as poets and authors of fiction they intentionally chose to mis-translate the word to more heavily emphasize the significance of the abstract yet infinitely consequential entity that pervades the book. Max Brod, whose edition of the text the Muirs were working from, emphasized the spiritual symbolism of *der Schloss,*[95] and perhaps the Muirs sought to reproduce the symbolic richness of this element by being more flexible in their translation. I do not have confirmation one way or the other as to the Muirs' inner thoughts leading to their choice in the translation, but their ultimate selection of the word 'castle' adds another layer of medievalism and poetic fantasy to an already fantastical and medievalist rendition of the *Parzival* story.

Just as the word 'crypt' has certain connotations in our society, which influence how this is manifested and used in comics, so does the word 'castle'. Charles Ross notes that the function which readers associate with the implication of a castle in the story world dictates the possible inclusion of ideals of chivalry, lovely damsels in need of rescue, a king or queen in control of a kingdom, etc.[96] Norman Holland and Leona Sherman see the castle as a link to the Gothic.[97] They say that in particular the castle represents "villains and dangers in archaic language and *mise-en-scene*, it fits childish perceptions of adult threats. The castle is a nighttime house – it admits all we can imagine into it of the dark, frightening, and unknown."[98] For American readers, I would argue that the word alone immediately suggests a form and function only to individuals informed about European history and culture; otherwise the first connotation might simply be the classic Disney castle.

INTRODUCING THE COMICS

This chapter will look at three comics: two recent publications undertaken by David Zane Mairowitz in cooperation with the illustrators Robert Crumb (in the 1996 adaptation), and with Jaromír Švejdík (in the 2013 adaptation). The third adaptation is a short comic by Kája Saudek from 1967 titled "V zámku a v nadzámčí" (In the Castle and its Surroundings Above), but the date for its actual print publication is unlisted, perhaps having been archived without publication.

---

[95] Kafka, *The Castle,* trans. Harman, Publisher's note, xiv–xvii.
[96] Charles S. Ross, "Castles from Epic to T. S. Eliot," *Annali D'Italianistica* 8 (1990): 26–38.
[97] Holland and Sherman, "Gothic Possibilities," 279.
[98] Holland and Sherman, "Gothic Possibilities," 282.

David Zane Mairowitz (b. 1943) is an American writer who has undertaken a range of projects throughout his career, including several plays, a radio drama, and some graphic novels, including two introductory biographies; one on Kafka, the other on Albert Camus. Robert Crumb was introduced in the previous chapter. Along with Mairowitz, as of the time of this writing he lives in Southern France.[99]

The presentation of the adaption of *The Castle* in this book is heavily colored by the ideological approach the author and illustrator take. In this volume, Crumb and Mairowitz undertake a 175-page digest of Kafka's life, work, and personal philosophy. The book opens with a splash page of Crumb's illustration of the quote: "The image of a wide pork butcher's knife swiftly and with mechanical regularity chopping into me, shaving off razon-thin slices which fly about due to the speed of the work."[100] The quote itself floats above the image of Kafka in a narrative caption dominated by the Gothic initial letter 'T,' which protrudes beyond the frame of the caption. The 'T' creates a visual balance with the equally black bowler hat, also offset by a similar yet mirrored angle and the same size as the initial. The third equisized visual element is Kafka's face, based on a composite of his formal portrait photos but with his eyes widened open, eyebrows tilted upwards in concern and the corners of his mouth drawn slightly down—a lobotomized expression to accompany the oversized, hairy hand bringing down a heavy, square cleaver on Kafka's left hemisphere, three slices of his head flying off to the side and a halo of blood splatter around the portrait. The triangle of silver-dollar sized circular elements create a summarized iconography of Kafka—the Gothic initial implies historicity (and in this case, medievalism) and acts as a symbol referencing his literary work, the hat acts as a reference to his very civilized, worldly life as an office worker known for a smart and tidy appearance, and a head in the midst of a brutal act of destroying the brain and the face of the subject, as if engaged in manual, routine labor rather than brutality.

These three elements foreshadow how the authors of this book will present Kafka throughout the rest of the pages, the primary factor being a dual historicity of the early twentieth century and a darker, more brutal Gothic element. This historicity gives context for the other focus

---

[99] See Alexander Wood, "About Crumb Biography: Present Day," The Official Crumb Site, accessed August 12, 2019, https://www.crumbproducts.com/Present-Day_ep_121.html (accessed March 20, 2020).

[100] David Zane Mairowitz and Robert Crumb, *Kafka* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2007), 3.

of the book: the difficulties Kafka faced in his life, and the difficulties he placed his characters in while writing. These are presented not just as minor trials, but as violence and rejections towards individuals who cannot or choose not to defend themselves, just as Kafka passively stands in the process of being horrifically chopped apart is the first impression to greet the reader upon opening the book.

The authors embark on their framing of Kafka's biography, following a similar theme. The next page insists that "throughout most of his life, Franz Kafka imagined his own extinction by dozens of carefully elaborated methods,"[101] and includes a three-frame depiction of one of these methods, emphasizing the gory destruction of Kafka's body. The authors follow the depiction of this form of torture with another, which they claim to have intuited from their studies on Kafka: the use of Kafka's name as an adjective ("Kafkaesque"), which is illustrated by showing Kafka himself turning away from a group of people using the word, pressing his hands to his ears and making a wide-eyed, drop-jawed expression reminiscent of Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*. The authors do not refute but rather dismiss the interpretations of Kafka by Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Max Brod, insisting that these and "the 'pork-butchers' of modern culture"[102] have missed the true theme of Kafka's work: "the Jewish Joke" as Mairowitz and Crumb call it.

When giving concrete biographical information, the first fact presented is that Kafka was a Jew from Prague—illustrated by a silhouetted composite of the Prague skyline, emphasizing historical domed and spired rooftops, and the towers of St. Vitus' cathedral. To his Jewish heritage, the attributes of an "inescapable tradition of storytellers and fantasists, ghetto-dwellers and eternal refugees" is appended, insisting that Prague "suffocated him" and implying that he struggled with identity issues, all as a matter of conjecture.[103] The next few pages frame Kafka's biography through his Jewishness; as an ethnic marker, as a political marker regarding the Zionist movement, as a geographic marker tied to Josefov, and as a link to medieval and renaissance magic and mysticism. Having declined to cite a scholar before the tenth page of the biography, now Crumb and Mairowitz cite the Kabbalistic expert Gershom Scholem and his claim that mysticism still projects a force within Kafka's work through the magic of the Hebrew alphabet.[104] Four pages are subsequently dedicated to an illustrated retelling of the Prague legend of the Golem, concluding

---

[101] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 4.
[102] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,*5.
[103] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 6.
[104] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,*11.

with an image of a young Kafka walking past the Old-New Synagogue, which is described as "one of the most sinister-looking buildings in the Prague Ghetto."[105] textually drawing the reader back to the chill of the Gothic adjacent to a heavily black-lined rendition of the building and the serious, side-ways glance on young Kafka's face as he hunches by. "Kafka would have had no way of avoiding their fantastical imprint," claim the authors in reference to the legends of the Prague ghetto,[106] though they note themselves that Kafka was not a practicing or religious Jew, nor had he mentioned the legends in his works in any significance.

The most interesting part of their presentation of Kafka's biography is that from the very first few pages they visually imagine him in situations, even though they present no evidence for these 'facts' beyond conjecture. Kafka is seen suspiciously slinking by the Old-New Synagogue, smiling in a lamp-lit street corner of the ghetto, looking ashamedly away from his father, reading antisemitic newspaper columns, and interacting with his family in a dramatic fashion. There is evidence that Kafka attended a Yiddish theatre troupe, as depicted,[107] but the authors are not forthcoming with their source for the depiction of the performance (meanwhile Kafka's presence is only indicated by the back of his head, implied by his distinct ears).

The authors then launch into a survey of antisemitism of the early twentieth century, depicting Kafka reading evidence of the "rabid hatred of Jews"[108] in a paper purchased from a street vendor. This is a transition into a highly camp image of the ritual murder which Jews were accused of, a phenomenon which the authors incorrectly identify as being the most prevalent myth in Eastern Europe (apparently being unfamiliar with the geographic designation of Central Europe). This functions as a set up to address the Hilsner case, in which a young Jewish man was accused of the murder, and later found innocent, of a young Christian girl in Polna, so that the anti-Semitic riots may be depicted in the comic. This subsequently leads to a scene depicting the protection of Kafka's father's shop, implying that it was shielded by recognition of a Czech rather than German-Jewish name, specifically showing that a shop front with the German surname "Heitzmann" was attacked, but the Czech surname "Kafka" protected the building from rioters.

The authors then initiate a theme which they return to many times throughout their presentation of Kafka's biography and his work; his self-loathing. On page 25 of the book they

---

[105] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 15.
[106] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 15.
[107] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 20.
[108] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 21.

attribute this to a stereotyped Jewish self-hatred, and on the very next page reroute the source of this tension to Kafka's relationship with his father, Hermann. Hermann is depicted as larger than life, aggressive and demeaning, juxtaposed with medallions of Franz commenting on his father. The authors propose that Franz's relationship with Hermann represent "awe in the face of superior power," which is expressed through the novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*,[109] and then go on to evidence how Franz internalized this abasement through the short story "The Judgement," wherein a young man is commanded by his father to jump into the river, and is so compelled by the sentence that he kills himself.

Shame is presented as a driving factor in Kafka's impetus to write, created by his relationship with his father. This shame extends to his body and thus also to romantic intimacy; the idea that the authors address later in the volume. "Metamorphosis" is presented as a manifestation of Kafka's perceived wish to disappear, scripted to make the circumstances of the insect's death as pitiable as possible. The other animal lead stories—"The Burrow," "Investigations of a Dog," "Report to the Academy," and "Josephine the Singer"—are presented as examples of self-erasure. The tendency towards annihilating the self is conflated with Kafka's ill health and hypochondria, again tied to his Jewishness by the authors.

The book jumps quickly between a range of points in Kafka's biography: his interest in "discipline and manliness,"[110] and in pursuit of these ideals, possible marriage. This time is framed as using marriage to escape his father, meanwhile considering multiple other means of escaping marriage. The flow of his biography in this volume concludes his quandary with tuberculosis, which is said to end his marriage prospects, and Kafka's success in university and employment at the Workman's Accident Insurance Institute as placating his father.[111]

Crumb and Mairowitz maintain their portrayal of Kafka struggling against himself and the whole world around him, insisting that Kafka's writing is about power, submission, and humiliation,[112] and claiming that "In the Penal Colony" is not only evidence of this, but is predictive of the horrors of the twentieth century yet to come. Their adaption of this story leads into a presentation of the mood in Prague during the First Republic, which summarizes that the

---

[109] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 28.
[110] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 62.
[111] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 72.
[112] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 72.

"Jews were caught in the middle" and that "Czech nationalists were traditionally anti-Semitic."[113] *The Trial* is presented as being written in the spirit of this time, despite the fact that earlier the authors claimed that the book had been inspired by Kafka's tense relationship with his father, and note that Kafka received uncontrollable laughter upon reading passages of the story (though who laughed at which passages or why is not evidenced), a comment which is positioned with great irony against the final panel of the illustrated adaptation of the story, which ends with "It was as if the shame of it should outlive him."[114]

The authors seem resistant to accommodating a more nuanced understanding of identity which could extend beyond one language and one nationality—though bilingualism or trilingualism and an overlap of multiple state or social affiliations has been evidenced among inhabitants of Central Europe since the Romans recorded interchange along the Danubian *limes*—and so label Kafka exclusively here as a German-speaking Jew, and Kafka's existence in the new Republic of Czechoslovakia as doubly persecuted: "Germans were now assaulted in the streets and their shops looted. And of course, for the Czechs, what better 'Germans' to avenge themselves on than the Jews?" the authors summarize.[115] It is important for the authors to present the Czech people as the ultimate villains in this phase, and to separate Kafka from his personage as a Prager and a Czech language speaker, in order to reveal what they perceive as an ironic interest in Kafka's work by his Czech oppressors at the conclusion of their book.

The trajectory of the biography is now suddenly interrupted by introducing another one of Kafka's romantic partners, Milena Jesenská, described by the authors primarily by her religious affiliation (non-Jewish), and a language marker as his Czech translator. Her personage is insignificant beyond her contribution to the myth of Kafka which the authors are trying to promote. The interlude about Milena's effect on the writer is linked to the hypothesis that the character of Frieda in Kafka's *The Castle* is modelled on her. The biography then embarks on an illustrated adaptation of *The Castle*, which will be addressed at greater length later in this chapter. Because of the authors' belief that *The Castle* is autobiographical, the character Frieda is assumed to be Milena Jesenská and Frieda is illustrated to look exactly like Jesenská. Frieda's relationship with

---

[113] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 85.
[114] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 95.
[115] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 98.

K., who is illustrated with the same facial structure and ears as the artist used to indicate Kafka, is exaggerated to take up more space in the story than it does in the original novel.

Though *The Castle* was previously said to be inspired by Kafka's relationship with his father, while they do not see K.'s journey as an unfinished grail quest, they still tie the story of *The Castle* to a medieval source: the myth of the wandering Jew. Richard Cohen examined the thirteenth century origins of this tale and its modern manifestations, [116] which is often misunderstood as biblical in origin rather than medieval: a mistake which the authors seem to have made here as well. They claim that Kafka never intended to finish the story presented in *The Castle*, because "any 'ending' would have probably spoiled this [labyrinthine path], one of the great literary 'journeys' of our time."[117] The following page shows the silhouette of a male figure—it is Kafka or K., considering they're illustrated identically—with a tramp's bindle against the backdrop of a town, as the text above claims that the characters in *The Castle* were indeed from Kafka's own life, and that Kafka's abandonment of the text in 1922 further linked the character of K. with Kafka's real self in a quest for acceptance, but "in the end, like the Wandering Jew, unwelcome."[118]

Crumb and Mairowitz emphasize the role of female characters in *The Castle*, and especially those who have a relationship to K., in order for the novel to act as illustration for an exploration of the role of comfort women in Kafka's life and his perceived fear of women and sex.[119] The following thirteen pages of the book look at Kafka's romantic life, his relationship with the women around him and his female relatives. This narration of the role of women in Kafka's life and writing is punctuated by Kafka's fantasies about leaving central Europe and perhaps moving to Palestine, and ending with a very curt conclusion that he finally "found a woman he could live with."[120] This refers to his relationship with 19-year-old Dora Diamant, with whom he lived in Berlin and Prague in 1923 until he moved to a sanatorium near Vienna in 1924 where he later died. The seemingly happy relationship with Dora is granted only a few peripheral notes, as it does not fit with the image of Kafka as a tormented, hopelessly un-romantic creative genius, and the biography speedily

---

[116] Richard Cohen, "The 'Wandering Jew' from Medieval Legend to Modern Metaphor," in *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 147–75.
[117] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 125.
[118] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 126.
[119] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 127–39, containing an adaptation of *The Trial* focusing on the wife of the Court Usher.
[120] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 139.

proceeds onward to Kafka's death, and an illustrated adaption of "The Hunger Artist." Kafka's problematic relationship with the women of his life and his creative work, corresponded with a version of Kafka who does not understand his own desires and is too timid or hindered by the complex workings of his mind to engage socially with finesse. This is in discordance to the other version of Kafka the authors so eagerly present when it suits them, one who visits cafes and brothels, is well read and well-travelled, successfully chats up women who he fancies, and is fit, smartly dressed, and has a respectable position among the writers of Prague.

Crumb and Mairowitz's book concludes with an afterword, an attempt at a historiography of the literary reception of Kafka. They provide closure in the form of Max Brod's editing, the arrival of the Nazis, and the death of Milena Jesenská and Kafka's sisters in concentration camps. They note that Kafka "was slowly becoming The *Adjective*"[121] as they put it —meaning the beginnings of people trying to analyze his work, an endeavor which Crumb and Mairowitz ridicule, presenting an image of literal strawmen with trite speech bubbles forced into their mouths carrying mundane statements about college reading and smug holidays in Prague, as if reading the work of Kafka were a private and exclusive rite reserved only for those who truly understand his genius, as the authors imply they have. They continue their strawman argument deriding all literary scholarship studying Kafka, discarding all scholarly work on the topic and offering praise only for works which they found themselves to be genuine: Ernst Pawel's *The Nightmare of Reason*;[122] Elias Canetti's *Kafka's Other Trials*;[123] Pietro Citati's *Kafka*,[124] Ritchie Robertson's *Kafka: Judaism, Politics and Literature*,[125] and generally recommending the work of Marthe Robert, a French essayist and translator, as a whole. Unsurprisingly, these authors are not academics, but rather essayists, writers, or in other creative fields. Indeed, the recommended reading items are popular texts, well executed and unburdened by footnotes. They are also, just as the work by Crumb and Mairowitz, based on an intuitive, empathetic and sympathetic interpretation of Kafka's life and works, rather than the application of a theory.

---

[121] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 156. [Emphasis in the original.]

[122] Ernst Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka*, (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984).

[123] Elias Canetti, *Kafka's Other Trial: The Letters to Felice*, (Berlin: Schocken, 1988).

[124] Pietro Citati, *Kafka*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal, (New York, NY: Knopf, 1990).

[125] Ritchie Robertson, *Kafka: Judaism, Politics, and Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1985).

The afterword also takes care to dismiss one last foe of the myth of Kafka, that being the Czech people themselves. They propose that Kafka's relationship to the region of his birth was "ambiguous, to say the least,"[126] and insist that Kafka's work was never accepted among "the Czechs," citing the paucity of work translated into Czech language. The authors claim he was rejected by the Communists, and later inexplicably rehabilitated in a 1963 celebration of his life and work when it was deemed that his writing "fostered the humanist tradition and countered the rise of world imperialism,"[127] illustrated with an imagined photograph of dignitaries standing in front of a framed triptych of Marx, Lenin, and Kafka, flanked with flags and stars.

Crumb and Mairowitz present any enthusiasm for Kafka originating in Prague as disingenuous. To honor his tomb in the Jewish cemetery is diminished as an act of mere tourism, and they laughingly point out the sale of souvenirs with references to Kafka. In an attempt at irony, they include an illustration of themselves, clad in Kafka t-shirts, standing in a square in Prague, as if they are above the joke themselves, uniquely informed observers of a comically misplaced enthusiasm for Kafka. They solemnly note that the Franz Kafka Society, who seek to revive Prague's Jewish heritage, as being the only legitimate organization for approaching authentic Kafka. "After years of ignoring him or treating him as a pariah, the new Czech Republic is finally discovering its strange Jewish son, no longer a threat and suddenly *bankable* as a tourist attraction,"[128] quip the authors. Insisting on their intimacy with Kafka's inner thoughts "the irony would not have been lost on him,"[129] the authors conclude, thus concluding their work with an image of the "American colony" in Prague with McKafka Hamburgers and trashy tourists, under the watchful eye of Prague castle. The castle in this image seems to be a reference back to the illustrated adaption of *The Castle* provided on pages 109–124, where Crumb declined to even attempt a depiction of the castle there, the scene on the final pages of the book would have easily fit the role.

In conclusion of this introduction to the book, Crumb and Mairowitz place Kafka's creative impetus on no other sources but his Jewishness and his relationship with his father and women, all while deriding Kafka scholars and the pop culture consumption of Kafka's work and biography. The irony of the authors' presentation of themselves as being in on the joke is that they are in fact

---

[126] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 160.
[127] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 163.
[128] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 175. [Emphasis in the original.]
[129] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 175.

the butt of their own ridicule, having reduced Kafka to a two-dimensional, marketable character without support from evidence or even a reflection on the logic of their thinking. They get basic facts wrong, such as placing Bohemia in Eastern Europe, or claiming that Kafka's family was saved from antisemitic riots in 1900 by the fact that his family name was recognized as Czech.[130] The alternate between overemphasizing and ignoring information as it suits them—and rather seeking to reflect themselves in the biography of Kafka than attempt anything resembling an objective approach—makes the two projects by Mairowitz extremely interesting side by side.

## MAIROWITZ AND ŠVEJDÍK

Mairowitz does not openly criticize his previous project when introducing the book adaption of *The Castle*, but he also avoids giving a reason for attempting a second comic format adaptation with a new illustrator. He is also silent on the reasoning behind the choice of illustrator.

Jaromír Švejdík (b. 1963) is a Czech comic book artist, as well as the lead singer of the band Priessnitz and later musical projects such as Jaromír 99 & The Bombers, an occasional poet and guitarist. His illustration work appears under the name Jaromír 99 (though I will be referring to him by his proper name in this chapter); for example, in illustrated the popular *Alois Nebel* comics. He uses a special technique of cutting out the images from paper, usually black and white with gray for a monochrome effect, then layering the sheets to create the image with shading; he uses traditional pen and ink or painting techniques as well. He is currently the most internationally recognizable Czech comic book artist in the domestic comics scene.

The collaboration between Mairowitz and Švejdík was published in 2013 (published by Self Made Hero, London). This adaption of *The Castle* is much more substantial, extending 144 pages on thick paper. The pages are left unnumbered, and the image often extends to the edge of the page. The volume includes a very brief introduction by Mairowitz and is otherwise unburdened by any sort of gloss or text beyond the story itself. A summary of the presentation of the material follows below.

The initial image opens the same as in Crumb's version: the lone figure of K. crossing a bridge into the village. The page layouts now include identifying place names, and provide demarcated narrative captions in a distinct style of all capital letters, imitating the booming tone of a cinematic voice-over. As comics have been heavily influenced by cinematography, Švejdík's

---

[130] See Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 23–34.

visual presentation is primarily cinematic (dividing the action into clearly separated scenes, using pan-outs and zoom-ins, restricting the images and characters to their designated frames and panels), while occasionally tapping into tricks which are intrinsically available only in comics (the use of different text styles to present differenct voices, replacing symbols for words in the speech bubbles, reducing scenes to isolated silhouettes, allowing conspicuous inconsistencies in the shape of the castle in the distance).

The Mairowitz-Švejdík adaptation of *The Castle* fully accepts that K. is a land surveyor and that he himself arranged the arrival of the assistants—the reason he does not recognize them is explained away in that they are not his former assistants. There is no ambiguity as to why he is in the town, nor about his previous life outside of the town, as appears in Kafka's original version. The dialogue aims to remain true to the original, but is severely truncated as lines are picked out of the text and taken out of their wider context. Dialogue in general is cut short, so that sentences are as curt as possible, and often only one- or two-word statements are uttered.

Visually, there is no artificial historization of the characters or background; the figures are dressed in a way that is undetailed but implying the twentieth century, there are electric lights and phones, as would be appropriate to the time when Kafka composed the text. The starkness of the dialogue fits well with the starkness of the visual presentation. Thanks to Švejdík's technique, which is not unique to this publication but is used in almost all his illustrations, all the images are selectively reduced to a bare minimum: only three color-values maximum, selective presentation of subjects, and ample use of negative space. The grayscale color with the jagged edges of Švejdík's technique give an impression of something darker—bare trees, the silhouettes of crows, up-turned collars and bowler hats hinting at a film noir aesthetic, while the historic buildings reflect the hopelessness of the content, leaning towards the Gothic.

Because of the truncation of the episodes in the book—for example, the chapter wherein K. visits the steamy room where the neighbors are bathing is limited to three pages with very little context, with only a few lines of dialogue, and cuts off abruptly—the reader gets the impression of being trapped in a nightmare where sudden changes in scene or story happen without meaning, and all plot is lost in a confusing jumble of unrelated actions and conversations. The episodes are labeled with a title caption in the upper left of the first frame, allowing the artist and editor to avoid transitions, and giving a sense of structure to the otherwise hacked up adaptation of the book. Having lost the thread of meaning in Kafka's story, K. is juggled between romantic entanglements

and his attempts to get into the Castle. There is no sense of a genre beyond the visually Gothic presentation, which supplies the textual content some sort of style where the abridging of the original text has otherwise left none.

The two projects led by Mairowitz share many similarities (for example, the explicit focus on K.'s sexual activities, the editing of the story to highlight moments of rejection by the villagers), but can be compared on three points: their treatment of the assistants, their depiction of the Castle, and the final conversation with the landlady, which Winkelman picks out as a scene which supports his theory that the story is in fact a *Bildungsroman* in purgatory.

## THE LAND SURVEYOR'S ASSISTANTS

The choices applied in portraying the assistants—Jeremiah and Arthur—are a key in *The Castle*, in that the assistants are narrated as being separate and unique, and only K. is incapable of telling them apart, which is a demonstration of his disinterest in others whom he perceives as being below himself. In both of Mairowitz's projects, however, the assistants are presented as uniquely joined,
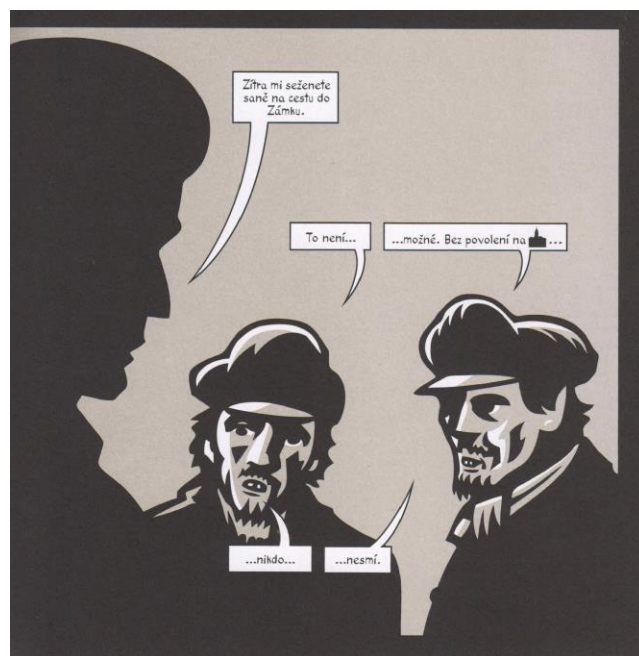
**Figure 11** (*Kafka*, 112), © Crumb and Mairowitz 2007.

**Figure 12** Detail (*Zámek,* 13), © Švejdík and Mairowitz 2013.
K: *"Tomorrow you two will take me by sleigh to the castle."* *Assistants: "That isn't possible. No one is allowed to go to [the castle] without permission."*

65

so that the reader sees them as K. sees them, rather than with the critical distance that the reader of the original is provided.[131]

In K.'s tenacious efforts to gain access to the Castle, where he imagines he belongs, these two men are in fact directly in contact with the Castle and are official representatives of power. In his arrogance, K. ignores their significance and potential to aid his way, only later finding out that they have official connections even closer than those of Barnabas, and could have easily provided K. with information about the townspeople. K. was too proud to consider consulting with them and preferred to treat them as unwelcome animals.

Mairowitz and Crumb embrace K.'s egocentric view of the assistants as truth and interprets them as such in their graphic account. Several elements are edited to reframe their interactions in a way that forces the story into line with Mairowitz and Crumb's interpretation of the work. The conversation between them, in which K. is aware that they are all playing along with the same rouse, the challenge posed by K. and accepted by the Castle, is edited out completely and replaced with K.'s genuine surprise that they are not his original assistants. Visually they are illustrated exactly the same, so that the reader is inclined to believe that K. cannot possibly tell them apart (rather than seeing an example of K.'s insensitivity and dehumanization towards the pair). Moreover, in departure from the original, the two share the same speech text, finishing each other's sentences. The narration above the illustration emphasizes that they are "two mad fools, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, straight out of the Yiddish theatre."[132] However, a close reading of the original text indicates nothing of the sort. This interpretation serves only to tie elements of the text more closely to the perceived Jewishness of the text.

K.'s acts of violence against them are never depicted, nor the revelation that the assistants actually work much more closely with the Castle than K. believed and are quite deeply wounded by his unfair behavior towards them. The exclusion of these key plot elements leads the reader to see K. only as a confused visitor to a strange town, portrayed as a kindly man in an unfortunate situation, thus furthering Mairowitz and Crumb's vision of the work as autobiographical, and further favoring their presentation of Kafka as an unappreciated and abused (and specifically Jewish) genius, denying space for any other characteristics to be attributed to him.

---

[131] The assistants are written as being distinct individuals, and while throughout the novel all the other villagers can tell them apart and treat them as two separate people, K. himself sees them as identical and does not bother distinguishing between them.

[132] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 112.

Perhaps because it is not tied to an effort to present Kafka's writing as a perfect mirror to his life, and vice versa, the graphic novel form does not edit out the revelation that the assistants are agents from the Castle, but it does reframe Jeremiah as attempting to steal away Frieda from K., trying to shoehorn the story into a romantic drama form, as any more intellectual readings of the text seem too much for Mairowitz.

In the second Mairowitz project, the assistants are again illustrated as being identical to each other, sharing the same lines, and in this case finishing each other's sentences over separate speech bubbles. They are portrayed with jagged teeth and blank, animalistic expressions, again immersing the reader in K.'s own perspective rather than providing the narrative context of the original. A little confusion is allowed in their introduction, but K.'s knowledge that the whole set up is a farce is glossed over, making their first encounter socially awkward rather than an important revelation of K.'s false identity.

Both interpretations use the visual depiction of the assistants to lean towards a certain presentation of K. as an innocent sufferer in the face of unexplained injustice. To depict the assistants in a style closer to the content of the original would not have been difficult—there would only need be enough difference in the physical characteristics of the two men for the reader to call into question K.'s judgement when he flippantly says he cannot tell them apart, and that he would rather just call them both "Arthur." Including the "heavy blows" and other abuses that K. inflicted on the assistants would not be impossible, as we have seen from action comics, and the oft repeated message of K.'s inequity towards others would have been successfully transmitted from the original.

## THE CASTLE AS AN OBJECT

Because of the significance of the word 'castle,' the artistic interpretations in the two Mairowitz projects put excessive emphasis on the Castle as a place, when in the original text the Castle is a force, or even a character,[133] more than a physical location. This is one of those instances of literary text which feel visual but are in fact not at all. Winkelman notes: "What is the role of the castle in all of this? It is the unseen hand that engineers everything."[134] Truly, in the scene when K. meets the school teacher outdoors with his pupils, the teacher says that the village and the Castle are the

---

[133] I would argue that it is similar to the role of Godot in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. He is not there, but he is always 'present'.
[134] Winkelman, "An Interpretation," 126.

same entity, and it is implied that the populations of both are infinite. The abstract nature of the Castle is confirmed in multiple ways. This, however, is a visually slippery, albeit correct, interpretation. It seems that Kafka's writing does not lend itself willingly to visual literalism.



**Figure 13** Detail (*Kafka*, 110), © Crumb and Mairowitz 2007.

Crumb's Castle is depicted only briefly, in one frame, as a tower jutting out from a mass of village roofs, with the external commentary adding: "It is clear from the start that he [K.] will never get to the Castle, and that the usual rigid hierarchy of power will suppress his attempts."[135] This succinctly declares Mairowitz and Crumb's interpretation and explains why the rest of the text focuses on the officials as individuals, rather than the peasants and the officials themselves as being fundamentally one with the Castle. The story is summed up at the end with an image of K. wandering through a literal labyrinth[136] and the line repeated from the school teacher: "there is no difference between the peasants and the Castle"[137] is left without interpretation, despite the fact that there is a narration above dictating that "most of the officials who work for the Castle are as aloof as the Count, and the villagers themselves are kept at a distance," which stands in direct contrast on the very same page.

---

[135] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 110.
[136] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 125.
[137] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 111.

**Figure 14** (*Zámek*, 46), © Švejdík and Mairowitz 2013.

Jaromír Švejdík's Castle is heavily influenced by knowledge of the correct Czech translation of *das Schloss* as a large urban estate in the sense of *zámek* and firsthand knowledge of the great number of such structures around the Czech lands. Kafka, a man having traveled around Central Europe, speaking both Czech and German, would have been very clear about the distinction between a *Schloss/zámek* and a *Berg/hrad*, and nothing was barring him from using the latter term if that had been his intention. Interestingly, the silhouette of Švejdík's Castle looks distinctly like the *zámek* in Mikulov, Czech Republic, with the shape of the tower, its position on the hill within the buildings and its curved outer wall. This is not to say that Švejdík's rendition of the Castle is not fictitious, but the concept of a chateau which he is illustrating is founded in lived norms. In comparison to Crumb, Švejdík appears unafraid to incorporate the visualized Castle as often as it is verbalized in the book, without requiring an overlap in the adapted dialogue.

Švejdík does a better job of incorporating the Castle into the visual interpretation of the story—the Castle shapeshifts and looms in the back of the frame like an ever-present eye. The structure constantly seems to shift its location and composition as well, while often remaining an undefined silhouette in the distance. It comes off as being remote on some pages and just around the corner on others, true to the original feeling expressed in Kafka's text. This is a point where visual interpretation acts as successful adaptation, within the process of transcoding[138] from text to visual media.

---

[138] Hutcheon and O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 20.

**Figure 15** (*Zámek*, 83, 92, 97, 107), © Švejdík and Mairowitz 2013.

## THE CONVERSATION WITH THE LANDLADY

The final point of comparison in the two Mairowitz projects is the presentation of the conversation of the landlady with K. about her dresses. This scene appears towards the end of the novel, where K. is walking furtively down a hall of officials when he is caught by the Landlady and has a second conversation with her. She scolds him and K. makes an off-hand comment about her wardrobe, which is full of fine dresses. She agrees about the quality of her dresses, and then shuns K. for being so very bad to say these things to her, and that he is not a land surveyor at all. K. agrees with this and he exits the floor, leading to another scene.

The original text allows this as a moment when K.'s assumed identity as the land surveyor slips, and he not only confesses to the falsehood, but gives hints at his true profession, most likely a tailor. This revelation is crucial for understanding the novel as a *Bildungsroman*, as it negates the thesis that K. is in the village to do his stated job. He, quite simply, is not. If that is not his true "apprenticeship," then the key must lie elsewhere. Winkelman interprets this as another moment where K. is given a challenge to overcome his pride, which he fails, and the landlady as an agent of the Castle, and thus an assistant in K.'s path to redemption and grace, throws him back out with a flurry of what would seem unnecessary scolding. However, if we accept the theory of purgatory, the scolding is suitable, and the scenario makes sense.

Mairowitz and Crumb's adaptation of the scene with the landlady is tailored to suit their reductive conclusion that *The Castle* represents the fate of the outcast Jew and closes the story at the point where K. gets thrown out of the landlady's building, depicted in shock at his own bad

luck. The narration in Mairowitz and Crumb's adaptation falsely states that, "the novel, as Kafka left it, ends with these words."[139] Perhaps the last portion of the text, the encounter with Gerstäcker, was left out in the act of editing. Mairowitz and Crumb are unreflective of the liberties they have taken in the adaption process, and rather insist to the reader that this short adaption is canon and equal to the original.

Oddly, between the two projects, both penned by Mairowitz, the Crumb version claims that the novel ends with the conversation with the landlady, which is compacted into four frames and omits the revelation about K.'s profession; in contrast, in the collaboration with Švejdík the text faithfully states the landlady's identification of K.'s lie, but not his confession confirming the landlady's accusation that K. is not really a land surveyor. The story does not end with K. getting thrown out but ends properly as Kafka's original does at the home of Gerstäcker, and the unfinished utterance of Gerstäcker's mother.[140]

## ADAPTATION AND INTERPRETATION

Mairowitz and Crumb's adaptation and whole biography go through great lengths to parody "Kafkologists," illustrating Kafka himself as running away from them in horror.[141] Through all their anti-intellectualism the authors claim to offer an honest interpretation of Kafka's life and works. One of their jabs at the establishment, as they perceive it, is to insist that Kafka is an outsider in Prague, and align themselves with him as outsiders themselves, trying to poke fun at the circus of Kafka which popped up in Prague to serve tourists. As if to let the reader in on their private club of being above the average literary consumer, they note sarcastically that:

> in the 'free Prague' of the 1990s, where his books are not banned (though not necessarily read) you can buy a Kafka *T-shirt* on every street corner in the tourist quarter, or his image on porcelain plates or artisanal wood carvings . . . (A welcome antidote to this is the recently founded Franz Kafka Society in the Old Town Square, which seriously seeks to revive Prague's Jewish heritage.)[142]

---

[139] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 124.
[140] Kafka, *The Castle,* trans. Bell, 275. "She gave K. her trembling hand and made him sit down beside her. She spoke with difficulty, it was hard to understand her, but what she said . . ."
[141] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 5.
[142] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka,* 165.

As they make fun of the tourists and the attempts to stuff Kafka into a convenient cultural box, they seem to have completely overlooked their own contribution to this phenomenon. There can be no Disneyfication[143] without the demands of American tourists, who come to Prague to buy Kafka t-shirts, chocolates, and take Kafka tours, even if they think they are doing it ironically. The Mairowitz and Crumb book summarizes that "what most educated people probably know about Kafka without having to open any of those tomes about him:

- He was a Jewish writer. He came from Prague and wrote in German.
- He wrote a story about someone who wakes up one morning changed into an insect and does not change back.
- He had problems with his father, with his job and with women. Judging by the content and style of his writings, those were not his only problems."[144]

And, indeed, that is where Mairowitz and Crumb's interpretation itself begins and ends. Crumb and Mairowitz have also strangely positioned the Czech people as the past and present enemies of Kafka. Mairowitz and Crumb, as they undermine the research of others present themselves as the sole saviors of Kafka's legacy, the only ones who understand him and his work, are so willfully ignorant and insensitive of their role in the process.

Mairowitz's second project related to Kafka's *The Castle* was published in 2013, and it appears to have been primarily a commercial endeavor. It is unclear why he chose to collaborate with Švejdík, aside from Švejdík's already secured success on the Czech comic book scene (despite no lack of other potential Czech artists), and Mairowitz, in his misguided search for authenticity wishing to secure a Czech artist to tackle *The Castle* in a more extensive adaptation.

Švejdík built on the graphic novel project with Mairowitz as much as possible, including a musical project with collaborators, putting the texts to song in an album called *Zámek*.[145] He organized the group Kafka Band, isolated ten stories from the book, and set the text to minimalistic musical accompaniment. The overall sound of the band sounds exactly like his band Priessnitz,

---

[143] Jean Baudrillard wrote in his essay "Simulations" (in: *Simulacra and Simulation, Simulacres et Simulation,* 1981, English translation 1983), "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyper-real and of simulation." In this dissertation I am using the term to mean the adjustment of real-world phenomena to adhere to the traits and characteristics of the theme park and company visual language, specifically in the creation of medievalist simulacra.
[144] Mairowitz and Crumb, *Kafka*, 2.
[145] Kafka Band, *Das Schloss* (*Zámek*), Supraphon February14, 2014. Compact disk.

just under a different flag. The effect was praised by some critics as being an interesting project but panned by others for being a vapid commercial project to profit from anything vaguely intellectual or artistic built on the mention of Kafka's name. Many Czech reviewers claim to prefer simply reading the original. Reviewer Ondrej Bezř, who reviewed the album for the magazine *iDnes*, summarizes that just as his listeners supposedly laughed, as Kafka read aloud "The Trial," so too will audiences chuckle at this album.[146] Jiří Špičák and Miloš Hroch writing for Radio Wave at the national radio station *Česky rozhlas* rated the album at a ten percent approval, scathingly stating:

> To base an album on the banal motif of misunderstanding between people who speak different languages is insufficient . . . Unlike Czech Soda, Kafka Band has the unpleasant aftertaste of project which is sponsored by the poor taste of literary institutions and Czech-German centers, and speaks the language of kitsch, the most reprehensible simplification and empty posturing of art.[147]

The references to *Alles gute* refer to reoccurring segment created by David Vávra and Milan Šteindler on the Czech comedy TV show *Česká soda*, which was produced from 1993-1997 by Česká televize. The *Alles gute* segments were comedic lessons of German language for native Czech speakers, and the album reviewers here are referring to the treatment of Kafka's text in the vocals of the album—a monotonous, gruff reading of the German text overlaid with Czech lyrics translating or adding to the text.

The graphic novel reduces *The Castle* in a similar waz; the single-page introduction written by Mairowitz restates his simplified interpretation of Kafka's work as being purely autobiographical, restating the direct correlation of Kafka the person to the character K. in the novel. Mairowitz writes with the air of authority but declines to say why this graphic adaptation is

---

[146] See Ondřej Bezr, "Recenze: Kafka Band hraje k pousmání i k podřezání žil," *iDnes.cz,* February 19, 2014, https://www.idnes.cz/kultura/hudba/kafka-band-recenze.A140219_094910_hudba_ob (accessed March 20, 2020).

[147] Jiří Špičák and Miloš Hroch, "Kafka Band = Alles Gute Bande," Radio Wave, March 7, 2014, https://wave.rozhlas.cz/kafka-band-alles-gute-bande-5209059 (accessed March 20, 2020). "Postavit desku na banálním motivu neporozumění lidí mluvících odlišnou řečí ale opravdu nestačí... Na rozdíl od České sody ale zůstává u Kafka Bandu pachuť projektu, který je zaplacený nevkusem literárních institucí a česko-německých center a promlouvá jazykem kýče, trestuhodného zjednodušení a vyprázdněné hry na umění." Translation mine.

necessary, or why the visualizations manifested the way they did. He does not reflect on the role of his subjectivity as a medium for interpreting the text, or what it means to render all the elements of the story graphically.

SAUDEK

The third adaptation is a short comic written by Karel Steigerwald and illustrated by Kája Saudek from 1967 titled "V zámku a v nadzámčí" (In the Chateau and its Surroundings Above)[148] which plays on the title of Božena Němcová's *V zámku a v podzámčí*, (In the Chateau and its Surroundings Below)[149] which was written in 1856, and infamously lives on as dull required
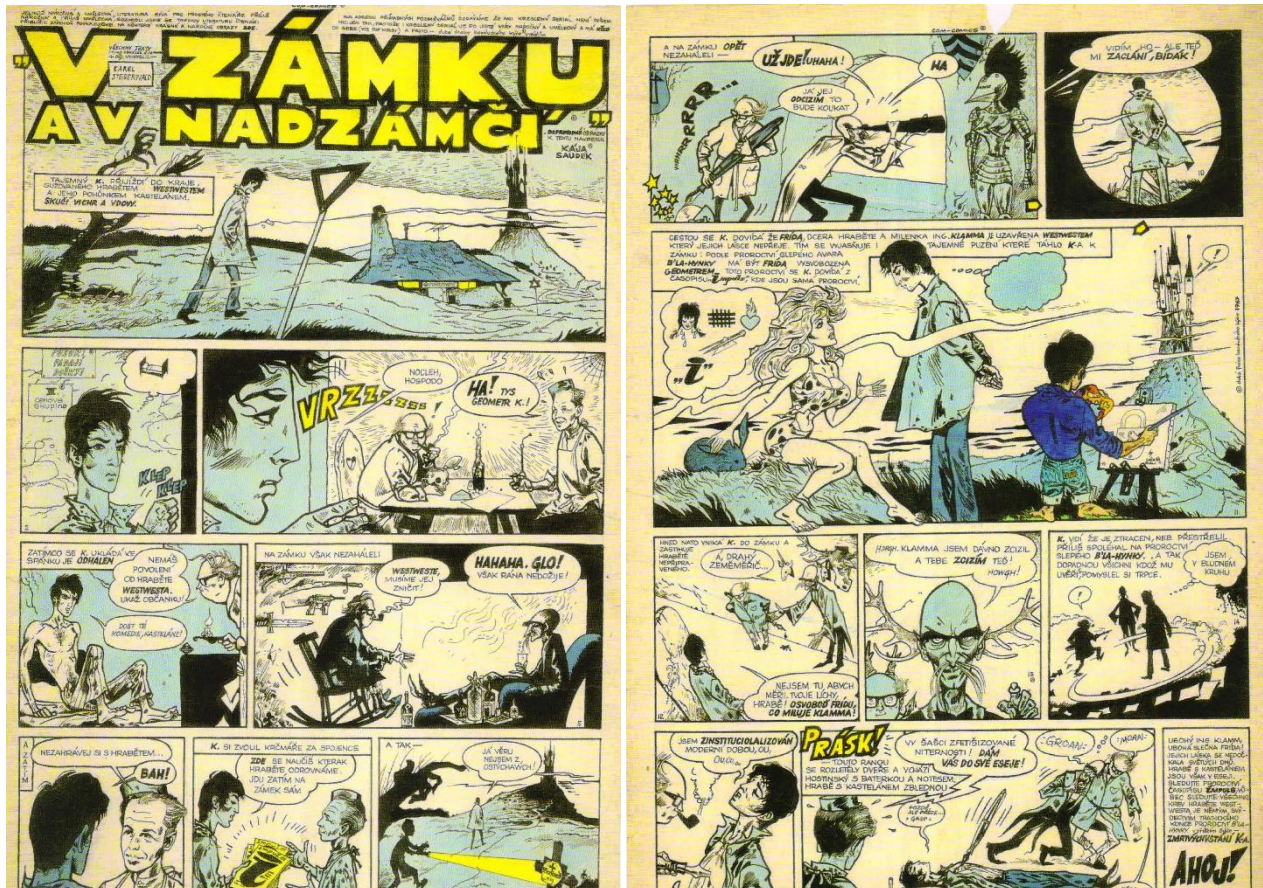


**Figure 16** (*V zámku a v nadzámčí*, 1-2), © Saudek and Steigerwald 1967.

---

[148] Kája Saudek and Karel Steigerwald, *V zámku a v nadzámčí*, 1967, Comic, 62x45 cm, Appearing pages 202-203 in Helena Diesing Kája Saudek, publication and archieve unnoted. Title translated by Martin Schweitzer at Palacký University. "Podzámci" in Němcová's original title indicates the inhabited area around or below a chateau, if it's placed on a hill. Towns or villages often hug the circumference of a chateau's grounds in Central European urban layout.

[149] Diesing and Prokůpek, *Kája Saudek*, 202–3.

reading for school children,[150] though Saudek does not go further in this reference, perhaps only intending to draw a line between one piece of required reading to another.

Saudek's adaptation is included here because it is clever in its acknowledgement of the translation issue described at the beginning of the chapter, and it specifically references both the artistic style (or visual language) of Robert Crumb (though it pre-dates Crumb's adaptation of *The Castle)* and Disney's signature castle. The illustration is done in black linework with monochrome blue shading and spots of yellow for accent, except for a self-portrait Saudek includes which features more colors. The whole comic fits between two pages, over the span of seventeen frames, the first as a title and introductory scene, and the final frame being only a text advertising the magazine *Impuls*.

The first frame includes the title in large block lettering, and a figure, identified as "K." heading towards a castle in the distance, which the readers are informed is the home of Count Westwest. K. is dressed as a contemporary of Saudek, a modern traffic sign bends in the wind, and a pub stands between K. and his destination. A Star of David is posted almost like another traffic sign in front of the pub, and the castle in the distance is nothing like Kafka's description, but sits high on a dramatic mountain, featuring high towers and a dramatic shape. K. knocks on the door to the pub and by the third frame he is greeted by two men in a comically Gothic setting, with a candle stuck into a dark bottle on the table, spiderwebs in the corner, one man drinking from a beer stein modeled as a skull, while the two hold old-fashioned pipes. The electric lights mentioned in Kafka's original story are replaced at every turn by dramatic candles, and this atmospheric insertion of antique objects alongside modern ones continues throughout; swords hang on the wall next to semi-automatic guns, a flashlight is used to light a spooky old tombstone (labeled "Bertrand, 1967," beside it another one labeled "Max Brot"), There is a full coat of amour with comically pointed breasts followed by a very modern blonde bombshell character in skimpy clothing. Advertisements for *Impuls* magazine and its single 'i' logo are inserted throughout.

---

[150] While Helena Diesing notes this (Diesing and Prokůpek, *Kája Saudek*, 199), my colleague Martin Elbel at Palacký University, and I subsequently confirmed this, examining user comments on the Czech book database website. User "VAnna" sums it up most of the comments: „U mě to není jinak - povinná četba. Zatím to je knížka, která mě nejmíň bavila, alespoň to není dlouhé." ("It's the same for me – required reading. It's the least entertaining book thus far, but at least it's not long.) posted 22.10.2019. Databazeknih.cz. "*V Zámku a v Podzámčí*—Božena Němcová | Databáze knih." https://www.databazeknih.cz/knihy/v-zamku-a-v-podzamci-604 (accessed March 20, 2020).

K. moves through this comically medievalized story world, leaving the pub and heading to the castle. Before he arrives, he meets a beautiful woman, who is described as Frida, adapted here as the daughter of Count Westwest and engineer Klamm's girlfriend. She supposedly leads K. to the castle, where he enters and is met by the two men from the pub. K. exclaims that he is not the land surveyor, but he is there to free Frida. The count—posed comically in front of a deer head mounted on the wall, so that he appears to have horns—claims to have gotten rid of Klamm, and promises to do the same with K.

The narrative caption in the next frame tells the reader that K. is lost, as the castle background falls away, and the assistant runs around to stab K. in the front with a gigantic fountain pen. Dramatically falling back, K. says: "I have been institutionalized by the modern era, ow ow ow."[151] At that point the story abandons any connection to Kafka's *The Castle* and proceeds to reference rather the modern era and contemporary criticism of Kafka's work, as the young man from the third frame (in the pub) suddenly re-enters the story and says: "You idiots of the fetishized interior! I'm putting you into my essay!" To this the dying K. adds "Too late, but well said." The final narrative, which fills the last frame, ties up the story with "Poor engineer Klamm, poor Miss Frida! Their love never saw the light of day!" and finishes with an advertisement for the magazine.

Written very small, outside the illustration frames and above the title, the following text is written:

> As it is complex and artistic, literature tends to be too complicated and artistic for the average reader, we decided to bring the literature closer to the reader. At the same time, we will include some beautiful and complex images here.

The second column reads: "In case anyone cares to sneer, we add that an illustrated series is nothing to sneeze at, and to its own degree is complex and artistic and has its own worth. (RIP Kirby[152]) And so." This explanation is wordlessly expounded upon by an image inserted in the third frame of the second page, which shows Saudek himself in full color contrast, posing as if to paint a landscape of the castle in the background, but on his canvas there is a painting of a lock.

---

[151] Diesing and Prokůpek, *Kája Saudek*, 203. Text in Figure 16, translation mine.
[152] I believe this is referencing the comic book artist Jack Kirby, known for his work at National Comics Publications and DC Comics. Kirby did not die until 1994, so it is unclear why the note "RIP" is included here.

The castle itself appears now very clearly as a stylized Disney castle, and is moreover anthropomorphized and expressing an exclamation point in a speech bubble.

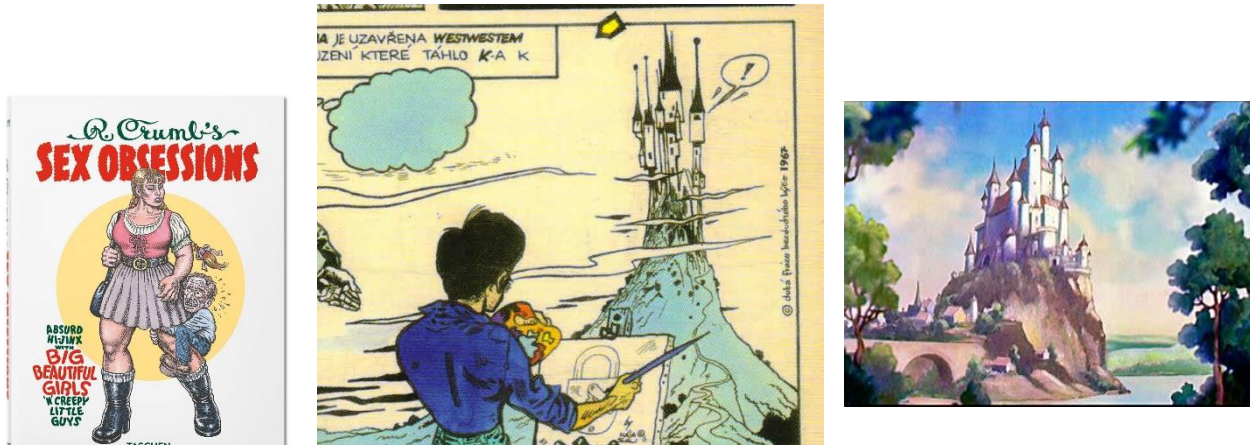The miniaturization of Saudek's frame (a stylization also repeated in the cover for *G030*



**Figure 17** Comparing R. Crumb's stylized small man, and Disney's castle design from the film Snow White. Detail (*V zámku a v nadzámčí*, 2), © Saudek and Steigerwald 1967.

*vs. Superhana* and some other stand-alone illustrations), references a visual language already well developed by Crumb, which Crumb titles "creepy little guys." Saudek and his brother Jan Saudek make references to Crumb in their work, as mentioned in the previous chapter. The direct reference to the Castle from the Disney film *Snow White* to depict the castle from Franz Kafka's *The Castle* in this adaptation is a bold choice, perhaps explained by the way it is being painted on the canvas, as a lock, something that Saudek and Steigerwald felt might be inaccessible to the average reader. The authors of this adaption have put the lament "I have been institutionalized!" into the mouth of K. himself, anticipating Mairowitz's concerns about the mishandling of academics in analyzing the work of Kafka, but Saudek and Steigerwald have achieved this criticism very neatly in their adaptation of the story through the addition of the single image of landscape painting the Castle itself.

## CONCLUSIONS

While Winkelman asserts that *The Castle* is an adaptation of the *Parzival* grail story from the Middle Ages, an idea which is supported by Brod, Kafka does not include explicit references to medieval objects or ideas beyond creating a Gothic atmosphere of fog, decay, and bizarre uncertainties. In the comic book adaptations, Mairowitz's first project with Crumb is heavily influenced by the arguments made in their biographical presentation of Kafka, and instead of seeing a connection with a grail quest, they link the story with the medieval myth of the wandering

Jew. Though the medieval inspiration for these adaptations is not named explicitly, anachronisms shift the storyworld to an earlier time, and the use of Gothic visual elements insert a new layer of medievalism into the story world. Saudek's illustration goes even further and depicts the Castle itself as a piece of medievalist simulacrum. Medievalism appears as inherit to the comic book adaptations of the text.

# CHAPTER 4: NUNS IN COMICS

[153]Designed to shock and awe, the combative nun characters appearing in modern-day comic books transport the reader to a fictionalized context in which the nun acts as a lightning rod for romanticized medievalism. Drawing on the film studies and art history disciplines represented in this volume, this chapter investigates the popular medium of comic books and graphic novels and their role in representing the archetypal nun. Her visual and literary legacy is built upon waves of reinterpretation going as far back as late medieval conceptions of early Christian martyr saints, building an image of devout, monastic women sacrificing themselves in the face of great violence for the sake of their sacred profession. Thus, the reverberations of the presentation and re-presentation of pugnacious sisters-in-arms create an archetype that is both wholly modern and yet timelessly capable of reinvention.

I do not intend this chapter to be a definitive account of all occurrences of nuns in comic books. Rather, I would like to propose a few concepts to address the phenomenon, with the aim of orienting both readers who possess full comic book literacy and those who are uninitiated in the genre. This chapter is concerned with the framing and depiction of nuns and religious women in comics, the historical precedents for these, and the implications of such characterizations in contemporary culture, not only in theory, but for the end consumer as well.

As an amateur producer of comic books and illustrations, I have been drawn into the current debates about the treatment of female characters in the traditionally masculine media of computer games and comic books. My graphic work revolves around the interpretation of primarily ancient, medieval, and early modern sources, usually with the aim of creating material that is both sincere and consumable, as well as artistic. This brought to my attention works with similar ambitions, such as Claire Bretécher's graphic novel *La vie passionnée de Thérèse d'Avila* (*The Passionate Life of Teresa of Avila*, 1980), which is based on the life and written accounts of the sixteenth-century saint.[154] The writings by the nun herself are considered to be a great contribution to the history of mysticism in Christianity, and the light-hearted depiction of a saint in the comic book—a stark contrast to the gravity with which the painter François Gérard imagined her around the year 1820—raised my curiosity about the choices of the artists. During my investigations into

---

[153] A version of this text was published in the anthology *Where is History Today: New Ways of Representing the Past*, eds. Marcel Arbeit and Ian Christie, (Olomouc: Palacky University, 2015), 159–171.

[154] See Claire Bretécher, *La vie passionnée de Thérèse d'Avila* (Paris: Dargaud, 2007).

contemporary reactions to the new mendicant orders spreading throughout Europe in the thirteenth century, I came across both derisory caricatures of nuns and very solemn images of saints commissioned by monastic institutions, saints who were exalted as role models for women in their spiritual vocation.[155]

An attempt to address the phenomenon of nuns in comic books can seem doomed to become mired in a mess of shocking, isolated examples. Henry A. Kelly warns: "There are lots of pitfalls in dealing with all historical subjects, but religious topics have some peculiar dangers."[156] A serious examination of nuns in comic books not only faces several sensitive themes but also brings gender issues into the fray. The endeavor is fraught with the potential to reduce the artists to misogynistic opportunists, to view the characters themselves as erotic fantasies, and the production of such comics as consumerism at its worst. In the sphere of recurrent female stock characters, nuns appear with the same regularity and standardization that comic book consumers expect of other stock figures. However, religious female characters must navigate a unique cultural terrain of both inherited and modern issues.

The depiction of nuns in comics is the translation of graphic traditions into a modern visual language. As Maureen Moran suggests, in order to broach a temporally and culturally complex issue, readers "must inhabit a double time, simultaneously both early Christian and modern."[157] While approaching it through this "double-gaze,"[158] we must maintain what Judith M. Bennett calls "essential epistemic humility"[159] in order to avoid an anachronistic analysis of a historical subject or, conversely, to avoid judgment of modern phenomena through the prism of our lived experience. But the double-gaze is insufficient without comic book literacy and contextualization of the nun character within her graphic evolution.

---

[155] I use the term "mendicant" here in the meaning "a member of a religious order . . . combining monastic life and outside religious activity," not referring to their practicing of mendicancy, that is, begging. See Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "mendicant." Some notable women involved in the early creation of female mendicant communities include Saint Clare of Assisi, Saint Margaret of Hungary, and Saint Agnes of Bohemia. For more information see, for example, Penelope D. Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession*: Religious Women in Medieval France (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); or Leslie Knox, "Audacious Nuns: Institutionalizing the Franciscan Order of Saint Clare," *Church History* 69, no. 1 (Mar 2000), 41–62.

[156] Henry Ansgar Kelly, "A Neo-Revisionist Look at Chaucer's Nuns," *Chaucer Review* 31, no. 2 (1996): 115.

[157] Maureen Moran, "The Art of Looking Dangerously: Victorian Images of Martyrdom," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32, no. 2 (2004): 479.

[158] Moran, "The Art of Looking Dangerously," 479.

[159] Judith M. Bennett, "Medievalism and Feminism," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 322.

The following pages will approach nun characters in comic books as archetypes, involving standardized characteristics and storylines, employed in some cases as stock characters. The nun character is, moreover, intrinsically related to contemporary romanticization of the Middle Ages, as well as to Victorian medievalism, and carries graphic baggage acquired over centuries of popular depictions of religious women. Though the sexual charge of certain depictions of nuns can be shocking to readers unaccustomed to what is standard comic book artwork, the specific issues surrounding the visualization of female characters in general will not be addressed here. That is a thorny topic in its own right, and occupies the full attention of other authors.[160] Nor will we discuss the more intensely sensational use of nun characters in erotic comics, though such series technically also fall under the umbrella of "nuns in comics."[161]

## NUNS AS STOCK CHARACTERS

The examples on which this study draws are taken from comic book series that are widely circulated and accessible, with a reasonably large readership, or comic book series that are popularly regarded as classics. Nun characters appearing in purely supporting roles or in peripheral series[162] are not deeply analyzed in this study, although their characteristics were noted and can generally be said to agree with the wider findings. Faced with a plethora of examples, how can we tease out what makes the nun character stand out within the context of female characters in general? Comic books unabashedly use stock characters built on established tropes in order to move the story along or to invoke a previously established context as shorthand for peopling a comic book world which has to be squeezed into thirty pages or less. A quick survey of other female stock characters, such as superheroines or supporting characters for male superheroes, shows how unique the nun is among these. Among the stock female characters who are at the same time sex objects, there are the *femme fatale* (buxom and dressed in black), bimbo (cheerful, blonde, and dull), sexy librarian/journalist/hacker (usually acting as a living information-gap filler),

---

[160] Some informative introductions to this topic can be found in the works of Jeffrey A. Brown, who examines the evolution of roles given to female action characters in film in "Gender and the Action Heroine: Hardbodies and the 'Point of No Return,'" *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 52–71. Sheri Klein looks at the depiction of women in media, particularly comics, in "Breaking the Mold with Humor: Images of Women in the Visual Media," *Art Education* 46, no. 5 (Sept 1993): 60–65.

[161] See, for example, Dave Sheridan, Robert Crumb, Spain Rodriguez, Jaxon, Roger Brand, and Pat Ryan, *Tales from the Leather Nun* (San Francisco: Last Gasp Eco-Funnies, 1973).

[162] There are many small-scale or locally printed comics that could feature nun characters, but because of their limited circulation it is next to impossible to identify every occurrence of a nun in them

ingénue (fresh-faced and simple), sexy android or alien (emotionless and perfect), and flawed alpha female (who just wants a man). Of course, there are also non-sexual characters, such as the hag (an old woman of frightful appearance) or mum (a romantically undesirable supporting female of advanced age). Finally, there are masculinized women: the Amazon (buff and militant), the barbarian (not unlike the Amazon, rough, athletic, and featuring costumes of either ancient or savage design), and the powerful princess (usually a girl of immense family wealth). There are also combinations of the above. [163] Nuns do not come close to any of those existing stock characters, yet as a group they have a unique and consistent set of characteristics.

Nuns become stock characters in that they have slavishly repeated storylines and characteristic traits that can be referenced in shorthand by a comic book artist or author. The consistently repeated visual signifiers are a generic habit (white wimple, black hood), exaggerated religious paraphernalia, superior strength or physicality, and their weapons, usually a sword or a gun. Some of the characteristic elements are more abstract or demonstrative, such as the capability to perform supernatural feats in the form of miracles while encircled by or in opposition to other members of the convent, and, finally, the explicit motivation tied to their religious vocation. There are other characters that are shown with various degrees of revealing clothes, or with a substantial stylization. However, in all nun characters the presence of these elements is basic.

The weaponry most often attributed to nun characters is very telling. Comic books tend to include a lot of violence, and a character's weapon or fighting skills are often an integral part of their persona. The recurring fighting style of nuns is perhaps closest to that of the Amazon or barbarian characters. Unlike other female comic book characters, such as Supergirl, they do not rely on super powers of a sci-fi or wildly imaginative sort but they are endowed with supernatural powers of divine origin.[164] Moreover, they use "phallic" swords and guns and hardly ever choose

---

[163] For more about female characters in comics, in part via film studies, see, for example, Jeffrey A. Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011); Hillary L. Chute, *Graphic Women* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* ([N. p.]: Exterminating Angel Press, 2009).

[164] There is no literature dealing with the useful and relevant difference between "super powers" and "supernatural powers." While miracles performed by religious figures are never referred to as "super powers," the concept of "supernatural" is frequently related to acts of God. See, for example, Marie Pagliarini, "'And the Word Was Made Flesh': Divining the Female Body in Nineteenth-Century American and Catholic Culture," *Religion and American Culture* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 225. The term "super powers," commonly used in comic book literature, has no inherent connection to religion or Christian tradition.

contact-free weapons.[165] The Amazon and barbarian heroines—such as Xena from *Xena, Warrior Princess*, She-Ra from *She-Ra: Princess of Power* (1985), and Red Sonja from *Conan the Barbarian*[166]—use axes and swords as well but, unlike nuns, they are almost entirely fabricated, and not present among us today.

The storylines involving nuns are also formulaic. There is no nun without a convent, and they are always contextualized as either acting within or against their community; the nun super-heroine is acting either as an agent of the sisterhood or within the framework of nun "escape stories." These are usually set in some dualistic Judeo-Christian conflict, although they vary between good and evil alignment.

Some or all of these key signifiers are utilized to form a single character within one of many visual languages, which creates the visual presentation that readers experience when they open up a comic book. The traits are then filtered into what Neil Cohn calls a "visual language" (VL) the most common of which are "Mainstream American VL" (or "Kirbyan"), "Cartoony American VL" ("Barksian"), Japanese VL, and Independent VL.[167] There are, of course, almost infinite variations created by artists within a single visual language, but here are some examples for orientation.

Kirbyan visual language is the most common one in American and Western comic books, and gives its characters a clean, athletic look that is indicative of traditional superheroes or other typical genre characters. Within this visual language, nun characters often take on a more suggestive physicality, though this is more the effect of the visual language than an intentional

---

[165] Other comic book heroines prefer contact-free weapons: for example, Catwoman (Selina Kyle) from Batman and Wonder Woman (Diana Prince) from the eponymous series use whips, women in X-men use noncontact restricting powers, and the Black Canary (Dinah Lance) uses a lethal sonic cry. It is true that Wonder Woman has an Amazonian back-story but her adventures involve an invisible airplane and other modern oddities.

[166] All the heroines appear in comic books and their film adaptations in various incarnations and under different names. Xena appeared in Topps Comics in 1997–98 and Dark Horse Comics in 1999–2000; the four-volume collected edition of *Xena, Warrior Princess* appeared in 2000. She-Ra, a.k.a. Princess Adora appeared for the first time in the TV series *She-Ra: Princess of Power (*Filmation Associates, 2005–7); there were 93 episodes in three seasons. Red Sonja, whose origin goes back to the 1930s, is still best known for Richard Fleischer's film *Red Sonja* (Dino di Laurentiis, 1985).

[167] See Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 139–44, 153–56. The "Kirbyan" is named after the pioneer comics artist Jack Kirby (1917–94), who created Captain America and went on to work for both Marvel Comics and DC. The "Barksian" refers to Carl Barks (1901–2000), who worked for the Disney Studio and became famous for his comics about Donald Duck and as the creator of Uncle Scrooge.

message about the personality of the nun. Comic book series that use a more traditional visual language include *The Magdalena*, *Le Troisième Testament*, or *Warrior Nun Areala*.[168]

Barksian and Independent comic books both encompass a wide range of subcategories and variations. Barksian visual language is distinguished by the simplicity of facial features and comically exaggerated physicality, for example, bulbous noses or hands composed of only four fingers. Independent visual language contains all those variants that cannot be readily categorized into Kirbyan or Barksian standards. Several comic book series featuring nun characters fall into a grey area between Barksian and Independent—the illustrations are simplified for humorous effect, but include many aspects which are idiosyncratic to a specific artist. Comic book series that use this range of visual languages include *Suore Ninja* and *Sister Claire*, and *La vie passionnée de Thérèse d'Avila* also belongs here.[169]

The range of visual languages would be incomplete without including Japanese visual language. Because of the enduring popularity of manga comics both domestically and in the West, this visual language has crossed borders through translation, adaptation, and imitation. As the users of Japanese visual language frequently exploit exoticized Christian European tropes, many Japanese comic books feature nun characters, often combined with subplots involving vampirism. While these comics are often detached from European culture or misinterpret it, the visual signifiers listed earlier are still employed. Within Japanese visual language, there is often an emphasis on dress, community, and supernatural powers (in opposition to super powers, which are not from God but rather from outer space) associated with the nun character. Comic book series that use Japanese visual languages include *Helsing* (whose nun characters are sometimes featured in their own chapters), *A Certain Magical Index*, and *Trinity Blood*.[170]

---

[168] Joe Benitez et al., *The Magdalena,* vol. 1–12 (Top Cow Productions, Apr 2010–Apr 2011); Alex Alice and Xavier Dorison, *Le Troisième Testament*, vol 1–2 (Glénat; Grafica, June 1997–Nov. 2013); Ben Dunn, *Warrior Nun Areala*, vol. 3, issues 1–19 (Antarctic Press, Dec 1995–Feb 2001).

[169] Davide La Rosa and Vanessa Cardinali, *Suore Ninja*, vol. 1–6 (Star Comics, Mar 14, 2013–Jan 2014); Elena Barbarich, *Sister Claire*, vol. 1–2 (Dec 2013–ongoing as of Sept 2014), http://www.sisterclaire.com/ (accessed March 20, 2020); see also Bretécher, *La vie passionnée de Thérèse d'Avila.*

[170] Kouta Hirano, *Helsing*, vol. 1–10 (Young King OURs; Shonen Gahosha, Sept 1999–March 2009); Kazuma Kamachi and Chuya Kogino, *A Certain Magical Index* (Toaru Matjusu no Indekkusu), vol. 1–14 (ASCII Mediaworks, Nov 2007–ongoing as of Oct. 2014); Sunao Yoshida and Thores Shibamoto, *Trinity Blood,* vol. 1–2 (Kadokawa Shoten; Apr 2001– Nov 2003).

It would also be possible to include the popular and widely circulated series *Claymore*.[171] Although the community of female characters in this series are not explicitly nuns, they work in concert with the Church, and are formed on a Joan of Arc visual theme as female warriors in medieval armor, carrying the massive swords after which the series is named. Inducted into their order through vows and initiation, they are transformed into winged creatures that draw heavily on European Christian conceptions of angels mixed in a Gothic way with gargoyles, demonstrating all the characteristics of religious women or crusaders on the periphery of monasticism.

The characteristic features of nuns in comic books are neither accidental nor innovative. Rather, the most significant characteristic of religious women in comic books is their dogged reliance on historical tropes. Nun characters are a vehicle for romanticized medievalism: they are almost always placed in a Gothic environment, and all the elements of their presentation draw on remnants of various phases of medievalism. We have examined how the nun character exists as an abstraction and a stock character, but before attempting to understand this in contemporary application, we must ask: when female monastics are contemporary, and the nun characters interact with modern characters, why are they retrofitted into a hyper-romanticized medieval context and where do their storylines originate?

## MEDIEVAL SOURCES

From the beginning, nuns as Christian women were characterized by religious fervor and vigor and their initial presentation came through the hagiography of early Christian martyrs. JoAnn McNamara gives as an example Saint Perpetua, who, in order to brave the ordeals of the arena,[172] is said to have "systematically stripped herself of all that had made her a woman,"[173] and the strength which allowed her to bear her violent fate is characterized as "masculine." The fortitude that can be seen in modern comic book nuns has a very long pedigree. The tradition of depicting religious women with swords is also initiated from the outset with iconography that depicts martyr saints with the weapons of their own execution.

---

[171] Norihiro Yagi, *Claymore*, vol. 1–26 (Shueisha; Jan 2002–ongoing).

[172] Supposedly living at the turn of the 3rd century CE, Saints Perpetua and Felicity were early Christian martyrs. Their legend was recorded in both Latin and Greek, describing their martyrdom in an arena by decree of the Roman emperor Septimius Severus; they were set upon by wild beasts and swordsmen until they died of their injuries

[173] Jo Ann McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998: 31.

In addition to the Virgin Mary, whose story is nothing less than heroic, nuns preferred to dedicate their convents to female patron saints, the most popular being the heroic martyrs: Saint Catherine (of Alexandria), Saint Margaret, Saint Thecla, and Saint Agnes of Rome.[174] The popularity of Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret is particularly interesting. Saint Catherine, who was possibly a fabricated character, but enjoyed a great repute especially at the time of the Crusades, is a saint of heroic spiritual combat, a martyr, depicted not only with the wheel, but frequently with a sword. Saint Margaret is also usually depicted with a sword, and although in this case the weapon is symbolic of execution rather than sword-fighting, a legend depicts her killing a dragon. Both Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret appeared in visions to Joan of Arc, and according to a legend it was at a church consecrated to Saint Catherine that Joan of Arc found her sword, thus making the symbolic weapon an active one.[175] Saint Thecla rejected social conventions by cutting her hair and serving the budding Christian community in the same manner as a man,[176] while the hair of Saint Agnes of Rome was miraculously transformed into armor around her body to protect her from harm. In general, saints are a type of pictorial stock character, recognizable by their symbolic attributes; their images immediately communicate not only aspects of their legends, but also their supernatural powers.

Rather than be held to their secular roles, dictated by gender, the women of the early Christian Church seized opportunities to expand their influence and possibilities. Virgins (both men and women) enjoyed a special position within the Christian community, including enhanced spiritual roles. For females, virginity raised them to the same level as men, or even higher, by relieving them of the qualities that made them women. While popular conceptions of sexuality today see gender as binary, at that time, as McNamara states, "monastic theorists tended to conceptualize a third gender, apart from the two sexually active genders, harking back to the old view that, without active sexual and reproductive activity, gender did not exist."[177]

Later in the Middle Ages, religious women were organized into controlled communities and monasticism was standardized. Theologically and practically, female monastics entered a negative feedback loop; they were increasingly pushed into dependence on the *cura monialium*

---

[174] See McNamara, *Sisters in Arms,* ix.
[175] These legends and others can be read in a range of sources. See, for example, Alban Butler, *The Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs, and Other Principal Saints* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1866).
[176] McNamara, *Sisters in Arms,* 25.
[177] McNamara, *Sisters in Arms,* 144.

(obligation for the care of nuns), while simultaneously they were derided as weak and burdensome. The respect that had been garnered through the preservation of virginity "lost its transformative power when virgins were thus reduced to allegorical brides."[178] This re-feminized role opened the door to the later sexualization and consequent demonization of womanhood. Women took on more restricted, cloistered roles, even as convents were more and more disenfranchised. In claustration, the community became inseparable from the identity of a nun, and religious women seeking freer expression joined alternative communities. At the same time the visual signifiers of a spiritual vocation, such as the distinctive habit, were formalized.

## VICTORIAN MEDIEVALISM

Nuns in contemporary comic books are a shorthand embodiment of Victorian medievalism—Gothic in the literary sense of the word. They are placed in environments loaded with popular cultural symbols of the Gothic: raw stone interiors with vaulted ceilings, ominously illuminated by candles, and halls filled with statues of saints raising their hands in solemn prayer. Although the style of comics today may seem fresh and modern, readers unconsciously use their "double-gaze" in order to project the medieval qualities of a Victorian romance onto their twenty-first-century page, utilizing much of the symbolic information that has accumulated through the ages. Thus, regardless of being set, for example, in a kung-fu zombie story or a space western, an anachronistic buxom nun in a black habit and armed with a sword seems more predictable than a fat nun equipped with a neon-green habit and a laser gun, although the setting may rather suggest the latter.

In many ways, nun characters in Gothic literature, for example in the work of Charlotte Dacre, an English writer of Gothic novels,[179] mirrored the masculinized religious woman of the early Christian Church, violating the sensibilities of nineteenth-century contemporaries with their brutal affront to feminine ideals. According to Moran, in the presentation of stories about saints and martyrs, nineteenth-century readers were again forced to accept a duality of gender roles encompassed by the women who were depicted, who were lovely yet fierce.[180]

---

[178] McNamara, *Sisters in Arms,* 44.
[179] James A. Dunn, "Charlotte Dacre and the Feminization of Violence," Nineteenth-Century Literature 53, no. 3 (Dec 1998): 326. Dacre (ca 1771–1825), who also wrote under the pen name Rosa Matilda, became famous for her novels, most prominently Zofloya (1806), introducing aggressive and violent women.
[180] See Moran, "The Art of Looking Dangerously," 480.

The voyeuristic romantic tension that places nuns in a precarious position in some comic books (although no female of any profession avoids being objectified if the author so wishes or the visual language lends itself to that) owes much to the nineteenth century. Nuns of the nineteenth century, not unlike their late medieval sisters, were caught between the confused desires of a society that was both highly suspicious of monastics and also titillated by them. As Susan P. Casteras noted, a cloistered nun, as a "symbolic lily of virginity and spirituality, much like her secular sister in real life, was enshrined in an atmosphere of mystery and unattainability that made her simultaneously innocent and repugnant, titillation in her *hortus conclusus* of femininity and chastity."[181] The art of the era reflects this, using religious pretenses to present beautiful young women on the canvas. Simple graphics illustrated the texts of stories of girls escaping corrupt convents, where an anti-Catholic public assumed that priests abused the sisters as in a harem, further compounding the element of fantasy.

One of the characteristic plot formulae—that of the "escaped nun"—also has its visual roots in the nineteenth century. Susan M. Griffin suggests that, as part of the anti-Catholic movement, and spurred by Protestant suspicion of Catholic practices in ante-bellum North America,[182] stories of escaped nuns were used to vilify monastic institutions. These stories included fabricated and exaggerated testimonies of girls escaping convent life, demonizing the convent as a brothel or prison overseen by crooked priests. Medieval sources were held up as earlier evidence of the corruption of Catholic nuns. The escape plots of modern comic books trade heavily on these features: the woman is victimized by the convent environment, abused by the clergy, and in the case of one series, *A Certain Magical Index*, a nun is literally rescued from a convent by agents of the Anglican Church.[183]

Again, these nun characters are re-imagined in a stylized medieval environment, engaged in harsh acts of corporeal penance and housed in dark and cold Gothic interiors. Although the modern world exists all around the convent and other characters periodically intrude with all the trappings of the twentieth century, in the comic book world, the community of nuns is frozen in an imagined time.

---

[181] Susan P. Casteras, "Virgin Vows: The Early Victorian Artists' Portrayal of Nuns and Novices," *Victorian Studies* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 182.

[182] Susan M. Griffin, "Awful Disclosures: Women's Evidence in the Escaped Nun's Tale," *PMLA* 111, no. 1, Special Issue: *The Status of Evidence* (Jan 1996): 93–107.

[183] See Kamachi, *A Certain Magical Index*, vol. 10, chapter 52 "The Greatest Gift," Aug 22, 2012.

In the 1980s, when Umberto Eco famously announced that we were living in a "new Middle Ages,"[184] cosmetic medievalism was certainly being embraced in popular culture. Elements of medievalism appeared especially on television, while comic books were reaching an explosive mass circulation and the feminist movement was riding high on power suits and shoulder pads. Female counterparts to male heroes garnered extra attention: Conan had Sonia, Hercules had Xena, Superman flew alongside Wonder Woman, even the Joker, a villain, was accompanied by Harley Quinn, and successful female characters got their own series. In the period of increasing enthusiasm for comic books, that is, in the 1970s and 1980s, there was, incidentally, a development of the scholarly study of medievalism, with several conferences being organized and journals being initiated.[185] Gothic images of combative nuns began appearing in comic books at about this time, spreading rapidly both as supporting characters and headliners of their own series. A synthesis of the strong female characters introduced in the 1980s and the concurrent romanticized recycling of Victorian medievalism, bolstered by real academic research, was packaged with all the awe and sentimental idealization that could be expected of secular, yet thoroughly contemporary artists.

The comic book storyline of pugnacious sisters, sisters in arms both spiritually and literally, channels not only the Victorian romance but the medieval paradigms of martyrdom and sacred heroism that the nuns of those idealized times embraced. As Jeffrey Brown points out, in an era of alternative histories and historical fiction, modern comics act as a sort of belated wish fulfilment for the emancipated woman, where females engage in the service of the Church, in a physical way previously only available for men, in a direct and radical rejection of claustration and secular feminine norms.[186] Such a role validates and even necessitates the medievalist framing of nuns and their storylines in comic books, despite the subsequent anachronism it creates.

## NUNS IN CONTEMPORARY COMICS

Having outlined the defining characteristics of nun characters in comics, as well as some of their historical roots, we may wonder what this cultural phenomenon means for the end user. How does

---

[184] Umberto Eco, "The Return of the Middle Ages," trans. William Weaver, in *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays* (1986; New York: Mariner Books, 1990), 58.

[185] For example, *Studies in Medievalism*, founded in 1979, stemming from Western Michigan University's Medieval Institute, itself founded in the 1960s. The International Conference on Medievalism first met in 1986, originally named the General Conference on Medievalism. In the early 1990s, some prominent contemporary scholars of medievalism, such as Richard Utz and Tom Shippey, received their doctoral titles and entered the academic world.

[186] Jeffrey A. Brown, "Gender and the Action Heroine," 52.

this character fit into the current debate about role models and the movement to create desirably strong female characters?

Two measures have been created regarding the presence of female characters in comics: the Smurfette Principle and the Bechdel-Wallace Test. The Smurfette Principle, proposed by Katha Pollitt, an American essayist and poet, is a tongue-in-cheek summary of female presence in most TV, games, and comic books not aimed specifically at a female audience: that is, a group of men is "accented by a lone female, stereotypically defined," who is usually "a little-sister type, a bunny in a pink dress and hair ribbons."[187] It takes its name from Smurfette, the character from *The Smurfs*, whose only defining attribute is that she is female and a romantic foil. She is not even a true Smurf, but originally a creation sent by the evil wizard Gargamel to infiltrate the Smurf community.[188]

The stock nun character, however, really triumphs as a champion of women. Not only does a nun intrinsically reference a community of women, but she is most often accompanied by that community, either ostentatiously or in the background. Moreover, like the heroines of Amazon- or barbarian-themed series, nuns naturally lend themselves to being contextualized with other women, while avoiding being undermined as barbaric or mythical. Nun characters also stand a good chance of avoiding being reduced to romantic foils, and so their stories have to move beyond the traditional twists offered to a "Smurfette" character. This quality is also what allows nun-themed comics, such as *Sister Claire*, *Warrior Nun Areala*, *Suore Ninja*, and episodes within other series, to pass the Bechdel-Wallace test. Although not an absolute measure of feminism, this test proposes an orienting standard. For a work to pass, it must: 1) include at least two women; 2) who have at least one conversation; 3) about something other than a man or men.[189] These qualifications may seem relatively easy to meet, but it is surprising how small the number of works is that achieves even this level of gender inclusion. Few popular comic book series would pass the test but all of the comic books with nun protagonists do so safely; it is partly because women themselves are their creators.

---

[187] Katha Pollitt, "Hers; The Smurfette Principle," *New York Times*, April 7, 1991, sec. 6.

[188] See Pollitt. The Smurfs are a community of small blue creatures inhabiting a forest, created by the Belgian artist Pierre Culliford (Peyo) in 1958, which have since become a global franchise in many media.

[189] Alison Bechdel, *Dykes to Watch Out For #1* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1986), 22. Bechdel, an American cartoonist, credits her friend Liz Wallace as a co-author of the test.

The contemporary appeal of the nun character was caught in Terry Gross's interview with the author Ann Patchett, in which she said:

> I was with nuns the whole time I was growing up and they were my role models, they were career women who didn't have children. They were women who said I have this thing that I really want to do. I want to devote my life to God and not get married and not have children.[190]

These are women relieved of worldly expectations, free to focus on their vocation. If they can be attractive and handy with a sword as well, what is not to like for women, and men, in a world where the choice between marriage and children or claustration is no longer a burden? The nun character, primarily understood as a female trope and vehicle for the exploration of historical themes, in the canon of comic book heroines is hardly a bad thing for the consumers of comic books.

To conclude, the essential role that history plays in modern media is undeniable, and yet the representation of historical materials is often altered to suit the needs of a writer or artist. In the case of nun comic book characters, the manipulation of their historical elements speaks to the cultural atmosphere in which they are reinterpreted. This phenomenon is, however, hardly a new development, as artists and writers of the past made use of nun characters in the same way. As the Victorian medievalists represented their subjects in an altered and romanticized way, so did late medieval artists in their reinterpretation of earlier saints. For the nun archetype appearing in today's comic books and graphic novels, the layers of re-presentation have a dynamic history of their own.

---

[190] Terry Gross, "Patchett: In Bad Relationships, 'There Comes A Day When You Gotta Go,'" *Fresh Air,* National Public Radio, aired Jan 23, 2014, transcript at http://www.wbur.org/npr/265228054/patchett-in-badrelationships-there-comes-a-day-when-you-gotta-go (accessed March 20, 2020).

# CHAPTER 5: PAGANS AND WITCHES IN COMICS

This chapter will examine the first collections of the following comic book series: *Angela: Asgard's Assassin*,[191] *Angela: Queen of Hel*,[192] *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*,[193] *Heathen*,[194] *Northlanders*,[195] *Black Road*,[196] *Witchblade*,[197] *Rat Queens*,[198] and *Hemlock*.[199] After a short introduction to the theme of witchcraft and Paganism in general, the instances of these two elements in comic books will be examined. Each comic will be introduced in more depth at the beginning of its section.

Our understanding of the ties between Paganism and witchcraft are inherited from a long legacy of cultural development which, for the Paganism of the Vikings and the pre-Christian magic of the early Britons, were recorded in the Middle Ages and are referenced in the context of the Middle Ages and medievalism. For the sake of this chapter, I will be considering Paganism and its associated magic to be tied to religion in the same sense that the magical "miracles" created by nun comic characters are dependent on their religious affiliation. Without their religion there is no magic. We are not accustomed to thinking of Paganism as a religion *per se*, but this is rather an effect of the Judeo-Christian context of modern Western culture which undermines most other religions as not being a "religion" but rather some sort of superstition or merely the subject of mythology. As comedian Ricky Gervais summed up this logical fallacy: "There have been nearly 3000 Gods so far but only yours actually exists. The others are silly made up nonsense. But not yours. Yours is real."[200] In the case of Pagan characters, they are all part of some religious system, without gods (not unlike Shinto, which is respected in the West, and is a religion without a god)

---

[191] Kieron Gillen et al., *Angela: Asgard's Assassin—Priceless* (Scott, QC, Canada: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2015).

[192] Marguerite Bennett et al., *Angela: Queen of Hel—Journey to the FUNderworld* (Salem, VA: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2016).

[193] Marguerite Bennett et al., *1602: Witch Hunter Angela* (Scott, QC, Canada: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2016).

[194] Natasha Alterici, *Heathen: Vol. 1*, (Bethesda, MD; Missoula, MT: Vault, 2017).

[195] Brian Wood et al., *Northlanders: Book 1 "The Ango-Saxon Saga"* (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2016).

[196] Brian Wood et al., *Black Road: Volume One "The Holy North"* (Berkeley: Image Comics, 2016).

[197] Caitlin Kittredge, Roberta Ingranata, and Bryan Valenza, *Witchblade (2017), Vol. 1* (Los Angeles: Top Cow, 2018).

[198] Kurtis J. Wiebe, Roc Upchurch, and Ed Brisson, *Rat Queens: Volume One: Sass and Sorcery*, ed. Laura Tavishati (Berkeley: Image Comics, 2015).

[199] Josceline Fenton, *Hemlock: Issue One* (Self-published, printed through Lulu.com: mild tarantula, 2010).

[200] Ricky Gervais. @rickygervais, Twitter Post, December 29th 2015, 2:33 AM. https://twitter.com/rickygervais/status/681785157808992256 (accessed March 20, 2020).

or with recognizable gods of European heritage. Viking-Pagans have many gods which we associate with mythology, but for the story world of these characters the gods are as consequential as the Judeo-Christian god. This chapter will look at Paganism as a medievalist trope in graphic novels and comics, especially regarding female characters whose superpower is magic.

The type of magic practice or Paganism varies widely between the comics in the corpus. "Pagan" designates only a non-Christian European type of spirituality, there is a lot of space for variety. Most of the series, such as *Angela: Asgard's Assassin*, *Angela: Queen of Hel*, *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, *Heathen*, *Northlanders*, and *Black Road*, reference the well-known Scandinavian pantheon, while *Witchblade*, *Rat Queens* and *Hemlock* (also some characters in *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, in a different universe but the same story world as in the *Angela* series) have story worlds built on a nontheistic religion, still referencing medieval European folk practices. The witchcraft appearing in these comics ranges from a nature-based, pre-Christian practice, to the type of magic which Michael Bailey, in his study of the evolution of the definitions of witchcraft from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern era, tied to the vision of witches developed in the early modern era, thanks to the popularization of witch hunts.[201] These two simultaneously existing depictions of witchcraft reflect the pre- and post-Christianization phases of Europe: "In the late-antique and early-medieval periods, as Christianity imposed itself on classical and Pagan systems of magic, ecclesiastical authorities emphasized the demonic nature of most magic, and thus condemned most non-Christian ritual."[202] The worship of Pagan goddesses was tied to witchcraft as well. Bailey demonstrates how church officials created definitions of witchcraft built on previous texts; for example, fourteenth-century Aragonese inquisitor Nicholas Eymeric cited at length the famous tenth-century *Canon Episcopi*[203] at length, which condemned sorcery in general and included the following passage:

---

[201] Michael D. Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages," *Speculum* 76, no. 4 (October 2001): 990, https://doi.org/10.2307/2903617 (accessed March 20, 2020).

[202] Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft," 989.

[203] Originating in the 10th century, it appears in Gratian's Corpus *juris canonici* of c. 1140 *(Decretum Gratiani*, causa 26, quaestio 5, canon 12) A full version of the text (in a 1939 translation by Henry Lea) is available here http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/witch/canon.html (accessed March 20, 2020).

Some wicked women, perverted by the devil, seduced by illusions and phantasms of demons, believe and profess themselves, in the hours of the night, to ride upon certain beasts with Diana, the goddess of the Pagans, or with Herodias, and an innumerable multitude of women, and in the silence of the dead of night to traverse great spaces of the earth, and to obey her commands as of their mistress, and to be summoned to her service on certain nights.[204]

Witches by the official canonical definition need not be female, but the dominant cultural assumptions imagine practitioners of magic, in the real and historic sense, to be women. Lara Apps and Andrew Gow show in their study on the gendering of witchcraft that the reasons for this are not necessarily flattering; the female gendering originates in the post-Christian construction of witchcraft, as women were considered intellectually weaker and more subject to corruption by the Devil.[205]

Witches are not generally considered to practice in isolation—they are imagined within covens. As was heard in the tenth-century text *Canon Episcopi*, women worship together. This is similar to the presentation of nun characters described in the previous chapter—there is a certain weight achieved in a faceless female group. One of the qualities of being in the group, a convent or a coven, is often sexlessness, both in the concept of gender presentation and the actual access to heterosexual relationships. This both frees and supports the characters to engage in "unfeminine" fighting activities (as they are not tied down by typical secular female concerns, such as cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing), as well as naturally facilitates openly queer characters who are already in a same-sex environment.

What is most interesting about these comics—with the exception of *Northlanders* and *Black Road* and their attempts to be historically accurate—is that their embrace of high fantasy elements like magic and fantastical beings correlates with stories that highlight female agency and heroism, or queer relationships. The appearance of witches as challengers of patriarchal norms has been the subject of scholarly examination; there is Cristina Santos's study on the Queen in the Snow White story, who is portrayed as a witch. The Queen's witch state is defined as follows:

---

[204] Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft," 975.
[205] Lara Apps and Andrew Colin Gow, *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe* (Manchester, UK ; New York: Manchester University Press; Palgrave, 2003), 131–32.

insisting on having a personal sense of identity, sexual and otherwise, aside from her non-biologically imposed motherhood the Queen is perceived as the 'bad mother' or 'witch' because she does not accept the self-abnegating and sacrificial role of the 'good mother.'[206]

As Santos argues in her text, the queen is not young, beautiful, or a potential mother, so she is rendered useless in the context of a patriarchal society, and drama arises from her conflict with Snow White, who is all those things and fits with gender norms. Being a witch, in this case, is a last attempt to retain some sort of agency in her own life. It is questionable if this classic witch character is feminist, but modern portrayals of witches in media are tied with feminist motives.

The connection between witches and feminists in other forms of media has also been addressed in scholarly research. In Meg Lonergan's analysis of the TV series *American Horror Story: Coven* confirms that the series uses the starting witches (as being a feminist perspective anchor) to talk about other modern issues such as:

persistent white supremacy—particularly within academia—the political differences between generations, anti-feminist men's movements (so-called men's rights, the Red Pill,[207] etc.), as well as the diverse subgroups of feminism represented by the diverse characters in the show (including critical disability and environmental feminisms).[208]

Douglas Ezzy, a of sociologist, notes that the rise of witchcraft in comics follows the rise of interest in "white witchcraft" as a combination of interest in neo-Paganism and self-help, wherein

---

[206] Santos, *Unbecoming Female Monsters,* 10.

[207] The term "redpilling" originated as a reference to a scene from the Wachowski siblings' 1999 film *The Matrix*. Morpheus: "No one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself. This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill and the story ends. You wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes. Remember—all I am offering is the truth, nothing more" (*The Matrix*, Warner Bros., 1999). The implication is that we are all in a naïve delusion, and only by taking the red pill (meaning to accept a hard-to-swallow truth) will we wake up to reality. To "redpill" someone is to bring them around to a subversive, conspiratorial way of thinking, which is believed to be the hidden truth. Redpilling in online media is noted in Viveca S. Greene, "'Deplorable' Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies," *Studies in American Humor* 5, no. 1 (2019): 31–69, https://doi.org/10.5325/studamerhumor.5.1.0031 (accessed March 20, 2020).

[208] Meg Lonergan, "Witches, Bitches, and White Feminism: A Critical Analysis of American Horror Story; Coven," *Render: The Carleton Graduate Journal of Art and Culture* 5 (2016): 1, digital publication https://carleton.ca/arthistory/wp-content/uploads/Lonergan_WitchesBitchesWhiteFeminism.pdf (accessed March 20, 2020).

witchcraft is really a path to the American dream: success can be obtained by the individual, through the help of a little magic. He concludes that this phenomenon progressed further in comics after 2010 thanks to increased social consciousness, progress in queer, trans and women's rights, and also thanks to the expansion of media onto online platforms, self-publishing, and the constant growth of popular comics conferences.[209]

The series which have been selected for this chapter were chosen along the following criteria: critical success and popular circulation; the main protagonist is Pagan with access to magic powers; the main protagonist is either a witch or witch-related; the main protagonist is female with a supporting collective of other female characters (that is not a token female character[210]), magic/Paganism/witchcraft play an essential role in the identity of the character and the story world. They will be introduced and described in relation to each other, with special attention the role that magic, Paganism and witchery plays in the series, and how this corresponds with an emphasis on modern social issues, such as feminism and queer love.

## *HEMLOCK,* VOL. 1–4

This self-published series originated as a webcomic,[211] written and illustrated by British cartoonist and animator Josceline Fenton. Prior to the debut of *Hemlock*, the artist had also been actively publishing work on the website Deviant Art, and had two comics, *Circle* (2009) and *Ukin* (2010), both out in print. The series was first published online in 2010 after Fenton branched out from her Deviant Art page to launch the series, opening with a blacked-out page with white text floating on the lower half with a quote from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: "And I will show you something

---

[209] Douglas Ezzy, "White Witches and Black Magic: Ethics and Consumerism in Contemporary Witchcraft," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21, no. 1 (January 2006): 19.

[210] Tokenism theory states that "tokens" are individuals representing a minority collective which comprise less than 15% of a group's total. Regarding tokenism and women, see Lorainne Code's chapter on the subject: "Tokenism," *Feminist Research: Prospect and Retrospect*, edited by Tancred-Sheriff Peta, (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 1988), 246-54.

[211] See Josceline Fenton, "Hemlock," *Hemlock*, first modified June 10th, 2010, http://hemlock.smackjeeves.com/comics/1132876/2-50/. Last accessed November 10th 2019, the website is now defunct.

different from either your shadow at morning striding behind you or your shadow at evening rising to meet you, I will show you fear in a handful of dust." At the time of writing, the series continues to be updated with collections available in print, while Fenton actively appears at comic conferences and artist events.

In illustrating *Hemlock,* Fenton uses Indian ink with small size brushes on A4 heavyweight paper sometimes with pens for details, and scans the final product for online publication, performing small digital corrections. Comic book artists traditionally use larger paper at about 18x43cm for sketching for the average trade paperbacks which measure at 17x26cm, but Fenton's finished printed comics measure roughly 15x21cm, resulting in both her images and the printed comics to hold roughly four frames per page, which is incidentally also comfortable for



**Figure 18** Promotional Art, © Fenton 2010.

viewing on a laptop screen. The image is then scanned, cleaned up digitally, then speech bubbles and other details are added using Manga Studio Debut v4.[212] The artist notes on the comic's official webpage that the choice of illustrating in black and white was largely a practical choice for faster updates and cheaper printing (though she quips that she also likes the aesthetics). As far as inspirations go, Fenton offers the following list:

> aubrey beardsley, john bauer, ted naifeh, mike mignola, tove jansson, egon schiele, gustav klimt, sailor moon, woodblock prints, german expressionism, dolls, action figures, traditional/folk/national costume, historical fashion, street style, cute ceramics, graphic art, calligraphy, haute couture, animation, a whole bunch of comics and manga, the list goes on and on. mostly visual stuff, if something looks cool I will want to draw it. faces too— people who have interesting or slightly odd faces are the ones i want to draw. my sister says this usually means a weird nose. [lower case text and punctuation in the original][213]

---

[212] Josceline Fenton, "FAQ," *Hemlock*, first modified June 10th, 2010, http://hemlock.smackjeeves.com/faq/. Last accessed 10.11.2019, the website is now defunct.

[213] Josceline Fenton, "FAQ."

Because of the smaller scale of the image size and the weekly publishing of one page at a time, the story moves slowly, but there is significant attention to visual detail. A single page contains minimal text and substantial visual information, placing Fenton in the "show, do not tell" mode of storytelling. The medievalist foundations of the series are evident in the visual style, rather than the writing. Fenton presents the characters drawn in a detail-rich blend of medieval folk-dress and Victorian fashion, and draws on medieval folktales to design her characters. One character, Baba Yaga is a popular legendary witch from medieval Slavic folklore;[214] she supposedly flies in a mortar and uses the pestle as a weapon, lives in a house with chicken legs, and switches between good and evil roles in the fairy tales. Fenton has used the folklore character loosely here, and the rest of the characters connected to Fenton's Baba Yaga in this series are of Fenton's own creation, though she notes that they are roughly based on Scandinavian and Russian folklore. Fenton has imagined a new chivalric folklore around Baba Yaga, which places the old witch at the head of a royal dynasty, followed by her three sons: Sindri, Simo, and Sisu. As a folkloric plot mechanism, Baba Yaga ages each time she is asked a question, and each of her sons has been promised one question. The settings in the series are either charmingly folksy, as in the cottages of the local humans; medievalist urban, such as the market where Lumi stops on her way to visit King Simo; or the grand and Gothic palace of the King of all witches.

Lumi is the protagonist of the series: she is considered a young witch (though hundreds of years old), who had started out as a rather inadequate witch schooled in the "old ways" before the story begins. Lumi lives in a home built into the shell of a giant snail named Richmond and is accompanied by a three-eyed frog changeling named Tristan, who died at the age of nineteen and became Lumi's animal familiar in the body of a frog through a mishap in the ritual of the witch's familiar. Though the series mentions no other witches marrying, Lumi happens to be married to one of Baba Yaga's three sons, Sindri, who tricked her into coming close to the cave where he was imprisoned, slipping a wedding band around her ankle. The magical ring changes sizes and shrinks to such as size as to crush Lumi's ankle when Sindri calls to her from any distance. Sindri used to be King of the witches' realm, but he was cast out and his younger brother Simo became King, while the youngest, Sisu, continued to work closely with his mother and assist her in her magical tasks.

---

[214] Concisely described in: Brian Cooper, "Baba-Yaga, the Bony-Legged: A Short Note on the Witch and Her Name," *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, 1997, 82–88.

Lumi does not live with her husband Sindri because she is rather afraid of him and his violent, magical manipulations of her will, and rather puts her efforts against him and her marriage; needless to say, theirs is not a romantic relationship, but rather a plot device. As summarized in the review of the series published by Sloane Leong in *Comics Journal*:

> Most of her time is spent concocting hemlock-heavy poisons to keep her evil husband Sindri sedated, at the threatening request of King Simo, but Sindri has developed a tolerance to his wife's poisons, and his awakening presence is bound to cause problems for Lumi and his brother rival Simo.215
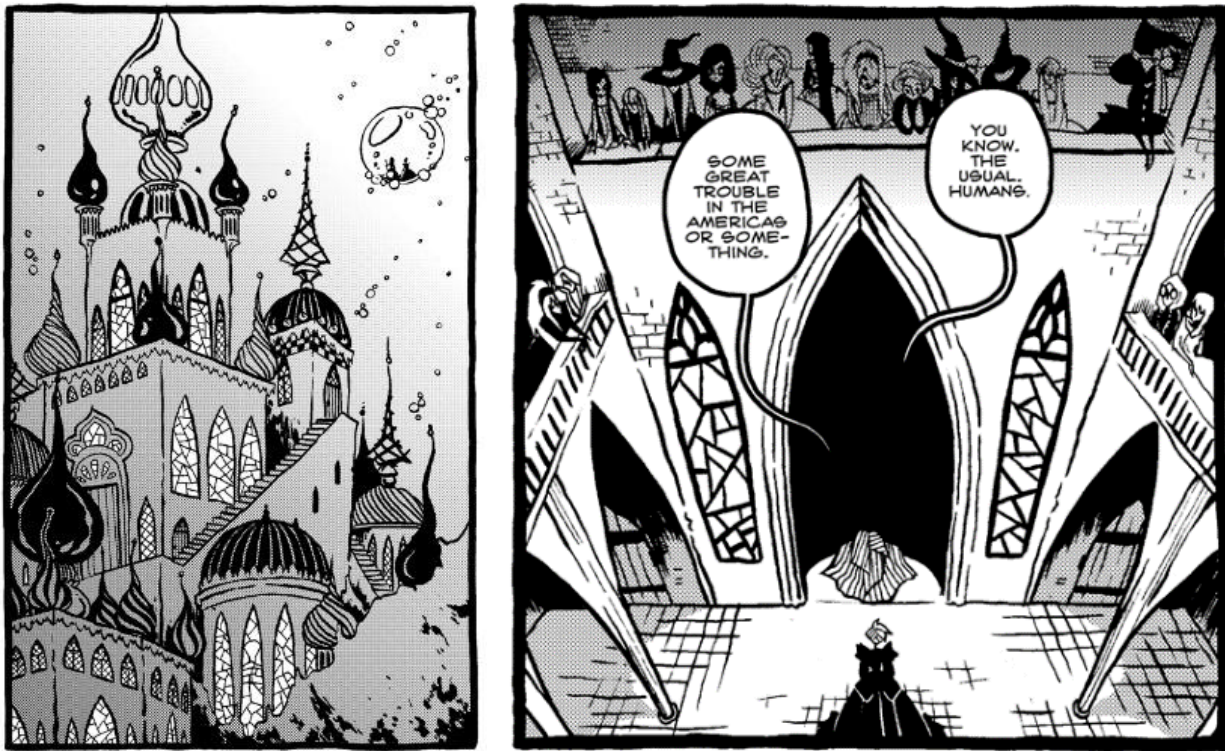


**Figure 19** (*Hemlock,* Images 2.70 and 2.75), © Fenton 2011.

There are male supporting characters, but the society of witches is female. Baba Yaga's three sons, Sindri, Simo, and Sisu, have positions and titles stemming from Baba Yaga's own position of absolute authority over all the magical beings. The witches are a closed sisterhood, but outside of the royal court they live individually. The story includes witches court, overseen by

215 Sloane Leong, "Hemlock," *The Comics Journal*, December 4th, 2017,
   http://www.tcj.com/reviews/hemlock/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Baba Yaga's middle son Simo, which the readers see when Lumi is summoned in front of King Simo to discuss her responsibilities towards her husband, who the king would like dead. This is located at an underwater castle, which is again a medieval structure with references to Russian architecture. The inside is strongly inspired by Gothic architecture, featuring high pointed arches and stained-glass elements, with a brick and masonry texture to the walls. Aside from King Simo himself and a few guards (none of whom are implied to be witches), all the inhabitants are clearly female gendered witches, identified by their dresses. I note here "clearly female gendered" because Fenton's renditions of faces, hair, and body forms do not themselves always clarify gender—the king's guards could easily be read as female, but it is hard to make a conclusion.

Baba Yaga's progeny are described in Fenton's folklore as being created through a union with an entire people (Sindri is from the union with the night people, Simo of the dawn people, and Sisu of the day people), rather than through Baba Yaga's relationship with a single male individual. There is no talk about marriage, family life, childbearing, or other traditionally feminine concerns. Witches in this series are set apart from mankind, apparently born or created as witches. When retelling the story of her being tricked into her marriage, Lumi is described as "a young witch," but there is no note that she was made into a witch or trained into being one.

The primary medievalism of this series is its narrative reliance on Scandinavian mythology and its visual references to imagined medieval folk attire. There are many Gothic elements as well, beyond the somber tone of the storytelling. In Sindri's cave there is a secret chamber: a dark,



**Figure 20** (*Hemlock,* Image 4.87), © Fenton 2013.

**Figure 21** (*Hemlock,* Image 4.89), © Fenton 2013.

**Figure 12** (*Hemlock,* Image 5.10), © Fenton 2014.

100

Gothic crypt where the head of Sindri's dead horse is secretly interred, with vaulted ceilings and a mysterious talking skull. The illustration's style, working heavily on the black and white balance, also adds to the Gothic atmosphere, enhancing the shadows and black figures outlined in white, and the starkness of light, as seen in the example images (Figures 20-22) .

Fenton seems to have chosen the time setting partly thanks to the fashion of the era—characters' garments are painstakingly drawn in detail reminiscent of the French designer Erté (Romain de Tirtof), with the dramatic black and white line work seen in the work of Aubrey Beardsley or Harry Clark. All these artists worked through the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century and all drew heavily from medievalist inspiration, depicting figures in reinvented historic garb. Having set the story in a rural background gave the artist permission to retrograde many of the innovations of the nineteenth century, and so Fenton omits items which seem too modern: lamps appear rather than electric



**Figure 23** (*Hemlock,* Image 4.106), © Fenton 2013.

lights; travel is done by horse or by foot rather than by bicycle, automobile, or train; natural "potions" are sold instead of modern medicine. Fenton also omits innovations such as telegrams, telephones, courier services, or anything looking like a post office. There is no mention of worldly government or civic duties that were in full effect at the time. While she is usually seen with a quill (as above in Figure 23), perhaps the only contemporary technology appearing in the series Lumi does use is a modern pencil, which was an invention from the late nineteenth century; the series is set not in the real nineteenth century, truly, but in the Victorian medievalist nineteenth century.

Fenton has numerous other opportunities to reference the era; for example, she could have easily incorporated it in the language used by the characters. It is not a rule, but often comics will try to closely mimic the dialogue of the time. Other medievalist comic series, such as the *Mouse Guard* series by David Peterson,* a collection of medievalist animal fables based on a story world populated by High Medieval mice, give the mice a period-appropriate voice and also period-appropriate forms of speech including medievalized soliloquies and royal proclamations. In the case of *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, which will be described in length later in this chapter, the characters both use and intentionally play with the language of Shakespearian dialogue. In

*Hemlock*, however, while there are some attempts to give certain characters' dialogue a more lyrical edge to emphasize pseudo-folkloric origins, nothing sounds like dialogue composed in the nineteenth century. Occasionally the dialogue swings between modern causal—"So, I'm just gonna close my eyes now . . ."[216]—to slightly more formal utterances such as "It reeks of human. It cannot possibly be a familiar."[217] Sloane Leong's review sees this use of language as a positive attribute for readers, saying: "While many of the main cast members, including Baba Yaga and her three servants, hail directly from old folklore and communicate with some of the lyrical syntax of their traditional origins, Lumi and Tristan provide a more contemporary entry point for readers with their modernized witty language."[218]

Lumi works with magic, primarily potions that she cooks up, and does not carry any weapons other than the odd ceremonial dagger (Figure 24), wooden spoon or broomstick. Swords appear in the series (Figure 25), but there are no combat or fight scenes, though there is a fair amount of blood to accommodate the need of certain ingredients for spells. There is also a reoccurring emphasis on the fact that the magic that Lumi uses is an older or more earth-based folk magic, which sets her apart from the other witches, who use newer contraptions such as wands and crystal balls, as being particularly antiquated, which is also a type of medievalization.
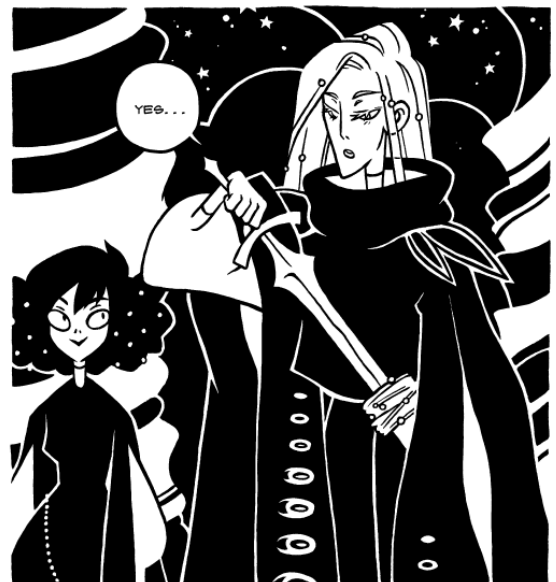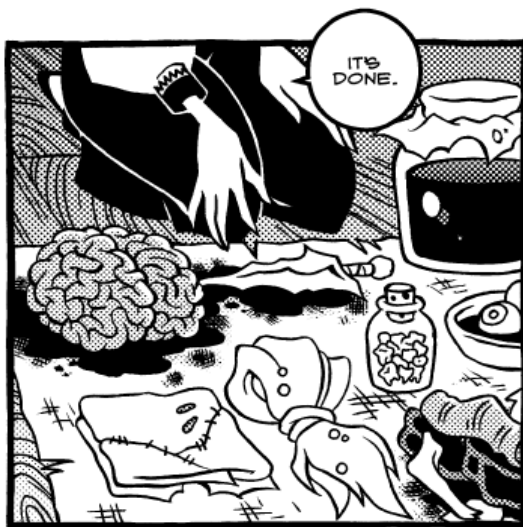


**Figure 24** (*Hemlock,* Image 5.58), © Fenton 2018.

**Figure 25** (*Hemlock,* Image 5.25), © Fenton 2015.

---

[216] Fenton, *Hemlock: Issue One*, image 1.48.

[217] Josceline Fenton, *Hemlock: Issue Four* (Self-published: mild tarantula, 2013), image 4.37.

[218] Leong, "Hemlock."

In sum, *Hemlock* presents readers with a witchy sisterhood in a medievalist setting, telling the story of a witch of the old ways struggling to unravel Fenton's folklore and find a way to dissolve her marriage. Both the visual presentation and the story contain strong elements of medievalism, while not being overly self-reflective of the historic content, as the next comic, *Heathen,* is. Additionally, while *Hemlock* does not contain any openly homosexual characters, heteronormative romance is uprooted in Baba Yaga's non-romantic relationships with her sons' fathers (of an infinite number, as all males of a people form the collective father for each son), and Lumi's quest to be relieved of her unconsummated, loveless marriage.

## HEATHEN, VOL. 1–4

This series is published by Vault, partly crowdfunded through Kickstarter, written and illustrated by Natasha Alterici. The lettering is done by Rachel Deering, who is granted equal billing on the cover. The first issue of the series was so popular after its 2017 debut that it sold out and went into a second printing within the year, [219] and was selected as a Young Adult Library Services Association's 2018 Great Graphic Novel for Teens. [220] Moreover, the creators have been approached about a film adaptation which was announced in 2018, with Constantin Films and Prime Universe.[221] The series has six issues released, with issues #7 and #8 planned for a future date, at the time of writing.

*Heathen* has very clearly stated social and political leanings. The main protagonist is a young woman named Aydis, and the story follows her interactions with an imagined Viking people and a lightly interpreted Nordic mythology. The series clearly advertises itself as feminist and queer, with the official blurb "Born into a time of warfare, suffering, and subjugation of women, she is on a mission to end the oppressive reign of the god-king Odin," on the back of every issue. Aydis is forced to leave her community, and at a loss she decides to take on Odin and rescue the Valkyrie Brynhild,[222] who Odin has cursed to live at the top of a mountain surrounded by magical

---

[219] See Rich Johnston, "Heathen #1 Sells Out, Goes To Second Print – And It's All Thanks To Lesbian Vikings," Bleeding Cool, March 15, 2017, https://www.bleedingcool.com/2017/03/15/heathen-1-sells-goes-second-print-thanks-lesbian-vikings/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

[220] See Young Adult Library Services Association, "2018 Great Graphic Novels for Teens," n.d., http://www.ala.org/yalsa/2018-great-graphic-novels-teens (accessed March 20, 2020).

[221] See Vault, "HEATHEN Returns!," Vault Comics, January 15, 2019, https://vaultcomics.com/heathen-returns/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

[222] The character is loosely inspired by the mythical figure Brünhild, Alterici is referencing the spelling used in the Eddic poem "Helreið Brynhildar."

fire. As only a warrior with a pure heart can break the curse and pass through the fire, Aydis takes it upon herself to break the assumed masculine requirement for the challenge, and indeed frees Brynhild. The two make a deal to help each other end the reign of Odin. The gods and the other Valkyries are upset by this event, and even more by Aydis'ss mission to destroy Odin, so they set out to place barriers in the paths of Aydis and Brynhild. The series is currently ongoing, so the story has not yet reached its conclusion.

The story is queer in the sense that it talks openly about the issues faced by lesbians in an imagined medieval, conservative Scandinavian community (though there is no evidence that lesbians were, as a rule, subjected to exile or execution, as the comic implies).[223] The protagonists' struggles and the stands she takes against pseudo-historic suppression speak volumes more about the modern era and will be more relatable to a teenager from a conservative suburb in Wisconsin than transmitting any reliable information about the Middle Ages. The
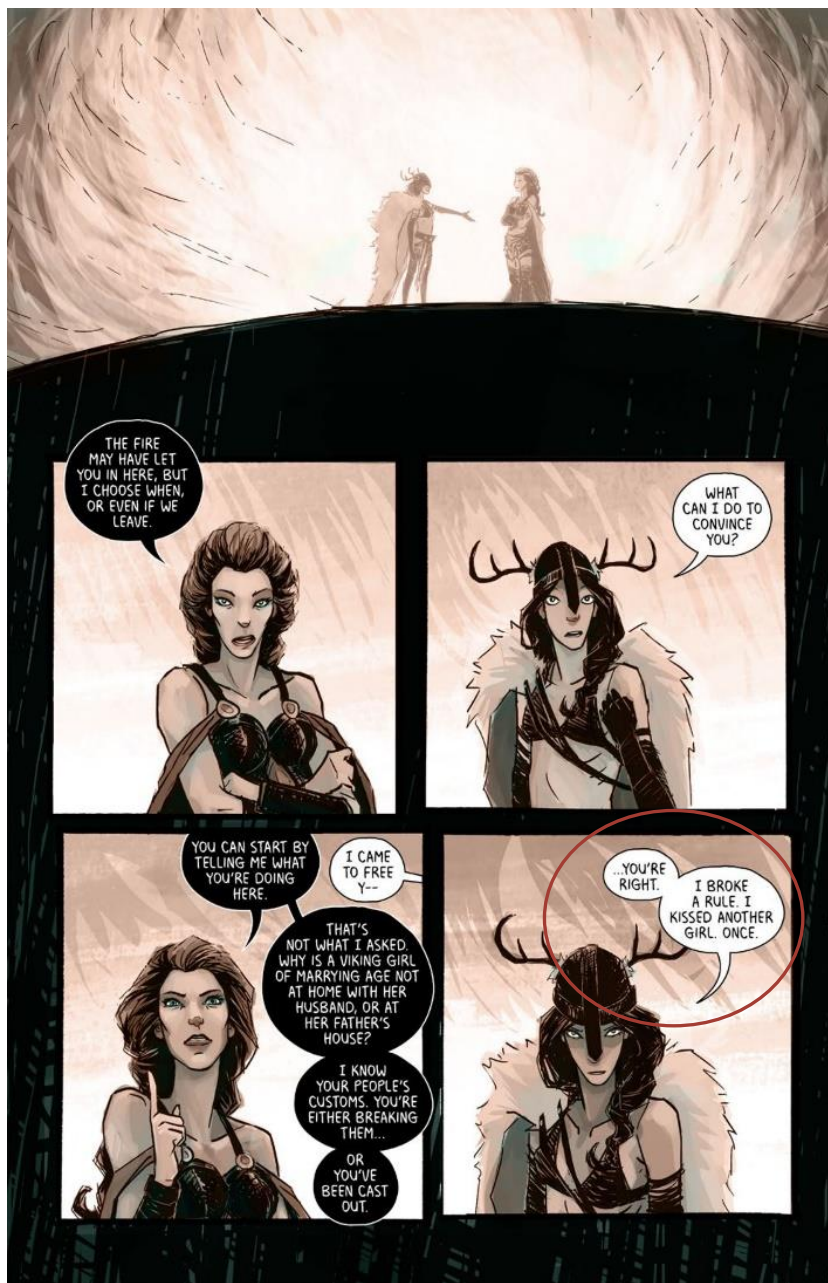


**Figure 26** (*Heathen*, Issue 2, 17), © Alterici 2017.

language used to talk about homosexuality is strongly referential to modern, Christian complaints that the kiss the two girls shared is "unnatural" or in some way "breaking rules." There is no evidence to indicate that Viking culture held any such rules beyond using some slurs as insults, and the research by Carol Clover into medieval Norse society suggests that women might have very well been able to take same-sex lovers.[224]

While *Heathen* works hard to emphasize a support for queer women and a feminist revision of history, the feminist aspect is a modern spin on already misinterpreted history. The angst at being tied to kitchen is rather a reaction to 1950s American society, rather than a reaction to the realities of Nordic communities in the Middle Ages. Archeological evidence shows that there were female warriors, that women were buried with honors, held high political positions, and were in many ways equal to their male peers. There is also evidence of strong societal reliance on gender roles, but these did not necessarily dictate who one could sleep with, and there appears to have been some flexibility regarding sexual orientation.[225]

---

[224] Carol J. Clover, "The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia," *Scandinavian Studies*, *Norse Values and Society*, 60, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 147–88.
[225] See Clover, "The Politics of Scarcity."

One of the important symbols which appear in *Heathen*, and also in *1602* and *Rat Queens*, is horned headgear. The antlers or horns play a masculinizing role, in that Aydis puts them on as part of her warrior outfit, to fulfill the assumedly male role of freeing Brynhild. Also, the antlers have a geographic and temporal connotation. Like many renditions of the public imaginations of "Paganism" or Vikings—or simply as a popular music festival accessory of today's fashion conscious—antlers appear as one of the dominant visual elements of the depiction of Aydis as part of her Viking attributes. This is ironically written into a dialogue with the Valkyrie Brynhild who notes that the ornamentation is not typically Viking. This might be new information for many readers who are used to seeing Pagan characters outfitted with a romantic set of antlers, as can be seen on *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*'s magical woodland character The Enchantress, where it appears without comment. While taking time to comment on the antlers, the characters seem oblivious to the fact that they are dressed in attire reminiscent of leather bikinis, which make their fur shawls and capes redundant. At no point has archeological evidence suggested that medieval Nordic women



**Figure 27** (*Heathen*, Issue 2, 10), © Alterici 2017.

106

dressed themselves, in the dead of winter no less, like Red Sonja.[226]

This moment of feigned concern for historical accuracy has nothing to do with upholding visual realism in the series. Rather, the previous page in the issue shows Aydis sewing her helmet with determination, a typically female activity which will enable her character to present herself in masculine drag, as Alterici seems to imagine that lesbianism must entail an overt confrontation with gender presentation. Part of Aydis's queer identity is tied up in uncorroborated assumptions about medieval Scandinavian society and the very modern notion that transgressing gender roles is signaled by challenging gendered dress.

It is odd that Alterici did not abandon the leather bikini as a visual indicator of Aydis's transition into her role as a warrior. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that the leather-and-chainmail bikini is already a medievalist comic staple, thus there is no reason for Alterici to remove it, since it also serves as a visual reminder of Aydis's sexuality, and her position as a warrior is only secondary, having arisen from her acceptance of her sexual orientation in the face of exile from her community. The enduring nakedness of the characters can also be attributed to what is called "fan service," as suggested by the use of scantily clad characters as semi-erotic subjects for alternative covers by guest artists which are included in the issues.
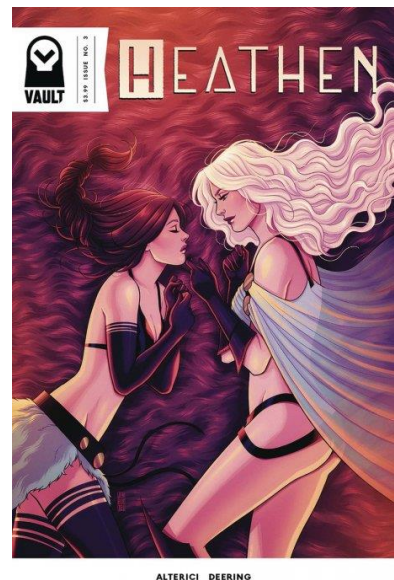


**Figure 28** No. 3 Variant Cover (*Heathen*, Vol. 1), © Jen Bartel, 2017.

The medievalisms of *Heathen* primarily draw on modern simulacra of the Viking age. Anachronisms abound, but the warm sepia color palette, the abundance of leather, fur, chainmail, snowy rural landscape, rustic huts, and the medievalist staple tavern all reliably draw the reader back into a medieval mindset. Fighting is done with shields, swords, bows, and battle axes; daggers and spears appear as accessories. It seems more necessary to create a situation which requires a medieval weapon to be displayed than to solve physical confrontation in the more historically accurate manner of fists and whatever heavy objects are laying around. Nordic mythology is referenced, and Issue 4 starts off with a *Beowulf* reference to insert some historic authenticity through association.[227] Yet, there is

---

[226] Red Sonja is described in Chapter 7.
[227] The theme of authenticity is explored in: Clements, "Authenticity."

no attempt to maintain a facade of realism: animals talk, the mythical Valkyries and Norse Gods are involved actors in the story, no one gets cold marching through the snow in a leather bikini.

It is unclear if a queer story necessitated a very sexually liberal Freyja,[228] the inclusion of Valkyries as a separate group of characters, or if imagining Freyja and the Valkyries this way seemed like a promising setting for a queer story. The portrayal of Odin as a misogynistic, controlling deity seems forced, a way to focus Aydis's anger at her community on a single symbol of oppression. Alterici surrounds Aydis with female characters, including letting Aydis visit the castle where the all the Valkyries live despite not being a Valkyrie herself; meanwhile Aydis's only male companion is a young man who is literally mute and primarily passive in the adventure. This is a strong reversal of the female tokenism typical in older comic book series, where the female characters were often restricted to the role of supporting the male protagonist, often quietly and without agency.

Meanwhile, the members of the Valkyries, along with Freyja, Brynhild, and Aydis are linked together in a way reminiscent of the nun comics. The Valkyrie sisterhood resides in a sacred castle in the "godlands," their only obligation is to do their God's (in this case, Odin's) work, and the greatest disgrace is to be thrown out into the secular world. The Valkyries are socially structured in a hierarchical sisterhood like a nunnery, however with Freyja in the "abbess" position the sisters are granted substantially more romantic freedom.[229] This, however, does not include the freedom to marry or participate in secular gender roles. In fact, Brynhild's punishment for disobeying Odin is to be expelled from the Valkyries and marry a mortal. Part of Brynhild's curse is to be artificially made weak and helpless in her mountain top prison, waiting for some warrior (who she could have easily bested in her previous role) to rescue her so she can be married again, a cycle which is embarrassing for a formerly powerful Valkyrie, and then she must endure each husband's aging and subsequent death, while she continues to be immortal. This is similar to *Hemlock*; heterosexual marriage appears in the story as a horrible curse forced upon a female character by a magically stronger male character, which then destroys the female character's strength and autonomy. The plot's emphasis on portraying issues with sexuality and inclusion of commentary about gender roles is a departure from the nun comics, which avoided lesbian

---

[228] Again, the spelling of the name is Alterici's choice.

[229] Freyja secures human servants and voluntary sex workers to service the Valkyries while they are on rest leave at the castle in the godlands.

storylines in favor of more Victorian "nun rescue" or escape stories, where the runaway sister separates from the community in order to participate in secular gender roles. Aydis follows the medievalist nun standards of having a medieval weapon (a bow), and female comic book combat standards in that she has a non-contact weapon. It will be interesting to see how the series will develop further and what position Aydis will have in relation to the Valkyries.

## RAT QUEENS, VOL. 1–5

The series is written by Kurtis J. Wiebe and has been published by Image Comics since 2013. It was nominated for the 2014 Eisner Award for Best New Series and won the 2015 GLAAD Media Award. The Illustrations for issues 1–8 were done by Roc Upchurch, Tess Fowler illustrated *Braga* #1 with Kelly Fitzpatrick providing color, and issues 9 and 10 were illustrated by Stjepan Šejić. Tess Fowler returned as the illustrator in issues 11–16, with coloring done by Tamra Bonvillain. There was a reboot in 2017 illustrated and colored by Owen Gieni who continued on until issue 15 of the reboot. Issue 16 saw a complete replacement of creators, following the team who executed the special *Swamp Romp*, due out in April 2019, with story by Ruan Ferrier, art by Priscilla Petraites and color by Marco Lesko. The series was initially met with rave reviews, but as the series carried on, fans got frustrated with the slow and incomplete developments in the story, the revolving door of artists and issues with the inner politics between creators; Wiebe admitted that "it is no secret *Rat Queens* has had its share of controversies."[230] The series continues to be popular: even its reboots. For the sake of this text, I will be focusing on issues 1–5 as they are contained in Volume 1, *Sass and Sorcery*.

It is hard to better summarize the impression that *Rat Queens* wishes to make than the official series blurb, which appears on each cover of the trade paperbacks:

> They're pack of booze-guzzling, death-dealing battle maidens-for-hire, and they're in the business of killing all gods' creatures for profit. It is also a darkly comedic fantasy series. This modern spin on an old school genre is a violent monster-killing epic that is like Buffy meets Tank Girl in a Lord of the Rings world on crack!

---

[230] Kurtis Wiebe, "This Is Me Now," *Inside the Mind of Kurtis J. Wiebe,* January 24, 2019, https://kurtiswiebe.com/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

It is significant that the blurb touches on modern feminist media icons that are popular among comic book consumers: *Buffy* and *Tank Girl* (both exist in both comic and screen form; *Buffy* is a comic based on the TV series and *Tank Girl* is cult classic film from 1995 starring Lori Petty in



**Figure 29** *The Rat Queens: Hannah, Violet, Dee and Betty*, © Weibe and Upchurch 2017.

the eponymous role based on the hit comic). The characters from *Rat Queens* build on these past icons and sound like the results of social media audience analytics. Wiebe spent years developing the concept of the series with artist Roc Upchurch, fine tuning the characters from the initial negative reactions to the *Goblinettes*—Wiebe and Upchurch's first collaborative, feminist project—to the final version of the series.[231]

The series follows the characters through a stream of adventures; first, they are assigned a minor mission which reveals a larger conspiracy in the local government, meanwhile they have angered a gigantic ogress who they must fight, and then the conspiracy takes them to another secret, and they must rescue their sworn enemy from kidnapping. The looseness and the speed with which the heroines jump from one adventure to another is characteristic of medievalist adventure series, such as *Conan the Barbarian*, wherein the depth of the adventures is less important than the thrill of the action. Each of the characters represent some class of magical being:

---

[231] Kurtis Wiebe, "Rat Queens Interview with Kurtis Wiebe," *Geek and Sundry*, May 5, 2014, https://geekandsundry.com/rat-queens-interview/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Hannah the "Rockabilly Elven Mage" who is something of a spell-casting demon, Violet the "Hipster Dwarven Fighter" who carries a sword and occasionally sports a beard, Dee the "Atheist Human Cleric" formerly from the cult of N'rygoth, still capable of some magic, and Betty the "Hippy Hobbit Thief" whose primary contact with magic is her constant consumption of magic mushrooms. The beings closest to looking human, Dee and Hannah, are the practitioners of magic, while the two very obviously fantasy beings, Violet and Betty, are more worldly.

Like *Heathen*, *Rat Queens* focuses on its female characters, not because that is simply a legitimate thing to do when half of the population and roughly half of comic book readers are women,[232] but as a political statement. In a 2014 interview, creator Kurtis Wiebe was aware that an all-female cast goes against the grain:

> With Rat Queens in particular, it's the opportunity to do something different and to make some positive changes in a quickly changing industry. To be part of this new era of creators who embrace the diversity of the real world by representing it in comic books with a diverse cast. It's been amazing to see the love coming from the fans who are gay, straight, black, white, big, small, old and young. I've never seen such a wide variety of fans in my life as a comic writer and I'm absolutely honored to be right there alongside their excitement. It's opened my eyes in a lot of ways, especially because I was worried that Rat Queens wouldn't be given a chance. An all-female team fantasy book created by two guys.233

In a 2015 interview with Image Comics, *Rat Queens* artist Tess Fowler stated: "We live in a society that ostracizes noisy, outspoken women. It makes outcasts of them. The heart of RAT QUEENS is the love between such outcasts. That's something a lot of people can relate to. Including me."[234] It should be noted that Fowler had a falling out with the project within a year of the interview[235]

---

[232] Brett Schenker, "Facebook Fandom Spotlight: Who Are the US Comic Fans?," Graphic Policy, February 1, 2014, https://graphicpolicy.com/2014/02/01/facebook-fandom-spotlight-who-are-the-us-comic-fans-5/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

[233] Wiebe, "Rat Queens Interview with Kurtis Wiebe."

[234] Tess Fowler and Kurtis Wiebe, *Rat Queens Untangled with Tess & Kurtis*, interview by Image Comics, November 5, 2015, https://imagecomics.com/features/rat-queens-untangled-with-tess-kurtis (accessed March 20, 2020).

[235] She accused the project founders of sexism and went on a public campaign claiming that her work and the work of female contributors was not equally valued and compensated, and cited Upchurch's private issues with his wife's accusations of domestic abuse.

and did not contribute to issues after 2016, but her statement communicates the framing of *Rat Queens* as a reaction to contemporary society rather than a project of medievalist fantasy purism. Medievalism in this case is a tool for transmitting modern ideals about social issues.

The creators approached this project explicitly as a medievalist fantasy, and play with the genre by openly commenting on the genre norms and parodying the speech style of characters in series such as *Prince Valiant*. Alternatively, when modern-day references are used, medievalism is inserted back into it.

Some examples of this medievalism include Violet's line: "We can sit around and bitch or we can make some monsters bleed. And my sword is hungry for blood."[236] This very in-genre exclamation is met with immediate ridicule: Betty retorts "Really?" and Violet revels in the cliché, saying "I have been sitting on that one for a week. It is terrible, isn't it?" "The worst," confirms Betty, taking the words right out of the reader's mouth. As can be seen in Figure 30, the series dialogue heavily plays on known genre stereotypes, openly flaunting them and picking apart their problems. This sets up the awareness of the story world and open



**Figure 30** Demonstrating medieval awareness, not parody. (*Rat Queens*, Issue 2, 3), © Weibe and Upchurch 2015.

disagreement with the parts of the story world that go against the uglier parts of modern society, specifically addressing issues in the roles of women, trans people, the queer community, and people of color. There are no characters representing the disabled, but perhaps they will be included in future issues.

---

[236] Wiebe, Upchurch, and Brisson, *Rat Queens*, 15.

Going in the opposite direction, elements of contemporary comics are retrofitted to suit the medieval fantasy environment, for example, Betty's comment after a night of partying, "Uggh, I feel like unicorn-doo."[237] Also, Hannah has a necromancer's stone "infused with the tortured souls

of the dead," [238] which functions basically as a cell phone to take calls from her mother. Some background characters are illustrated with very modern piercings or haircuts. Most importantly the gender roles are far afield of older medievalist fantasy. *Rat Queens* takes it upon itself to go after modern gender issues by attacking them within the



**Figure 31** *Rat Queens* cover referencing classic *Conan the Barbarian* cover art.

medievalist story world. *Rat Queens* addresses sexist stereotypes, sometimes even very aggressively subverting them, going on a feminist message of "equality" and implying rather reversed gender roles. The review of the series in *Vice* said, "The Queens are simultaneously annoyed and unapologetic of the trappings of their genre; agency and back story never feel forced but a logical organic extension of living in a world originally designed by white manchildren, that is they are done taking your shit."[239]

Weibe was conscious about the potential awkwardness of two men creating a "feminist" comic, and the series has had some issues in this regard. The original artist, Roc Upchurch, was removed from working on the series[240] due to domestic abuse issues in his personal life. Weibe

---

[237] Wiebe, Upchurch, and Brisson, *Rat Queens,* 52.

[238] Wiebe, Upchurch, and Brisson, *Rat Queens,* 20.

[239] Vivek Gopal, "We Reviewed 'Rat Queens.,'" *Vice*, July 26, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_in/article/zmknx3/we-reviewed-rat-queens (accessed March 20, 2020).

[240] See Albert Ching, "Roc Upchurch Off 'Rat Queens' Following Domestic Abuse Arrest," *CBR* (formerly *Comic Book Resources*), November 21, 2014, https://www.cbr.com/roc-upchurch-off-rat-queens-following-domestic-abuse-arrest/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

himself eventually passed the series into the hands of Ryan Ferrier for upcoming issues in 2019, having been caught up in controversy with former collaborator Tess Fowler. Out of all the series mentioned in this study, this is the only series launched with an all-male creative team, and the only series where a creator's real-life behavior constantly derailed production and development. The ordeals were made into a documentary film by Lonnie Nadler, debuted at the DOXA documentary film festival in Vancouver in May 2018.

It is also interesting that with the male creators this is the only series where the female characters are conspicuously copying the male-character standards of the genre, rather than creating a new dynamic. This is reminiscent to the dynamic, apparent in Hollywood action movies of the 1980s, as described by Jeffrey Brown in his study on female characters in the action movie genre.[241] Again, this does not go unnoticed by reviewers and fans. For example, one reviewer wrote: "End of the day, it is still two dudes writing a comic centered around women. And it does occasional flounder into man-trying-too-hard-to-write-liberated-women territory."[242] Still the series is very popular, and the characters are popular subjects for cosplay.

*Rat Queens* offers a more special perspective of the "girl gang" than other series. In this case, the story is all action, and the characters are held together by their mutual allegiance to the team rather than by their religious affiliation or natural grouping (as in the case of nuns or the Valkyries). Their diversity is their strength in this case, both in the sense of providing a more interesting storyline and in their battle strategy. This is also partly a reaction to the genre, a welcome upgrade of the faceless female collectives.

*1602: WITCH HUNTER ANGELA,* VOL. 1–4

In 1993, Todd McFarlane contracted Neil Gaiman, along with three other recognized authors, Alan Moore, Dave Sim, and Frank Miller, to write one issue of *Spawn*, a dark superhero comic. While doing so, Gaiman introduced the characters Angela, Cogliostro, and Medieval Spawn. All three characters were co-created and designed by series creator, McFarlane. Angela is supposed to be an "angel," more importantly the sister of Thor and part of the Nordic pantheon. She was designed from the start as part of medievalized storyline in the Spawn universe. She is outfitted with a broadsword, Valkyrie head gear, a battle ax, the required "medieval babe" uniform of gauntlets on

---

[241] See Jeffrey A. Brown, "Gender and the Action Heroine: Hardbodies and the 'Point of No Return,'" *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (1996): 52–71, https://doi.org/10.2307/1225765 (accessed March 20, 2020).
[242] Gopal, "We Reviewed '*Rat Queens*.'"

the arms and a flowing skirt cloth head up by an armored belt—very similar to the styling we saw on Brynhild, the Valkyrie from *Heathen*.

Though Neil Gaiman and Todd McFarlane retain rights to the character, she has been filtered through various lenses, as different writers and artists interpret her story. In an earlier six-issue series, *Angela: Asgard's Assassin,* created in 2014, was building on Angela's story within the Marvel universe, crossing paths with the *Guardians of the Galaxy*. The following series, *Angela: Queen of Hel,* came out in 2015, written by Marguerite Bennett, featuring line art by Kim



**Figure 32** Angela's evolution from 1993 to 2016.

Jacinto and color by Israel Silva, as well as sub-story art by Stephanie Hans. The praise for the latter notes: "*Angela* is a great jumping-on point for anyone interested in representation, diversity and women with swords."[243] This sums up the trajectory of Angela's various rebirths: diverse characters and a female-led storyline tied together with medievalism.

Marguerite Bennett, with a spot by Kieron Gillen, wrote the story for the 2016 series titled *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, and Stephanie Hans returned to illustrate the series with additional art done by Marguerite Sauvage (#1), Irene Koh and Jordie Bellaire (#2), Frazer Irving (#3), and Kody Chamberlain and Lee Loughridge (#4).

---

[243] Allen Thomas, "Review: Angela: Queen of Hel #1," *Comicosity*, October 28, 2015, http://www.comicosity.com/review-angela-queen-of-hel-1/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

The story world over each of these series moves farther away from Todd McFarlane's image of Angela, starting with *Angela: Asgard's Assassin* presenting Angela as an autonomous character, moreover with a queer love interest, Sera (later written as "Serah" in *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*). The love interest and relationship between Angela and Sera are front and center in all three series, becoming more explicitly queer with each manifestation. Moreover, each new series gains more medievalist trappings, until *1602: Witch Hunter Angela* is set in the Tudor era with heavy medieval reference. It is perhaps unnecessary to note that the characters also get more and more clothes with each new series.



**Figure 33** Detail (*Angela: Queen of Hel*, Issue 1, 15),
© Bennett, Jacinto, Hans 2016.

The story in *1602: Witch Hunter Angela* follows Angela and Serah as they hunt the Witchbreed: supernatural beings who possess magical powers and cause a disruption to human society and politics. Angela is also seeking to destroy the Faustians, who are not Witchbreed, but are considered even more evil because they have chosen to be endowed with magical powers through a contract with a nefarious force, like the traditional story of Faust, which tells of a human making a deal with the Devil. It is not clarified whether that Angela is human; she seems to have magical attributes, in how her eyes glow, her clothes magically float around her, and she possesses beyond human strength. Serah seems to be human, however, and the antagonistic magical being, The Enchantress, is first presented clearly as a supernatural, but in the end it is revealed that her magic comes from her office (so she is neither Witchbreed nor Faustian), which Angela inherits when she takes on the role, also gaining the associated magical powers.

Partly abandoning Angela's previously developed backstory from the first two series (explained by the front page in this series, introducing it as part of the "Secret Wars" universe of the *Battleworld* in which "each climature is a domain unto itself" overseen by its god Victor Von Doom), in Issue 1 of *1602: Witch Hunter Angela* Serah tells the story of her first meeting and eventual friendship with Angela to their shared upbringing in a convent. The story is told slightly tongue-in-cheek, referencing some key points of the previous two series, and stating: "we were educated in the most genteel and delicate arts, In fine needle work [image showing fencing]. . . in the graceful languages [image showing spell-casting magic] . . ."[244] which is implying that Serah is not telling the story with full honesty.

Beyond this, Serah and Angela are visually very similar, as they were in previous series, and their depiction is cycled through multiple artists within *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*. The writing is tight and keeps within the previous series regarding Serah and Angela's personalities and their relationship to each other; even reference their song "Scarborough Fair"[245] from the first series. The dialogue is delivered in a pseudo-historic dialect: "I heard what Marlowe told thee, back in the Mermaid Tavern, I heard him warn thee of the dark path down which I would lead thee, I shall give up what I am, Serah,



**Figure 34** Detail (*1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, Issue 4, 4), © Bennett, Jacinto, Hans 2016.

if it means thou canst keep who thou art,"[246] Angela says in the final scene, after she has become The Enchantress, having killed the original holder of that title. The main plot of this series is Angela's conflict with The Enchantress, resulting in Serah's death, and Angela's eventual

---

[244] Bennett et al., *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 14.
[245] "Scarborough Fair" is a traditional English ballad which presents a list of impossible tasks a former lover must perform. It fits into the plot of Serah and Angela's love story in that throughout their adventures they often have to go to great lengths to rescue one another.
[246] Bennett et al., *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 82.

resurrection of her lover. In order to resurrect Serah, Angela must kill The Enchantress; killing The Enchantress means taking up the role of The Enchantress, because it is revealed that her character and magic are not her individual identity but are rather properties of the office that she occupies.

The imagery and dialogue dip between medieval and Renaissance references. The story is set in King James's England, perhaps to ease reference to witch hunts and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. However, the imagery of the earlier medieval crusades is used heavily. There are a few ruffed collars, but more swords than gunpowder, and thanks to the woods-to-castle setting the feel is medievalist, with references to King Arthur, the Picts, faeries, and so on.

The artists and writers may have been aiming for the Tudor era, but they conflated it with medievalism to suit the theme, often using a medieval-Gothic aesthetic to create atmosphere matching the story of death and mystery. They constantly present castle interiors, darkened forests, and macabre yet beautiful ghosts.

The characters—villains, heroes, and supporting characters—are female centered. There is reference to a nunnery and the background story of Serah and Angela takes place in a monastic setting. This is clearly a medievalization, as it would otherwise be anachronistic, considering the Dissolution of the Monasteries, sometimes referred to as the Suppression of the Monasteries, initiated in 1536 and 1541 by Henry VIII. While Serah and Angela's connection to the monastery is not emphasized evenly throughout the story, characters reference Angela's membership to the Holy Order, housed at a witch-hunting abbey, and Serah and Angela's direction to kill the "Witchbreed" and the "Faustians"[247] comes from God (who is Victor Von Doom in this series). The Enchantress calls her foe "good Sister Angela" and presents her with a vision of what she thinks will be the highest temptation for a hero: the attention of the Mother Superior.

---

[247] Angela describes the Faustians as different from Witchbreed (or natural born witches) as "The Witchbreed are *born* foul. These new threats [the Faustians] *choose* damnation." Bennett et al., 10.

**Figure 35** The Enchantress' temptation. Detail (*1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, Issue 4, 6),
© Bennett, Jacinto, Hans 2016.

On the opposite side of the fantastical spectrum, the Witchbreed in this series are males or females born into the role, while the Faustians (named after Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus*) have similar powers achieved through bartering a deal with their soul. Incidentally, King James I—for all his fear of witches—turns out to be Witchbreed, and, perhaps predictably, Marlowe is revealed to have gotten all his inspiration first hand, as he is himself a Faustian. Angela considers the Faustians to be much worse, because they had a choice, but this assumption is challenged by the Enchantress—also called "the Dealmaker on the edge of all things," "the Leader of the Wild Hunt," or "the Bride of the Faerie King"[248]—saying that desperate people barter with what they have in order to survive. The Witchbreed and Faustians look human, but turn into horrible monsters when they are in fighting mode. Characters from *The Guardians of the Galaxy* appear in this series,[249] but in an alternative form with alternative names, as magical beings in a gypsy caravan.

The depiction of the Enchantress is high fantasy. She looks like a woodland elf, spends time in dark and mysterious forests, and conducts all her dealings with magic. She also features

---

[248] Bennett et al., *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 20–21.
[249] Because of overlapping comic book universes.

antlers, which, as was seen in *Heathen* and *Rat Queens*, is an often-repeated simulacrum of Pagan dress implying magical or special powers.

The dialogue breaks style often by jumping between contemporary and historic, knowingly playing on genre norms. For example, in one scene, while on a quest to find the source of the Faustian conversions, Angela and Serah enter a suspicious village with pentagram graffiti, and Serah comments: "This village certainly seems. . . Pagan." "Very Pagan," confirms Angela. "One might say . . . Pagandemonium," continues Serah. "This is a pity smile, my sweet," retorts Angela.[250] Venturing deeper into the village, they discover that a public wedding is to take place, and that the marriage requires a blood ritual. The following conversation occurs:



**Figure 36** The Enchantress. Detail (*1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, Issue 1, 20),
© Bennett, Jacinto, Hans 2016.

Serah: "That's rather . . . archaic and anatomical."

Angela: "We do live in the 17th century, my love."

Serah: "Breaking the fourth wall is *my* purview, Angela, *shhh*." [italics in original][251]

The main characters are aware of the elements of the era which would be considered unsavory for twenty-first century, progressive thinking, and also what elements of the contemporary era would not be acceptable in King James's England. Their lesbian relationship is played out on two levels: within their own conversations Angela and Serah carry on as they would in the liberal modern era, however in public they alter even their background stories to neutralize their relationship into something more palatably medieval, presenting themselves as a pair of sister nuns from the same religious order. This is relatable in modern society, in which people in queer relationships present

---

[250] Bennett et al., *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 31.
[251] Bennett et al., *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 34.

their story differently depending on the audience: in this case their medieval or early modern cohort is code for conservative society.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering the series in this study follow similar trajectories as those which have been seen in television series, like *American Horror Story: Coven,* witches are used as a character representing females outside of traditional gender roles. As Lonergan concludes:

> Feminists, like witches, remain unpopular speakers of truth to oppressive powers and patriarchy . . . these stories exemplify playing with history and a construction of a feminist mythos that is not different than other patriarchal constructed narratives (such as Hobbes' state of nature or Locke's signing of the social contract).[252]

With the added element of medievalist fantasy, the possibilities are even more open for characters to use magic in order to exercise their power, and reflect on the uglier parts of medieval society as they have remained in our culture until today, for example, still trying to move past the role of women being limited in media to objects of male attention or mothers.

---

[252] Lonergan, "Witches, Bitches, and White Feminism," 9.

MEDIEVALIST PAGANS AND THE PSEUDO-HISTORIC

*NORTHLANDERS*

*Northlanders Book I: The Anglo-Saxon Saga* is over 400 pages long, but entirely written by Brian Wood, the creator of the series, and illustrated by Dean Ormston, Danijel Zezelj, Davide Gianfelice, Marian Churchland, and Ryan Kelly. David McCaig, who also collaborated with Wood on *Black Road*, and Dean Ormston did the coloring, Travis Lanham was the letterer, and Massimo Carnevale did the cover art for both the series and collection. The collection includes a variety of stories which are linked only temporally, as they all are set between 793 CE and 1014 CE, and geographically within the British Isles. The collection is divided into five parts: Part I "Lindisfarne" (Northern England, A.D. 793);[253] Part II "The Shield Maidens" (Danish Mercia, North of the Humber, A.D. 868),[254] Part III "Sven the Returned" (Orkney Islands, A.D. 980);[255] Part IV "Thor's Daughter" (The Outer Hebrides, A.D. 990);[256] Part V "The Cross & The Hammer" (Occupied Ireland, A.D. 1014).[257] Part III and Part V dominate the collection, while the other three parts seem like afterthoughts by comparison. Part II and Part IV feature female-led stories, and the art is done by female artists, but they are visually the weakest contributions to the collection, and the shortest.

Part I "Lindisfarne" is set in northern England in the late 8th century. The first chapter is the story of a boy named Edwin, who lives near the monastery of Lindisfarne, and is raised by a strict and violent father. Edwin has a much older brother, Cedric, who is equally violent and cruel, and is their father's favorite. As is common in Brian Wood's writing, the mother is absent after dying in childbirth, and is only referenced as a beloved memory. The mother was a "German" Pagan, and though Edwin's father turned to the Christian church for help after her death and raised Edwin within Christianity, Edwin secretly worships the gods "who meant business . . . the old Germanic ones with terrible names and terrible deeds," saying, "I am *her son*, Woden-born and proud"[258] (italics in the original).

---

[253] Wood et al., *Northlanders: Book 1 "The Ango-Saxon Saga,"* (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2016), 9–56.
[254] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 57–104.
[255] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 105–292.
[256] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 293–314.
[257] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 315–454.
[258] Wood et al. *Northlanders,* 21–22.

Wood's choice to phrase this specifically as "Woden-born and proud" is anachronistic to say the least, and more importantly it echoes the speech of white supremacist groups such as Sons of Odin, and groups who identify with Wodenism, as will be discussed in a later chapter. These "Heathen" groups, as they call themselves, are not white nationalist or supremacist as a rule, but many serious hate groups, such as the Proud Boys, have found grounding in Wodenism or have subgroups who identify as such. Wood's choice to regularly return to the theme of absolute faith in one's folk (which he consistently defines as based exclusively on birth, nation, and religion), and his strongly negative portrayal of characters who betray or leave their folk, is problematic through this lens.

Edwin continues to narrate the story, outlining the abuses of the Christian priests, until one day a Viking ship appears at the beach, and Edwin takes the chance to offer the invaders specific directions to the monastery. He is reluctantly accepted by the Vikings, who speak his language, and he agrees to help them further. The next chapter continues the story, starting with the bloody raid of the Lindisfarne monastery. As for Edwin's role in it, he says "I had not guilt, I felt no shame whatsoever . . . this was *right* . . . this was the gods balancing things."[259] However, Edwin's father and brother mount a counter attack with the rest of the men from the nearby village, and Edwin sees them slaughtered. Again, he feels little remorse, and demands that the Vikings take him with them when they leave—which they agree to do so long as Edwin, the small child, proves his strength and fights one of the men. Of course, little Edwin lands a blow on the warrior and sticks a dagger into his hip, and the story cuts ahead to "years later" where Edwin is a man and has been alongside the Vikings for years. He is illustrated to specifically reference his mother's coloration— long red hair and green eyes, to visually emphasize his dedication to his Pagan mother and her heritage, rather than his brown-haired, brown-eyed, and Christian father and brother. Adult Edwin repeats again "I am Woden-born," as he leads his Viking band on a raid.[260] The story ends with Edwin's full adoption of the Northmen's culture, and he is well ranked and respected by them, thus fulfilling the wishes he had at the beginning of the story as a young boy.

Part II presents a story of three women who are holding a fort against a band of Christian soldiers. The title is "Shield Maidens," who are trained female warriors among the Vikings, and despite the name are not necessarily maidens, but women from all walks of life who have been

---

[259] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 39.
[260] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 53.

trained to fight. The story opens with a narration spaced out over multiple frames on multiple pages showing how the Anglo-Saxons of Mercia fought back and persecuted the Danes who had settled in their land, graphically highlighting the butchering of Danish women and children. The characters are introduced; three women—Thyra, Gretta (the narrator), and Lif— shown running from a burning village under the narrative caption "we chose to resist."[261]

The story itself would barely pass the Bechdel Test, as the women primarily talk about their husbands, the men following them, and the men they attack, and then speak even more about their husbands. The women say, "what future is there without men," but then promising under siege that "if we survive this day, I swear to you, you will never need a man's help again,"[262] however the third woman, Lif, who is unmarried, is frequently considered untrustworthy with references specifically to her marital status. The subsequently validate all their actions with reasoning like "that's what the men would do."[263] After a few days of siege and the women attacking those from the Anglo-Saxon band who get too close to their fort, a Christian priest stands outside and chides them about submitting to their husbands, which they do not reject, but rather focus on accusing the Christians of having killed children (and offering to fart in the priest's face). They are performing at this point ideal conservative female behavior, primarily focusing on the issues of their husbands and their children; which are the two themes vocalized by women of the Alt-Right, such as Cecilia Davenport, a blogger interviewed by the *Economist*. She stated: "

> As for female empowerment, there's nothing that has made me feel more empowered in my life than supporting and being supported by a strong man. I think that men and women are better off when we stop fighting nature and allow our distinct identities to shine through, working together as a team. Again: just like race is real, biology is real. Why do so many fight it?[264]

The women of this story fight not in aggression, but in defense only, specifically for the sake of children, and specifically in the memory and for the honor of their husbands.

---

[261] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 63.

[262] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 74.

[263] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 83.

[264] See Cecilia Davenport interviewed in "Women and the Alt-Right," *Economist*, February 1, 2017, https://www.economist.com/democracy-in-america/2017/02/01/women-and-the-alt-right (accessed March 20, 2020).

The women say, "consider us Odin's wolves," in response to being called bitches,[265] again aligning the writing more closely with today's Odinist group speech than any historic reference to early medieval Danish religion. They emphasize their nationality and religion above all, stating that their enemies will "know to *fear* the Danish woman,"[266] but they also know that the Christians outside their fort are not necessarily afraid of them as enemies, but rather because they are an anomaly and the male warriors are unsure how to proceed against three women holding an empty fort. The Christians are represented as "intent on suppressing its women,"[267] and but it is left unsaid how the Danish women are less suppressed. The women arrange themselves into a hierarchy defined by their marital bonds, so that Thyra, who was the wife of an elder, is most respected; Gretta simply has a husband and is thus respected for his sake; and Lif is unmarried and considered unreliable and unhelpful—she is told to be quiet because she does not have children or a husband, and thus cannot be understood to have the motivation to fight (though she fights).

The women escape the siege, Gretta and Lif by swimming away in the night—Thyra goes into the water and walks dripping wet through the surprised Saxon encampment, who allow her to pass through unharmed. The story picks up again seven years later when all the women (Gretta and Lif now described as spinster sail-makers) are reunited back in Jutland. They have recovered part of the hoard left by Thyra's husband back in Danish Merica, and the story ends with all three wealthy thanks to the foresight of Thyra's husband, and back in their homeland.

Part III "Sven the Returned" is the longest part of the series, featuring eight chapters in total. This story, as the title suggests, focuses on Sven and his return to the north from Constantinople. The setting of the first chapter starts in Constantinople in the year 980 CE, when Sven of the Orkney Islands is fighting a ship of competing Norsemen in open water. One of the opposing warriors gives Sven a message that Sven's father was killed and that the whole settlement and inheritance belongs to him, but that Sven's evil uncle Gorm has claimed it in his absence. Sven decides to go home, and the story skips ahead six weeks later to rejoin Sven on a ship at Pentland Firth of Orkney. His fellow passenger notes that, though he is dressed like a foreigner, he remarkably has the "legs and stomach"[268] for the harsh northern waters, which is again the writer,

---

[265] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 66.
[266] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 83. [Emphasis in the original.]
[267] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 91.
[268] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 113.

Wood, emphasizing the blood and soil myth that people are inherently tied to the land of their birth through physical attributes and an affinity for the environment there.

Once on land, Sven is immediately recognized by his uncle's men, who apprehend him and take him to Gorm. Sven sees the villagers, "my father's people"[269] he calls them, have suffered under Gorm's leadership. Gorm shouts abuses to Sven, "You grew up into the disgrace you were, hopeless with a blade, a weak-limbed, knock-kneed mother's boy, clinging to her skirts,"[270] almost repeating the abuses shouted at Edwin in the first chapter. Wood seems to be repeating the image of toxic masculinity,[271] featuring the abuse of young men or boys by older men who accuse them specifically of physical weakness and attachment to women, a fear which was popularized after WWII by Philip Wylie[272] and other (such as Edward Strecker,[273] and today by writers such as Jordan Peterson who has termed this the "Devouring Mother"). Wylie describes the danger of men attached to their mothers, here noted as the abstract idea of "Mom"

> Mom had already shaken him out of that notion of being a surveyor in the Andes which had bloomed in him when he was nine years old, so there was nothing left to do, anyway, but to take a stockroom job in the hairpin factory and try to work up to the vice-presidency. Thus, the women of America raped the men, not sexually, unfortunately, but morally, since neuters come hard by morals. I pass over the obvious reference to the deadliness of the female of the species, excepting only to note that perhaps, having a creative physical part

---

[269] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 120.

[270] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 121.

[271] "Toxic masculinity" is a term from social sciences that describes norms of accepted behaviors among men that are portrayed as good and natural but are, in reality, physically, socially, and psychologically damaging, assuming a mythopoetic archetype of healthy versus destructive masculinities. The popular concept comes from sociologist Raewyn Connell (*Gender and Power,* 1987); ("Masculinities and Globalization" in *Men and Masculinities,* 1998); and the current form was built on by Terry Kurpers in his studies on men in prison. The term "delineates those aspects of hegemonic masculinity that are socially destructive, such as misogyny, homophobia, greed, and violent domination; and those that are culturally accepted and valued." Terry Krupers, "Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison," *The Journal of Clinical Psychology* 61, no. 6 (2005): 716.

[272] In particular the chapter "Common Women" in Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1996).

[273] Edward Adam Strecker, *Their Mothers' Sons; the Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem*, (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1946).

in the universe, she falls more easily than man into the contraposite role of spiritual saboteur.[274]

Wylie's notes on the dangers of women depending on their roles in men's lives plays a large part in both Edwin's and Sven's stories. It would seem that the protagonist here is a Gary Stu;[275] he is impossibly handsome, skilled, respected, clever, hugely successful sexually, and he will prove everyone who doubted him wrong. Publicly accused of weakness and then publicly overcoming the weakness—being rehabilitated in absence of the mother, who is dead, and through the violent, punitive death of the abusive older men who made the accusation—the Gary Stu character is the writer and reader's personal wish fulfilment, who see themselves as the weakened boy and hope to see themselves as the triumphant man. The Gary Stu, such as Edwin or Sven, is even the one to incite or directly kill the abusive older men in what is seen as an act of justice (while the young female characters, such as Brigid and Julia in *Black Road* are portrayed as evil traitors and betrayers when they turn against the older men). Sven, as the Mary Sue in this story, goes on to prove that he not only has detached himself from a reliance on women (as a boy), but now he uses them for his convenience and sexual gratification (as an adult). Wood's female characters, who turn against the men who abuse them, are not later shown in triumph, but they are portrayed as instruments of the men they are attached to (as in *Northlanders,* wherein Brigid is depicted as the submissive wife of her chieftain husband, and betrays her father; and Julia as the Cardinal's bodyguard, who turns against Magnus, the protagonist of *Black Road*).

Sven is beaten by Gorm and his men, and is left for dead in the countryside, where he recovers and hatches a plan to get his inheritance back from Gorm. Two characters are introduced at this point, a female archer who shoots at Sven from the distance and hits him once in the arm, and an old man named Ivarsson, who describes the archer as "a miserable, ratty bitch, living in the wild in the cliffs to the north," or "the Hunter's daughter,"[276] and it is later explained that she is

---

[274] Wylie, *Generation of Vipers,* 187–88.

[275] Mary Sue is most frequently used as a noun (a Mary Sue) or descriptor (a Mary Sue story), although it may also sometimes appear as a verb, to Mary-Sue, meaning "to insert oneself into a fictional story/character" as in cases where an author has inserted themselves thinly veiled as a character, most often as a protagonist who represents an ideal version of the self, with an unrealistic lack of flaws, or possessing only positive "flaws," ex: the character is too attractive, or too honest, as in the character Superman. Male Mary Sues are sometimes called Marty Stu or Gary Stu (or Gary Sue).

[276] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 134.

one of the few remaining ancestors of the islands native inhabitants who were there before the Viking settlements. Ivarsson takes Sven back to be healed by his nameless wife, who Ivarsson himself simply calls "the wife." They tell Sven the story how his uncle Gorm came to claim the land, and tell him that his mother is dead, and that Sven has a "birthright . . . and legitimacy to rule."[277] Sven sees his mission as a single man against what he describes as a dictatorship, a story of classic American heroism transposed into a medieval setting.

Sven spends time preparing his plan—getting information from the locals, and proving his belonging to them, mostly through violence, winning every fight. He also goes to find the archer, beats her bloody and throws he bow in a fire, and lectures her saying "I grew up on this land. My family owns this *whole area*, from this sea wall south and I deserve to be treated with *deference,* not living in the *dirt* like a slave getting *sniped* at by the likes of you."[278] He does her a favor by pinning her to the ground and violently setting her nose, which he broke, which—in Wood's logic—inspires her sudden trust and, though she cowers with the proper deference he demands, she talks with him briefly. After asserting his male fantasy dominance there, Sven struts home to find a beautiful, naked woman lounging in his bed. The woman is Thora, whose only background is that Sven knew her when they were both children, and she insists that they have sex immediately, which Sven acquiesces to.

The story jumps ahead two weeks to show the archer, now without her bow, pitifully struggling to catch a fish for six frames, until Sven appears smirking behind a tree in the seventh frame. Sven smugly walks into the water and catches a fish on the tip of his sword, chiding her: "You aren't very good at this," and upon seeing her eagerly grab the fish off the sword he chirps "hungry?" to which she responds, "*you* broke my *bow.*"[279] Sven, in his narrative caption, congratulates himself internally: "She did what I told her, this wild Scots girl. She kept her distance. *I* was the one who made the first attempt at peace."[280]

The opposite page shows Sven back in bed with Thora, who tells Sven that Gorm talks about his nephew often and has sent out spies. Sven has noticed these spies. In his narrative caption, Sven indicates that he has been having sex with Thora for the past five nights, to his own

[277] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 135.
[278] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 148. [Emphasis in the original.]
[279] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 157. [Emphasis in the original.]
[280] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 158. [Emphasis in the original.]

frustration, for the sake of getting information. Thora is Gorm's "servant and plaything,"[281] and asks Sven to take her away with him, hoping to rekindle the plans they had when they were children and they assumed they would have ended up married.

Sven then mounts a series of attacks on Gorm's men, playing on the older man's superstitions in order to make it seem supernatural. During one attack, Sven is helped by the archer, who has a bow again, and helps defend him from Gorm's men before disappearing. Gorm consults with an elder about the perceived omen of the attack, which turns some of Gorm's advisors against him, because they obviously suspect Sven. Sven leaves a bit of meat for the archer as way of thanks, goes home to find Thora waiting for him, naked in bed again, but with no use for her anymore, Sven tells her to stay or go, but to not speak to him. She stays and just sits sobbing in the bed, because apparently she has no agency to change the conditions of her life except for the possibility of convincing Sven to save her.

Later in the winter, Ivarsson and his wife are killed in punishment for helping Sven, and Sven comes into conflict with Hakkar, one of Gorm's men, who tells him that Thora has betrayed him, and presents Sven with the body of his lover from Constantinople (who had been indicated only briefly in flashbacks), who he had killed and shipped all the way up to Scotland just to harass Sven. There is a short flashback to a scene in Constantinople with his nameless exotic lover—he simply commands her to bed saying, "come back, now,"[282] and she abidingly follows his command. The story then cuts back to the main timeline, showing Sven breaking into the archer's home at night and forcing himself upon her, saying "please, I'm just really cold"[283] by way of explanation and ignores her vocal protests. Wood did not write in any consequences for Sven about this rape scene, and even concludes the story with Sven and the archer as a couple with a child. If a reader is to understand the character of Sven as a Gary Stu, the implications are truly disturbing.

In order to explain the significance of the woman's dead body from Constantinople, which is presented to Sven, the next chapter goes back twenty years to show Sven as a child in the Orkney settlement. Of course, the flashback is rife with child abuse, with older men specifically deriding the young Sven for weakness in regard to his mother. He comes home to find his house on fire and his mother slaps him for being a coward and yells at him that a real man should act otherwise and

---

[281] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 161.
[282] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 196.
[283] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 198.

be ready to die to defend their house and their women. It is not depicted, but the scene implies that the man who had harassed Sven earlier came by the house, abused his mother, then set the place on fire in his father's absence. His mother finds her footing and angrily stalks away. The toxic masculinity is just exploding off the page at this point, and Sven sulks and runs away. He becomes a slave rowing on merchant ships and ends up in Constantinople, where he meets the beautiful Zoe, who is his master's daughter. There is a scene where Zoe is informed by her father's business partner that her father has been killed, and she is set to be killed too, when little Sven miraculously finds the strength to kill the man himself, and persuades his henchmen to follow his orders, thus saving Zoe. She takes charge of her father's business, and Sven becomes her right-hand man. They are in love, in a non-monogamous modern relationship, but dedicated to each other as adults, and to the success of the business. The comic includes the last memories he has of her, and then cuts back to the present time, with a visibly bearded and weathered Sven standing dramatically in the snow at a cliff.

The next chapter opens with Sven on a murderous rampage, slaughtering Gorm's men, which is illustrated predominately in red monochrome against an orange-yellow sky. Then it cuts back to the archer's, now we know her name is Enna, and the house where Sven now lives, where he's decorated the front entrance with the heads of those he's killed, of which the archer expresses her dislike. He poses triumphant amid the heads on stakes and states "it's a *beautiful day.*"[284]

Sven orchestrates a military show-down with Gorm's militia. Gorm sends Thora, battered and one eye covered by a bloody bandage, out to deliver Gorm's message, asking Sven to surrender. Sven sees her state, and offers simply to help her die, telling her to keep a sword by her so that he can kill her in the confusion of the battle. Sven's companion commends this, saying "that was honorable of you."[285] Despite the fact that Gorm is Sven's uncle and his own flesh and blood, Sven says of the fight against the invader and illegitimate ruler that it is "about a broken people, and survival, identity and unity," again echoing the chants and arguments of white supremacists and the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory. This theory was cited by Patrick Wood Crusius, for example, as he shot twenty people and wounded twenty-six others in Texas

---

[284] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 227. [Emphasis in the original.]
[285] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 239.

"defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement,"[286] and is popular among white supremacist mass murderers in recent times. Wood has changed the focus of the story from a family dispute of inheritance to an armed conflict about the survival of a group defined and unified by the land they live on and their collective identity, who, for some reason, consider Gorm an interloper.

Just as the battle will start, Saxons land on the coast and the two opposing armies have to fight a single, even more ethnically and geographically different enemy to protect their land. During the fighting, Hakkar's battle cry is literally "I was born here! This is my land! My land!"[287] This suggests an assumed birth-right validated by geography, rather than focusing fighting for the sake of the lives of the villagers. As the battle rages on, Sven kills Gorm in rage, and then kills Thora in mercy. The Norsemen win the fight, and one warrior states "Never understand the point of it all, invading and conquering and the like. Can yeh not just be content with what God has seen fit to give you?"[288] This statement is unsettling in concert with the other statements Wood has written in, because it echoes the rhetoric the Great Replacement theory. The Norsemen retreat and Sven returns to the Saxon camp to negotiate a surrender everything to them. Sven later explains that he did this to surprise the Saxons and buy the Norsemen time to plan a counter-attack. He leaves Hakkar in charge of the settlement.

Sven buries Thora in what he calls a slave's grave, and finally reflects that "I was an asshole for treating her the way I did."[289] He sees this gesture and his yielding of the lordship of the settlement to Hakkar as his salvation, as he then runs away with Enna the archer, claiming that they had something stronger than love between them; "a bond from shared experience and adversity, forged in hard times and harsh climates. Two people facing death and walking away from it together."[290] Though he reflects on his abuse of Thora, he seems unrepentant about beating Enna into submission, starving her, and then raping her, causing the death of the few villagers sympathetic towards her and upturning the very social order and political security of the settlement, very likely giving Enna few choices for survival beyond leaving with him. They settle in the Faroe

---

[286] Talia Lavin, "The Boundaries of Whiteness Are Protected With Blood and Bullets," *Nation,* August 5, 2019, https://www.thenation.com/article/replacement-theory-racism-white-supremacy/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

[287] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 258.

[288] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 266.

[289] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 278.

[290] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 284.

Islands, and have a child, in cultural purity and isolation. Sven promises the child specifically, over a scene of him walking away with Enna and the baby, "there's no one coming, and I'll protect you with my *life*."[291]

The next part, "Thor's Daughter" is very short. It is set in the Outer Hebrides in 990 CE, and if follows Birna ThorsDottir, the daughter of the lord of the island. Her mother is absent, perhaps dead, and her father is murdered, and she realizes that she is "just the pointless burden of a daughter, fit for nothing but to be cast away."[292] One dark-haired, haggard man seems to be the one who orchestrated the murder, and denies Birna any assurances. Birna spends a long time reflecting on her identity as being her father's daughter, doing what her father would have wanted for her. Again, Wood writes a story focused on place and birth right; the other men of the community murder the man who murdered her father, and as Birna takes up her father's helmet and sword, and she says "this island took my mother form me. And my father. It tried to take my birth right. And it'll try again. But this island is my home, and I swear on my father's name. I'll never let it go."[293] That is the end.

The fifth and final part has five chapters and is set in Ireland, to the northwest of Dublin, around 1014 CE. The title "The Cross & Hammer," along with the setting note that the story takes place in Norse occupied Ireland sets expectations about a focus on religious and ethnic conflict. This story is special in the collection because the Vikings are actually the bad guys, and Magnus, a "loyal son of Ireland,"[294] is the Christian protagonist. Magnus does not speak much about religion, but he has a large Celtic cross pendant hanging around his neck at all times. Magnus's wife is dead, because Wood seems to be incapable of (or at least is disinterested in) writing a story which includes details about a healthy martial relationship, and it will not surprise the readers that she was good and beautiful. Magnus is running from the Viking invaders with his young daughter, Brigid.

The two are being pursued by Ragnar Ragnarsson, who is sometimes a narrator through narrative captions which appear as excepts from reports Ragnar has written to his superior, Lord King Sigtrygg Silkbeard. Through this we learn that Magnus has been on a rampage, killing seemingly innocent people in the countryside. Ragnar describes him as "this suspect, this killer,

---

[291] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 292.
[292] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 308.
[293] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 313–14.
[294] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 322.

this NATIVE."[295] We see Magnus is injured and in hiding with his daughter. While she is sewing an injury in his arm, they are attacked by a pack of wolfhounds. Magnus fights them off for five whole pages, and in the end, Brigid runs off into the forest. Magnus eventually finds her up in a tree. The story then continues to the evening when Magnus chats with his daughter and she helps him validate the killing of the dogs, rationalizing that it had to be done.

The next chapter opens with boats landing at night in Clontarf, and warriors coming on shore in a secret attack, and then cuts to Ragnar again, with his thoughts laid out in narrative captions quoting another report to his superior about the progress of his mission to capture Magnus. Ragnar writes that "his choice of victims points to a hatred of our presence in these lands, but more philosophical that personal. This is likely not a man wronged . . . so much as a man driven to a CAUSE."[296] The story turns back to Magnus, who is approaching a Norse farm, asking if they have enjoyed raping the land and citizens quite well, and then kills the adult men at the scene, calling on Saint Cianan[297] for help. Magnus sends the farm's children running, raids the house for supplies, and heads out, his daughter alongside. The story shows Ragnar frustrated with his men, and Magnus chatting about his dead wife with his daughter.

In the next scene, at an unnamed location, Brigid is bathing in a river while Ragnar spies on her. Magnus catches him at it and attacks the Viking, receiving a deep cut to the knee in the process. Magnus beats Ragnar, still in the water, but then runs away to find Brigid, who has disappeared in the meantime. Unfortunately, Ragnar has gotten a good look at the red bird tattoo on Magnus's left forearm, which can be used to identify the fugitive in the future. Still looking for Brigid, Magnus is greeted by a friendly fisherman, but still in a rage Magnus kills the Norse stranger, then finds a nearby house and slaughters everyone, women and children, on the premise, saying to himself that he does not even know what drove him to it, just that it was easy. Brigid reappears, apologizes and they continue on their way, as she continues to offer her father rational excuses for his violence, stating "the mission was sound"[298] in the end.

---

[295] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 326. [Emphasis in the original.]
[296] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 343. [Emphasis in the original.]
[297] St. Cianán was a Bishop of Duleek in Ireland, descended from the royal blood of the kings of Munster. His feast day is 24 November. It is unclear why at all this saint would be mentioned here, as there is no obvious relevance to the story, and Munster is far from the setting of the story.
[298] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 394.

In an attempt to draw Magnus out of hiding and provoke him to do something to expose himself to capture, Ragnar instructs his men to go on a rampage and destroy the local Celtic population and their land, commanding: "Humiliate this land, these people, their pride, their sense of self-worth and self-respect, leave them bloodied and destitute."[299] This is all broken into smaller narrative captions laid over scenes of brutality and destruction. Seeing the heads of his countrymen on spikes, Magnus takes the bait and goes out to the field to collect the heads and bury them. He is attacked by a band of men who stake his hand through with a sword into the ground and beat him.

The fifth chapter opens with Magnus in captivity, a rope around his neck and his hands tied back while angry Norsemen take turns beating him in revenge for his various personal offenses against them. Through the beatings, a sequence of his memories of Brigid as a little girl out in a field with sheep are shown. Finally, Ragnar appears to question him, and it is revealed that Magnus is Magnus Mag Rodain, an important and wealthy man who became a Cistercian monk at some point in his past, explaining his Christianity and the large cross he carries. Wood turns the conversation between Magnus and Ragnar into a conversation between conqueror and the innocent conquered, specifically on a racial basis, with Ragnar chiding Magnus: "If you think that you are somehow *elevating your race* in the eyes of some tyranny, you are sadly mistaken."[300] The typical accusations against racially foreign invaders are put in Magnus's mouth as he says, "You steal our land and our women."[301] Ragnar promises to make an example of Magnus for the other Celts, who have not fully submitted, and further taunts Magnus about his daughter. At this point it becomes clear that Magnus hasn't seen his daughter in real life for many years—the girl tagging along with him has been only a hallucination, and his actual daughter is a full-grown woman, who ran away from him and gave herself over to the Norse leaders years ago. The story up to this point, of Brigid constantly running off and then reappearing, has been Magnus's imagination, re-enacting her first disappearance and soothing himself with her apologies that he fantasizes about each time he imagines her return to him. She never ages beyond the year that she was when she left. Being reminded of this, Magnus goes berserk and breaks his ropes, beats back every Norseman in his path, and escapes.

---

[299] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 400.
[300] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 419. [Emphasis in the original.]
[301] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 421.

The final chapter opens and, having presented the capture of Magnus in parallel to short scenes showing the Norse occupation of Ireland, depicts the end of the occupation phase. Magnus has run and hid under a stone bridge, but his daughter, an adult, has seen him and followed the bloody trail there, along with a supporting band of Norse warriors. Magnus continues to hallucinate his daughter as a little girl, hiding with him under the bridge until his real daughter peaks her head in and says casually, "time to come on out of there now."[302] She has been violently commanded to bring him out, but she is so afraid of him that her first instinct had been to run, causing Ragnar to strike her to the ground in anger, and then drag her by her neck to the mouth of the hideout. Brigid goes in to have talk with him, but he only sees the fresh injuries to her face, and she slaps his hand away as he reaches out to touch her. Upset, she shouts at him, "You are a horrible, horrible man, you always have been, so selfish, so narrow-minded! And that's why I left, Da, before I died of a broken heart just like Ma did!"[303] Magnus appears crestfallen at this, and it becomes clear that Magnus has been an unreliable narrator, and the reality is that Magnus had cursed his wife for birthing a girl and that the woman had rather died of despair and losing the will to recover after childbirth, and so Brigid had run away at age eleven. Magnus explains that he thought he could get the ugliness out of him by clearing the Norsemen from the land, and eventually obediently gives up his hiding spot and goes out for his execution. The last page is Brigid running from the scene in tears while her father is executed at the river.

*BLACK ROAD,* VOL. 1 "THE HOLY NORTH"

*Black Road* Vol. 1 "The Holy North" was created by Brian Wood and Garry Brown. The story was written by Brian Wood, art by Garry Brown, the coloring by Dave McCaig, and Steve Wands provided lettering and production. The volume contains the individual trade paperback issues 1 to 5, published in 2016 by Image Comics, Inc.

The series starts with a long introduction, setting the stage of the story, wherein Christians have appeared in "the North" and have initiated conversion of the Northerners. The first frames show a large man carrying the body of a woman out to the hills and burying her. This is a preface to the first chapter "The Holy North," which is subtitled as "A Magnus the Black Mystery." The story opens in Iskfold where the local population is being converted to Christianity through taxation, and brutalities, such as crucifixion. The protagonist, that big man from the preface who

---

[302] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 447.
[303] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 449.

is revealed to be Magnus the Black, calls it "a warzone."[304] He is tasked with heading north to escort a church official: a cardinal. The character Kitta the Blacksmith is briefly introduced, she is described later as "moorish" and is illustrated as a black woman with short hair. She returns to the story later, and readers will certainly remember her, as she is the only non-white character present.

The story follows Magnus and the cardinal on their journey, and Magnus reflects on what he should do about the Christians; whether to resist them or join them. They are attacked by a group of men, who, despite Magnus's efforts to protect the cardinal, outnumber Magnus, and capture the cardinal and kill him, then strike such a blow to Magnus's head, almost killing as well. Unconscious, he is pulled away from the scene of the attack by a small female figure in a red cloak, with the hood obscuring her face. When Magnus wakes up, she introduces herself as Julia, the cardinal's adopted daughter.

Readers of *Northlanders* will find the pair—the mountainous and weathered older man, and a dark-haired, innocent-yet-feisty little girl—very similar to the characters Magnus and his daughter Brigid from Part V "The Cross and the Hammer."[305] Indeed, both men named Magnus protect a young girl in their charge, but in both cases they are betrayed and left to die by the girl. There are even similar scenes repeated in both stories, such as a wolf attack. Both men lost their beloved wives, who are described as being too good for them, with Magnus from *Black Road* saying, "I'm a miserable, ugly brick of a man,"[306] and the Irish Magnus is described as a "horrible, horrible man; so selfish, so narrowminded,"[307] by his own daughter, who has abandoned not only him, but has adopted Norse culture. The presentation of the men to the reader in both stories, however, does not suggest that they really are terrible—they are both presented to the reader as being honorable and doing the righteous thing to protect their homeland, the North or Ireland as the case may be, and they are doggedly devoted to the memories of their dead wives, faithful till the end. They are cruelly misunderstood and unappreciated by the little girls who they take care of, and are eventually undone not by the men and wolves they fight throughout the story, but by these ungrateful little girls who betray them. While the girls appear almost identical, down to the red color of their cloaks, the only difference between the men is that the Magnus from *Black Road* is bald and bearded, and not Christian yet, while Magnus from *Northlanders* has hair and a red

---

[304] Wood et al., *Black Road,* 10.
[305] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 315–454.
[306] Wood et al., *Black Road,* 36.
[307] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 449.

dragon tattoo on his left forearm. The writer Brian Wood, who created and wrote both comics, has not commented on the repetition in any of the interviews which I consulted for this chapter.

In the story of Magnus the Black, he decides to help the girl, while distractedly reflecting on the background of his wife's death, as a sort of reasoning as to why he should help Julia. In the next chapter, Magnus and Julia quickly catch the man who killed the cardinal, and blurts out under torture that Julia is a "Jewess" (which is her primary defining feature, along noting how small she is and her "dusky skin"[308]) and that the cardinal was considered to be an apostate and had to be assassinated. Magnus has a four-page flashback detailing his love of carnage—another similarity he has with the Irish Magnus of *Northlanders*. Then Julia executes the man who killed her adopted father, and the two continue along the *Black Road*. In the woods they are attacked by wolves, a scene which is very similar to the dog attack in *Northlanders*; the action is placed after a long digression explaining the arrival of the Christians. Julia is responsible for the wolf attack, because she insisted on cooking a rabbit.

Though the chapter is called "Out Come the Wolves," the wolf attack is just a background story while shorter background stories are inserted to explain the circumstances behind Julia and Magnus meeting on the titular Black Road. It shows Julia's past as a servant in the house of the cardinal, back in Rome. The main story picks back up after the wolf attack has passed, they are walking, injured, to a village nearby. Magnus intuits that they are being followed, and this foreshadows the events in chapter 4 "Shield Wall," which is one long flashback to the events leading to his wife's death. A lord who Magnus had defeated in battle gets revenge by burning down Magnus's village, and while Magnus runs out to fight (naked, with ridiculously exaggerated musculature and manhood) he is shot in the back and his wife dies as the village is razed. While reflecting upon it, Magnus remembers that Kitta (the aforementioned "moorish" blacksmith and hired assassin) was there at the scene, and mentioning it, Julia points out that Kitta is following them in the distance.

The story jumps ahead to show Magnus shot through full of arrows, in a hut in the village where he and Julia were heading. Kitta walks in and states that she had been following him in order to warn him specifically about Julia. The last chapter, "The Village North of the Lake," provides a fuller backstory to Kitta's life, and explains how Julia ended up shooting down Magnus with her crossbow. When it seems that Kitta has gained on the pair, Julia suddenly turns on Magnus

---

[308] Wood et al., *Black Road,* 69.

and begins shooting, and then runs away. While Magnus is healing from his wounds, Kitta tracks Julia's trail, headed north, as far as she can until the trail stops, as if "she sprouted wings and took flight."[309] Magnus decides to follow Julia, Kitta demands to come along, and the story is broken by another flashback to the horrors and violence which the Christian missionaries inflicted upon their Pagan converts. It shows a scene wherein the resistant Pagans are accused of witchcraft and insubordination, and are lit on fire as a group. The volume ends with Magnus's statement "Julia was playing me for a fool all along. I'm on a vengeance mission now."[310] As Magnus and Kitta's silhouettes disappear over the hills, Julia appears in the village behind them, and begins to follow them from behind.

Unlike *Northlanders*, there is only one illustrator for this volume, Gary Brown, so the chapters are stylistically cohesive. The coloring by Dave McCaig focuses on earth tones with pops of bright red, and also a lot of blue monochrome. Flashbacks are set off from the main story through strong color shifts. The battle scenes are done in almost a red monochrome, with a red sky, and the flashback scenes of Julia's life in Rome have a yellow cast, and the scenes with the burning of the village and the burning of the Pagans is dominated by a marigold orange color. The people are illustrated in a very realistic style, lean and muscular, while the protagonist, Magnus, is a hulking, exaggerated figure; his muscles are depicted so out of proportion with his body that his skull is the same size as his knee, and everything else (including his manhood, which the producers make a point to display the reader twice, despite there is no other nudity in the story) is minimally double the normal human size. Because of this, Magnus stands out in sharp contrast even among the other warriors. The dialogue is sparse, and there are curt narrative captions in the first-person voice of Magnus. Other narrative captions provide information about place and date. The characters are not often shown engaged in dialogue with one another—rather they tell stories and are passively listened to or are involved in some sort of violent interaction.

## MEDIEVALISM AS PERMISSION FOR BRUTALITY

This section of the chapter will focus on one specific element of medievalism within the comics mentioned in previous chapters. How is history used to legitimize horrors which would otherwise not be included in modern comics? In other spheres of comic production, female characters have moved beyond passivity and roles as objects or plot tropes. However, nun figures and their Pagan

[309] Wood et al., *Black Road,* 114.
[310] Wood et al., *Black Road*, 121.

equivalents in the witches' coven are regularly contextualized in a background of medievalist fantasy which has been traditionally deeply misogynistic and in stark contrast to the transformation underway in the portrayal of female comic book characters. This chapter will look under the hood of this phenomenon, delineating the role of medievalism in permitting and moreover seemingly validating the inclusion of brutality and violence in both today's popular comic book series and popular comics of the past. The comics mentioned in this chapter have been described in greater detail in previous chapters. The comic book *The Leather Nun* is addressed in Chapter 2, *Rat Queens, Heathen, 1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, *Northlanders,* and *Black Road* are described in the previous section.

Neither historic nor contemporary nuns or female Pagans (sometimes as witches) are necessarily involved in armed combat, but these characters in comics have been used as both the trigger and the objects of grotesque violence, which is propelled by a feedback loop in the close ties between the creators of comics and the ideal reader, as will be examined in this chapter. Drawing from a tradition of blatant misinterpretation and abuse of religious women in art and literature, these comics apply medievalism as a final bastion of tolerance for such content, relying on the legitimizing effect of what appears to be historic to permit the inclusion of cruelty and distinctly old-fashioned ideas about gender.

This chapter will look at several modern, English, and foreign-language comic book series which include nun and Pagan characters, and at the medievalist tradition that informs their content. Consideration will be given to earlier comics which apply similar tropes, and these will be placed in contrast to other female archetypes which have undergone modernization over the last two decades, such as action heroines, superheroines, and characters in progressive independent comics.

Before getting into the feedback loop, I would like to describe the approach used to form a picture of how these female characters are placed in medievalist texts. The goal is to apply Actor-Network Theory to map occurrences of female characters and their contexts within the comics. This theory posits that objects, ideas, processes, and any other relevant factors are seen as just as important in creating social situations as humans. The aim of ANT is to explore how networks are built and maintained to achieve a specific objective. ANT presents a theoretical framework wherein social scientists map how human and non-human actants work within a network, as described in Bruno Latour's *Re-Assembling the Social: An Introduction to ANT* (2009, 2015). As

a basic reference I used *Applying the Actor-Network Theory in Media Studies* (2017) by Markus Spöhrer and Beate Ochsner.

The network that I will be looking at is medievalist comics and graphic novels, as evidenced through production, distribution, and audience response where applicable. Medievalism in this case, as before, is not necessarily a picture of history founded on intense research and vetted by extensive textual and archeological evidence, but rather it is the gray area where the public's ideas about the Middle Ages do not line up with evidence. Medievalist content is often perceived by the public as more "authentic" than research content. The unit of measure for identifying actors in this context will be medievalist simulacra. Finally, there is a question as to the point when the actors turn into agents which generate meaning, and influence people to take real-world action. The research of this network revealed what I will term as a "feedback loop," in that it is self-contained and self-propagating, circulating from text to life and back to text. The mechanics of the feedback loop seem to work as follows:

- Tropes that require medieval contextualization are propagated and begin to seem more real that the real itself;
- Medievalist simulacrum of brutality is not required, but employed only in some cases;
- Medievalist characters are subject to brutality at levels that correlate with the intention to present "historical authenticity";
- Authors may then choose to employ medievalism as a legitimization to portray certain world views as not only natural, but part of shared heritage;
- Authors wishing to react against this and portray progressive messages further solidify the simulacrum as reality by correlating absence of brutality with distance from historicity.

Examples of tropes and simulacra which require a medieval contextualization include characters such as wizards, kings, monks, knights, Vikings, barbarians, witches, nuns, queens, shield maidens, Pagan priestesses, bar wench types, and vampires; settings in crypts, cloisters, castles, ruins, Viking long ships, or improbable combinations of these (such as a crypt under a castle which happens to be a nunnery, as they appear in Chapter 2); or typical comic book elements that comprise the fantasy/action genre, like swords, magic, "religious" powers, axes, exaggerated bodies, and impossible costumes.

When giving an overview of the comics considered in this section, I will include thumbnails of the cover or an illustrative figure, so that the reader can quickly orient what sort of visual style the comic is, and get a sense of the presentation of the nun characters. I believe this visual reference will be indispensable for the graphic comparisons later in the chapter. The comics corpus includes the following volumes, both historic and modern, anglophone and foreign: [311]



**Figure 37** Comics featuring nun protagonists. Publishing details in footnote.

---

[311] The first two historical texts are described in: Griffin, "Awful Disclosures;" Brand et al., *Tales from the Leather Nun*.; Kazuma Kamachi and Chuya Kogino, *A Certain Magical Index (Toaru Matjusu No Indekkusu)*, vol. 1–14 (Tokyo: ASCII Mediaworks, 2004).; Elena Barbarich, *Sister Claire Vol 1-2* (Self-published, 2013), http://www.sisterclaire.com/ (accessed March 20, 2020). Saudek and Weigel, *Lips Tullian*. Claire Bretécher, *La Vie Passionnée de Thérèse d'Avila*, 1st edition 1980 (Paris: Dargaud, 2007). Davide La Rosa and Vanessa Cardinali, *Suore Ninja*, vol. 1–6 (Italy: Star Comics, 2013).

In addition, comics including nun-like characters, or female characters who exist within a closed collective defined by religious alliance (such as a witches' coven) are as follows:[312]



Figure 38 Comics featuring a magic-weilding pagan protagonist. Publishing details in footnote.

There are, of course, many other comics with single characters or appearances of nuns, but the above comics have been selected because the nun characters have a major role or are the



Figure 39 Medievalist comics attempting historical authenticity from Chapter 6.

protagonists, and the comics are in wide distribution (which necessitates the exclusion of *Hemlock*, which is an indie series).

There are two other comic series which were well received and claim to be inspired by medieval history: *Northlanders* Book One: "The Anglo-Saxon Saga" (Vertigo, 2016) and *Black Road:* Vol. One "The Holy North" (Image, 2016). In their attempt to minimalize historic accuracy, Brian Wood, the writer and creator of both series has omitted female

---

[312] From top left to bottom right: Norihiro Yagi, *Claymore*, vol. 1–27 (Tokyo: Shueisha, 2001). Joe Benitez et al., *The Magdalena*, vol. 1–12 (Top Cow Productions, 2010). Kouta Hirano, *Helsing*, vol. 1–10 (Tokyo: Young King OURs; Shonen Gahosha, 1999). Wiebe, Upchurch, and Brisson, *Rat Queens: Volume One: Sass and Sorcery*. Kittredge, Ingranata, and Valenza, *Witchblade (2017), Vol. 1*. Alex Alice and Xavier Dorison, *Le Troisième Testament. Vol. 1–2* (Glénat: Grafica, 1997).

characters which would qualify among the nuns or witches' covens. There is one story about three Viking women, but it barely passes the Bechdel Test, because they speak mostly of their husbands and of men. The female characters exist in isolation, and these two series will be considered in contrast with the other which were summarized in the chapter on Pagans and witches in medievalist comics. The comics will be analyzed alongside *Rat Queens*, *Heathen*, and *1602: Witch Hunter Angela.*

The examination of medievalism in these comics has been heavily informed by Julia Round's approach in her 2014 book *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels,*[313] which offered a more theoretical view—examining, for example, the role of the crypt in comics, both structurally through the layout and literally in the content—and Chris Bishop's *Medievalist Comics and the American Century,*[314] which provides several models for a case study approach to analyzing individual comics. Neither Round nor Bishop's book speak about nuns or Pagan witches specifically. Other sources include Karl Fugelso's *Corporate Medievalism* I and II[315]and David Marshall's book *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*[316] both inform on the role of medievalism in consumable goods and pop culture, and though they do not focus on comics, they provide context for medievalism as a trackable phenomenon. Also, in order to understand the most recent manifestations of medievalism and to place it in historic context two works were consulted: *Postmodern Medievalisms*[317] edited by Richard Utz, and David Matthews' book *Medievalism: A Critical History.*[318] Finally, in compliment to Chris Bishop's analysis of *Red Sonja* in *Medievalist Comics and the American Century* (2016), focusing on female characters in particular, the theory of female characters in comics was supplemented by Mike Madrid's *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines.*[319]

---

[313] See Round, *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels*.

[314] Chris Bishop, *Medievalist Comics and the American Century* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016).

[315] Karl Fugelso, *Corporate Medievalism*, Studies in Medievalism 21–22 (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2012).

[316] David W. Marshall, ed., *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2007).

[317] Richard J. Utz, Jesse G. Swan, and Paul Plisiewicz, eds., *Postmodern Medievalisms*, Studies in Medievalism 13 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005).

[318] David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History*, Medievalism, Volume VI. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015).

[319] Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (Ashland, OR: Exterminating Angel Press, 2009).

Brutality can appear as a simulacrum of medievalism.[320] It will be differentiated from violence for the remainder of the chapter because I would like to examine which comics prefer brutality over violence, and whether they validate this choice with claiming the historical accuracy of brutality as a property of the Middle Ages. To clarify the terminology: violence can come in a variety of forms, but in comics I will use this term to connote action between two equals, where both are engaged in the action. There must be a differentiation between "violence against," where violence is inflicted upon as passive character, versus "violence" in which both characters may be engaged in the action. I will use the word "brutality" to connote the first situation—one sided violence—not only because it implies a victim, but because it maps on well to contemporary understandings of the violence seen in the Middle Ages and our modern perceptions of this.

Hannah Skoda writes in her collection of case studies about thirteenth and fourteenth century medieval violence that the people of the time also differentiated between types of physical violence: the term *violentia* was what Skoda describes in today's parlance as "disordering brutality," while *vis* represented a type of just use of force, "to reinforce social order."[321] While Skoda demonstrates that there are different types of violence, and that they were identified with different terms in the Middle Ages, she uses the words "brutality" and "violence" interchangeably. When speaking of today's manifestations of violence, Siniša Malešević specifically uses the word "brutality" to designate the sort of extreme, one-sided violence which people associate with the Middle Ages today, citing its connotations with instruments of torture, saying that medieval brutality "has become a phrase identified with gruesome forms of violence and as such is commonly used to denounce one's opponents,"[322] indicating the injustice of the violence. Using two examples taken from Volume One of *Northlanders*, the image demonstrates the core difference between violence and brutality.

In a violent scene, one character will be shown to win the fight, but this is not brutality because the other character could maintain a fair fight and fight was initiated within the framework

---

[320] Of all the ways to die in the Middle Ages—famine, plague, weather, domestic accidents, fire, death in infancy, food poisoning, heresy, hunting accidents, travelling accidents, death in childbirth, common illnesses, religious fervor (i.e. asceticism), or poor nutrition—interpersonal, nonmartial violence was actually at a minimum. In medievalist comics, however, most characters are eliminated through violence.

[321] Hannah Skoda, *Medieval Violence: Physical Brutality in Northern France, 1270-1330* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

[322] Siniša Malešević, *The Rise of Organized Brutality: A Historical Sociology of Violence* (Cambridge ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1.

of social norms of politically justifiable actions (a war, a chivalric duel, a raid). Moreover, the creators of the comic go through the trouble of showing that the action was equally engaged in on both sides. In Figure 40, the right-hand example of the illustrative image above shows the opposite of this, which is 'brutality.' This shows a character who is the victim of brutality, who is not in the position of a fair fight. More disturbingly, the death is aestheticized, positioning the corpse into a beauty shot, posed not unlike the female nudes one would see in a gallery of classical paintings.
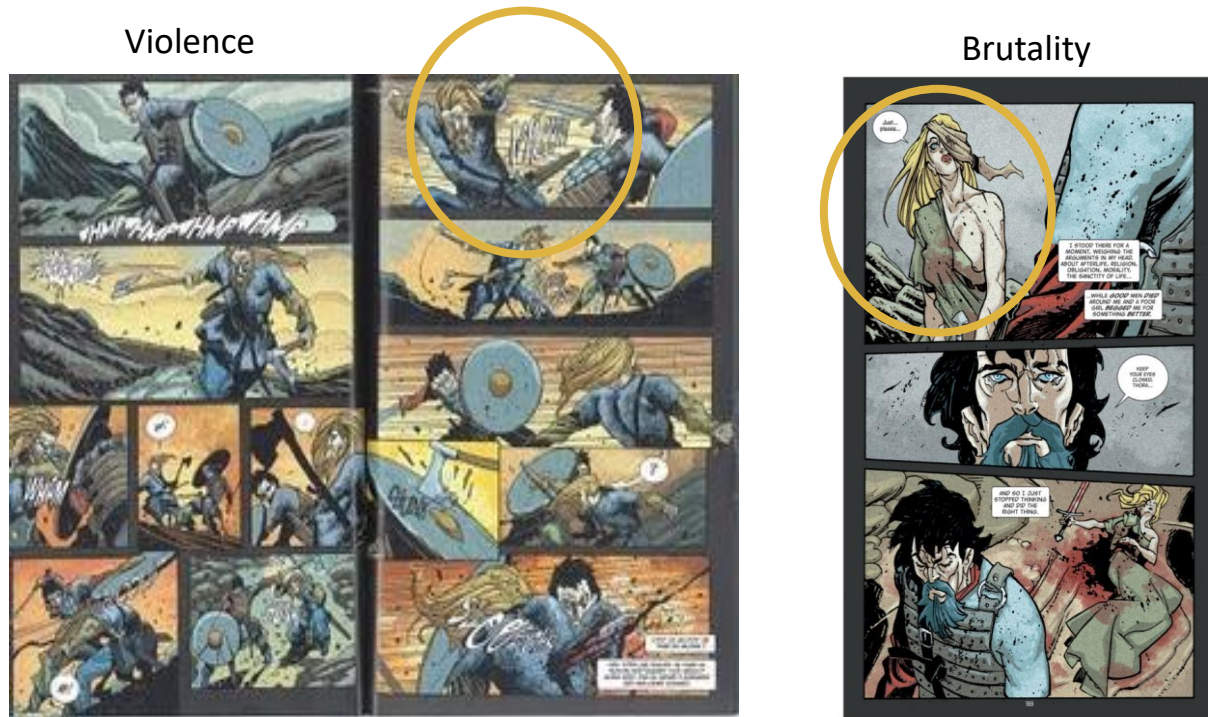


**Figure 40** Comparison between violence and brutality. Details from *Northlanders,* © Northlanders 2016.

It is not surprising that the target of brutality is a male child or a female character of any age, both in this example and throughout the corpus. The only story with brutality against children appears in *Northlanders*, in the chapter "Lindisfarne," wherein a boy is abused by his father and older brother and brings about their death in revenge.[323] The other occurrences of brutality are directed towards women of various ages. Adding insult to literal injury, death is a chance for the comic creators to aestheticize this moment, playing to the long visual tradition of glorifying the feminine body in death[324] and, moreover, framing the act of brutality to be portrayed as noble and

---

[323] Wood et al., *Northlanders,* 9–56.
[324] Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

elegant. This fetishization of abusing and even killing women can be seen supported in fandoms such as the *Twin Peaks* fandom, or among fans interested in David Lynch's films in general (including David Lynch himself, as he chooses to create such content),[325] a fan base which is predominantly male in online forums.[326] "Men hate women in *Twin Peaks* with shocking force," notes critic Timmah Ball.[327] Fans defend this with claims that Lynch is only showing the truth of violence against women, but this is not a reason for the brutality beautified and presented as a decorative element to the scene.

The issue has been addressed also by the literary world at large. Recently, British author and screenwriter Bridget Lawless initiated the Staunch Book Prize, meant to reward authors who can work within the thriller or action genre with a script "in which no woman is beaten, stalked, sexually exploited, raped or murdered."[328] This received a mixed reaction especially from female authors. For example, Scottish crime author Val McDermid objected to the prize, stating that she works hard to write truthfully about "difficult things," and to group truthful writer with the "pornographers of violence" undermines the efforts of well-meaning writers.[329] It would be interesting to see how such an initiative would translate to comics and film, where the image of a female corpse or the abuse of women in visually meditated on and beautified. This also raises the question as to how brutality is presented, and who chooses to include it.

---

[325] Diana Hume George, "Lynching Women: A Feminist Reading of Twin Peaks," in *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*, ed. David Lavery, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 109–19.

[326] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[327] Timmah Ball, "Wrapped in Plastic: Twin Peaks, Toxic Masculinity and Resolving My Love of Lynch," *The Lifted Brow,* September 5, 2017, https://www.theliftedbrow.com/liftedbrow/2017/9/4/wrapped-in-plastic-twin-peaks-toxic-masculinity-and-resolving-my-love-of-lynch-by-timmah-ball (accessed March 20, 2020).

[328] "Staunch Book Prize Home Page," Staunch Book Prize, accessed August 12, 2019, http://staunchbookprize.com/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

[329] Val McDermid, @valmcdermid, Twitter Post, January 29, 2018, 5:49 PM (accessed March 20, 2020).

Clearly, brutality as an aesthetic choice is not unique to medievalist comics. However, what is done in some of these comics is slightly different, as the killing and brutality is framed as being a necessary element to a historically accurate portrayal. Thus, in addition to the factors of 1) who the authors and the audience are; and 2) how the brutality is presented visually; we must also map 3) whether the brutality is considered excusable or necessitated by the historical setting. For the sake of comparison, I am going to place several comics into categories to see how they use brutality along these axes. How far do the "pornographers of violence" reach? I have narrowed down the
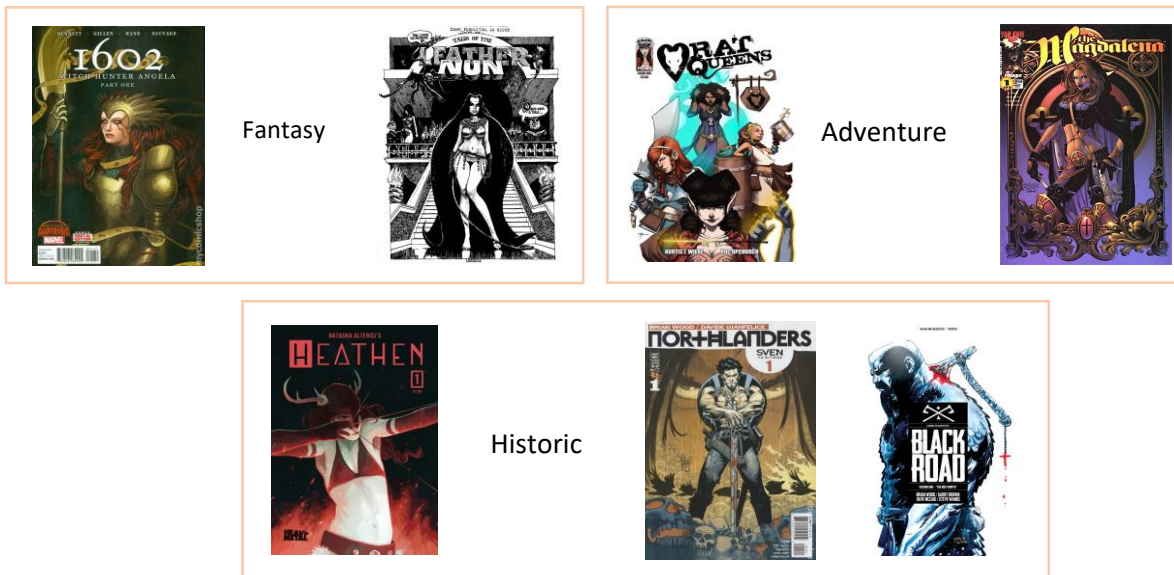


**Figure 41** Diagram of comic in comparison by genre.

comics in the corpus to seven, which I have examined in opposition to each other, considering story, visuals, historicity, and male or female authorship (to debunk the misconception that male authors always create misogynistic texts). The pairings are shown in Figure 41.

The first pairing, *1602: Witch Hunter Angela* and *The Leather Nun* are both included as fantasy; not just as a literary genre but being visually in the category of "the fantastic" as well. They both revolve around a romantic story, and neither make any pretext of historicity, even though the medieval and Renaissance time period is suggested through references to architecture, literature, atmosphere, and affects. In the case of *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, the romantic fantasy is the romance between the two main protagonists, Angela and Serah. They are both nuns from the same fantastical order, and their connection is what drives the story. Throughout the comics there is violence, as Angela and Serah fight the Faustians and Witchbreed, and especially epic fight scenes between Angela and the antagonist The Enchantress. In these scenes the protagonists and

147

antagonists are evenly matched. Serah is killed by The Enchantress, but not before coming up with her own plan to be resurrected from the dead and maintaining a presence in the story as a ghost—she is not a helpless victim of brutality here, but just another fighter on the same level as the attacker. Her death is not presented as a visual bookend to a chapter in Angela's story. Similarly, when the character Anna Marie is killed by The Enchantress, her death is given more visual space, taking up a whole page with several frames, to demonstrate her struggling with the supernatural influence of The Enchantress over her, which she has been strong enough to hold off some amount of time before succumbing. In this case, Anna Marie also represents agency in the action, as she had personally invited The Enchantress into her life by seeking to amplify her Witchbreed powers through further magical strength which The Enchantress could grant her. Again, this is not a one-sided case of brutality committed against a helpless victim.

*The Leather Nun* engages in romance, yet is far removed from the lesbian love story between Serah and Angela—it is a male, heterosexual fantasy. The amount of violence and brutality committed in this comic is extensive, but it is all in service of a bondage and sado-masochist fantasy, where male characters are just as likely to be heartlessly whipped as the females. Death and love do not play such a large role in this comic as it does in *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, but the violence is aestheticized, making a literal pornography of violence, the type of gratuitous literature which Val McDermid wanted to be delineated from. The eponymous Leather Nun is portrayed as both an evil force (she is shown accompanied by demons) and an object to be desired. Women are tortured, but in service of the male gaze, and always in an extremely sexual manner wherein sado-masochistic pleasure is emphasized. Females in this comic are both victims and perpetrators, as are the male characters, and the whole ordeal is presented lightly with a very cartoonish artistic style, with the females drawn in a hyper-sexualized fashion, and the males

invariably awkward and weak. The references to history are vaudevillian and mostly serve to emphasize the salaciousness of the comic's content (such as acts taking place within a church or using medieval Christian imagery to emphasize blasphemy). Just as the female authorship of *1602: Witch Hunter Angela* very likely influenced the development of a lesbian romantic storyline, *The Leather Nun* plays heavily to an



**Figure 42** (*The Leather Nun,* 22), © Last Gasp Eco-Funnies 1973.



**Figure 43** The Magdalena and her friends are crucified by Jackie. (*The Darkness,* Issue 18), © Top Cow 1998.

assumed male audience, and male authors have placed male characters into situations of brutality for comic effect. It is unclear what effect the authors are trying to create with the brutalizing of female characters, which is presented neither as comic nor as tragic, leaving the possibility that these scenes are presented for sexual gratification. Similar such scenes appear in the series *The Magdalena*, which will be considered side by side with *Rat Queens*.

The next pair are *Rat Queens* and *The Magdalena* (although this section could also include *Warrior Nun Areala, Witchblade*, or *Sister Clare*), both series following a sisterhood specifically intent on action. Both use elements of fantasy to create the story world, but the plots revolve around completing missions and kicking butt. As with *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, the heroines are often found fighting against female villains as well, and are on equal grounds in a fight, thus suggesting violence rather than brutality. One factor on which they vary is the development of the characters' back-stories. In *The Magdalena*, Sister Rosalia is the victim of rape and abuse, and later killed off to make room for the next Magdalena reincarnation. Her rape is often referred to, a common plot device noted by the "Women in Refrigerators" project[330] as being an unnecessary trauma dreamed

---

[330] An initiative of comic book creator Gail Simone started in 1999, which sought to document all the occurrences of female characters and "superheroines who have been either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator. I know I missed a bunch. Some have been revived, even improved — although the question remains as to why they were thrown in the wood chipper in the first place." These deaths usually serve only to provide motivation for a male character's action, or to destabilize a female

up by a writing team to provide motivation for female characters. Lorna Jowett, writing about the role of rape in a comparative study between sci-fi fantasy and realist TV programs (*The Shield, The Wire,* and *Battlestar Galactica*) demonstrates that the fantastical element creates defamiliarization, wherein "a woman, or any rapeable object, is reduced to the status of unfeeling machine, dehumanized by the power dynamic of victim and rapist," yet the realist dramas give space for the "all-too-human" response of the traumatized person.[331] *The Magdalena* includes the dehumanization, but omits the human response to trauma, which is generally not to immediately become a crime fighter. If this were the case, then the 5.0 victimizations per 1,000 occurring per year would yield at least 400,000 new caped crusaders per annuum in the United States alone.[332] Which begs the question as to why comic book authors regularly choose to use rape and brutality as a motivation for their female protagonists specifically, instead of all the other possible motivators, or why "rape is necessary to set up a dramatic tension among the characters."[333] Would a female character be uninterested in fighting crime if she were not raped? Are all women who are raped subsequently interested in fighting crime? It is indeed a strange way to create motivation. Rape and abuse are prime motivators for the protagonist in *The Magdalena*, while the *Rat Queens* characters fight evil motivated by a variety of personal backstories, none of which center on abuse or rape.[334]

While the Rat Queens never die—they always overcome their opponents, or are resurrected from near death by magical healing—the eventual crucifixion of the Magdalena (now Sister Mariella, Rosalia's daughter who was conceived from the rape) is turned into a full splash page of sexualized and aestheticized brutality.[335] The Magdalena recovers after "months in a coma," but

---

character's popularity. "Front Page," *Women in Refrigerators*, March 1999, http://www.lby3.com/wir/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

[331] Lorna Jowett, "Rape, Power, Realism and the Fantastic on Television," ed. Zoe Brigley Thompson and Sorcha Gunne, *Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures* 27 (New York: Routledge, 2010), 22, http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/11723/1/Jowett_Lorna_Routledge_2009_Rape_power_realism_and_t he_fantastic_on_television.pdf (accessed March 20, 2020).

[332] Marcus Berzofsky, Christopher Krebs, Lynn Langton, Michael Planty, Hope Smiley-McDonald, "Female Victims of Sexual Violence, 1994-2010," Bureau of Justice Statistics (7 March 2013), https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/fvsv9410.pdf (accessed March 20, 2020).

[333] Rape as motivator is not limited to comics: Nickie Philips, *Beyond Blurred Lines: Rape Culture in Popular Media* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 129.

[334] This is an example where the assumption that male writers might be more prone to write rape and abuse backstories is subverted, as the creators of *Rat Queens* are both male, and very conscious of their efforts to avoid stereotypical female characters.

[335] Benitez et al., *The Magdalena*. Darkness #18, November 1998, Chapter 2; Part 2.

the particular visual choices made in scenes like the crucifixion (shown in contrast to the Leather Nun illustration on the previous page) raise questions about the illustrators' intent. *The Magdalena* cannot claim to have grounded its visual choices in historic reference, as the crucifixion is indeed a historic form of punishment, but it does not require nudity. Moreover, if it were argued that the nudity was referencing the crucifixion of Christ, this would again be futile because in no other ways than the undress of Christ on the cross is the biblical crucifixion referenced. In most fights, the Magdalena holds her ground; yet the nagging elements of "fridging" and the gratuitous nudity in the scenes of brutality take away from the character's strength and autonomy. In all these cases, the authors are primarily male, and the illustrators are male or mixed staff. The aestheticization of brutality is clearly a choice and not a gendered authorial imperative.

The last pairing are the historical projects, and the most starkly contrasting comics; in this case "historical" means medievalist, in that the authors did research and took inspiration from historical sources such as sagas, historic literature, and museum reconstructions (such as the *Laxdæla Saga*, *Beowulf*, and the exhibits at the Viking Museum in Reykjavik), as mentioned in the previous chapters. This does not imply that they are slaves to historical accuracy, but both the authors and their fans are convinced that the comics contain a large degree of authenticity, especially in how society and mores are presented, especially the homophobia addressed in *Heathen* and the rugged individualism championed in *Northlanders*. I have included *Black Road* here, too, as it is a logical companion and almost continuation of Brian Wood's *Northlanders* project. Among these three, *Heathen* hangs closest to a fantastical history,[336] by incorporating mythological Valkyries, talking animals, etc., but still reflecting on historicity in its source material and references. *Northlanders* also includes elements of the fantastical in the sense that it references the Sagas and other historic primary sources. *Black Road* positions itself as a "correct" telling of the arrival of the Christian missionaries to the north and features little or no fantastical elements. Again, it is hard to identify if the gender of the authors influenced the appearance of brutality but seeing how Brian Wood's project have twice ended up in this category of historic realism with a

---

[336] Fantastical history here meaning that there is great attention paid to the historic context, yet it allows elements of fantasy, or "low fantasy" (defined as containing supernatural intrusions into the "real" world), Gary Wolfe, *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 60. To be incorporated, provided that the fantasy is also couched in a historic context.

heavy element of brutality, specifically medievalistic, I would conclude that these are not accidental choices on his part.

Heathen, Northlanders and Black Road can be mapped out in relation to each other on two axes of criteria: the role of action in the story progress ranging from violence to brutality, and the approach to representing historic material, ranging in levels of irreverence. Based on counts of violence or brutality occurring in the text, or irreverent and serious historicity, the distribution of these series can be seen in the chart below. In general, Rat Queens rates high for violence, and very low for attempted historical accuracy: it is indeed a medievalist high fantasy critique of medievalist high fantasy.[337] Equally uninvested in historical accuracy, but higher on the scale of brutality instead of violence is the first part of the Magdalena series. Attempting to at least incorporate historical sources and cleverly play on them, 1602: Witch Hunter Angela and The Leather Nun are found to the more playful side of center, with the former being heavily invested in brutality as a means to its own ends, as previously explained, and the brutality is inflicted on both genders for titillation and comedic aims. Heathen floats in the middle of the group: it does not subject its female characters to rape or maiming simply to further the protagonist's plot, and it swings between being irreverent in its application of historical elements (choosing to copy the classic chainmail bikini from the archives of comic book history rather than a museum piece) while inserting a substantial amount of legitimate Viking lore and trivia, and an authentic natural background. Finally, Northlanders and Black Road are placed quite near each other, positioned opposite Rat Queens on the spectrum. These series prefer brutality in their portrayal of female characters, often barely giving them a voice before using their death as a picture opportunity and type of motivation for the male protagonist. Black Road leans more towards an attempt at researched historicity (if only Brian Wood knew how to do research) and provides its female characters with more autonomy in some cases, while still killing off the wife of the protagonist in exquisite visual detail for the benefit of the reader in the very first issue. A full account of all

---

[337] While Kathryn Hume defines fantasy as a departure from consensus reality, being equal parts mimesis and fantasy where literary works may fall on different parts of the spectrum, high fantasy places a book at a very unequal portion of fantasy. Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1984), 20. Also, Peter Hunt and Sheila Bannister Ray describe high fantasy as different from science fiction fantasy in that science fiction "departs from contemporary consensus reality by extrapolating that reality into the near or far future" while high fantasy creates an entirely separate world where the action takes place. Peter Hunt and Sheila G. Bannister Ray, eds., *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 476.

occurrences of violence and brutality in *Rat Queens, 1602: Witch Hunter Angela, Heathen, Northlanders Vol. 1,* and *Black Road* can be found in the Appendix under "Counts of Violence and Brutality."
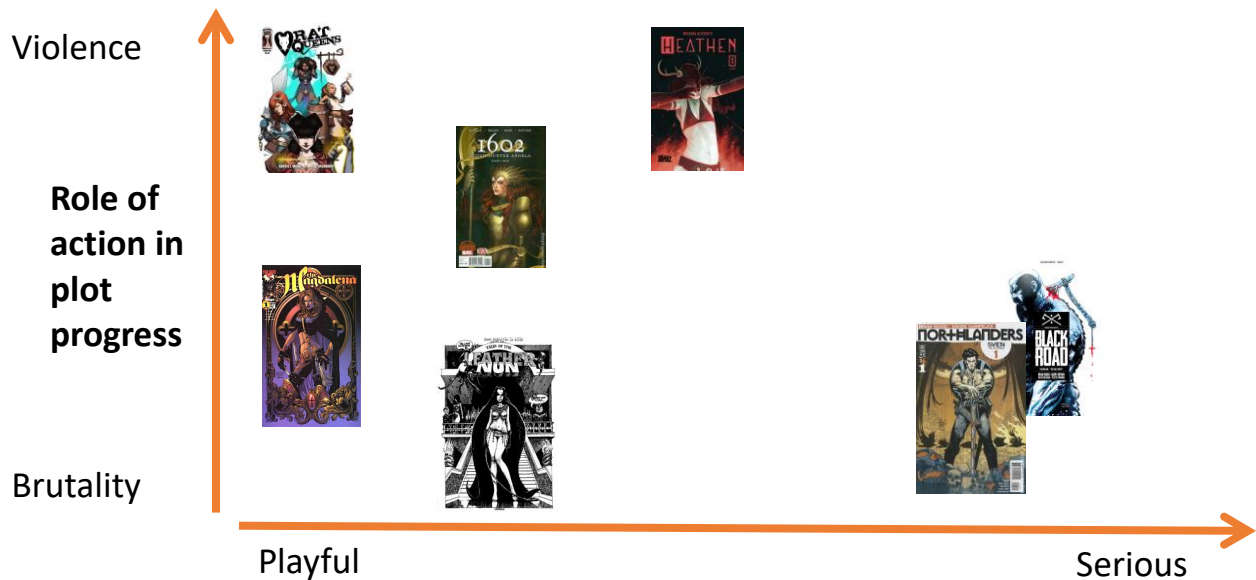


**Figure 44** Roughly plotted approach to representing historic material, as measured by content and number of occurrences of violence and brutality, and judgment as to whether it was serious or playfully approached.

The biggest issue here in practical terms is that the comics with the most brutality which are in popular circulation today—*The Leather Nun* having already been committed to the underground comics archive—associate this simulacrum with historical accuracy. An absence of brutality is linked with fantasy, such as in *Rat Queens*. The presentation of brutality reaches beyond the aestheticized death of female characters to the portrayal of female victimhood. Are the female characters engaged in fair fights and self-sufficient, or are they expendable victims used as fodder for motivation? The comics map out similarly, showing that in comics where female death is romanticized, female characters are also presented as weak in comparison to their male counterparts, forced into the role of victim or burden. In a perhaps conscious inverse of this, *Rat Queens* goes out of its way to portray male characters, at least briefly for laughs at the recognition of the inversion, in this role of being an incompetent burden or helpless victim. Quantifying the content of these comics (see: Appendix) the concurrence of brutality and historicity (and the opposite, lack of brutality in high fantasy) unfortunately equates female victimhood with perceived historical accuracy.
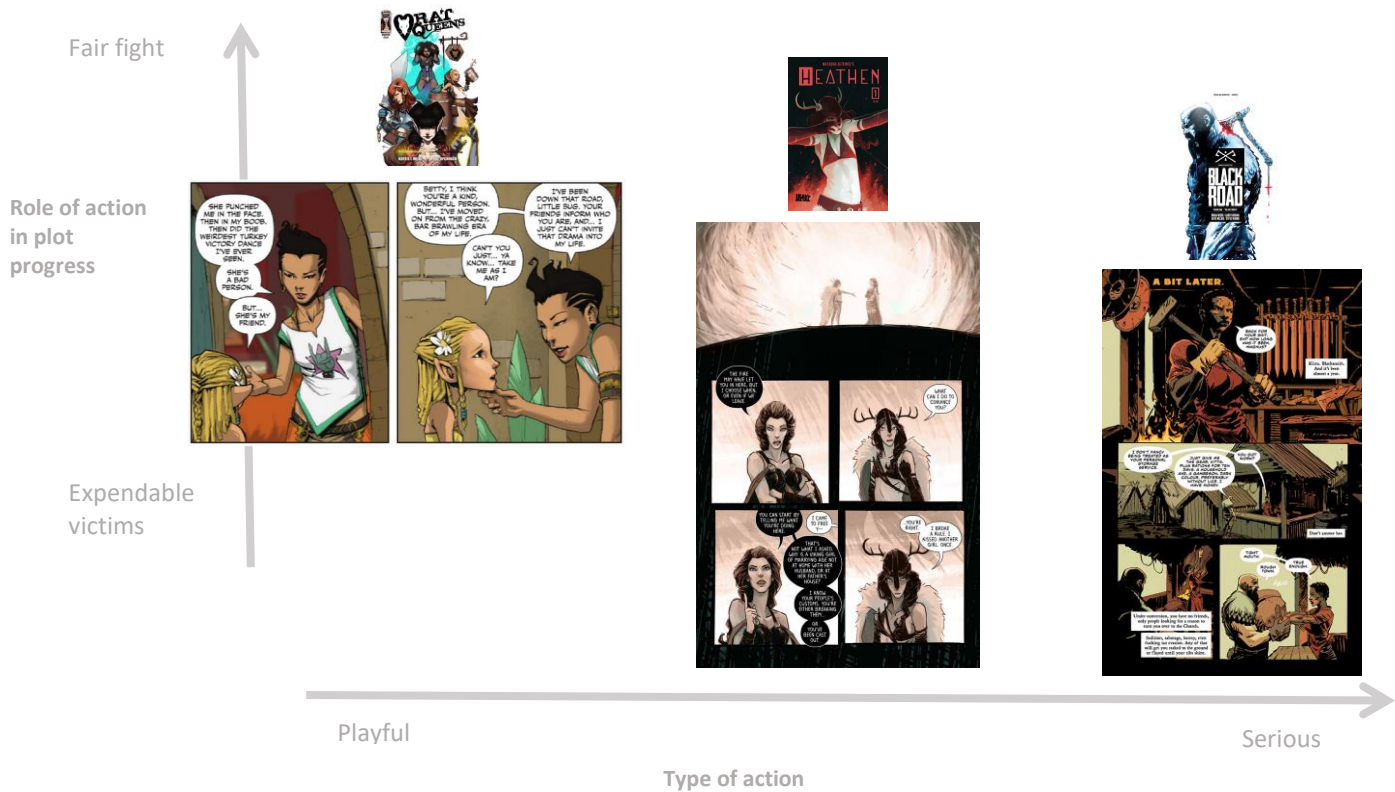
153
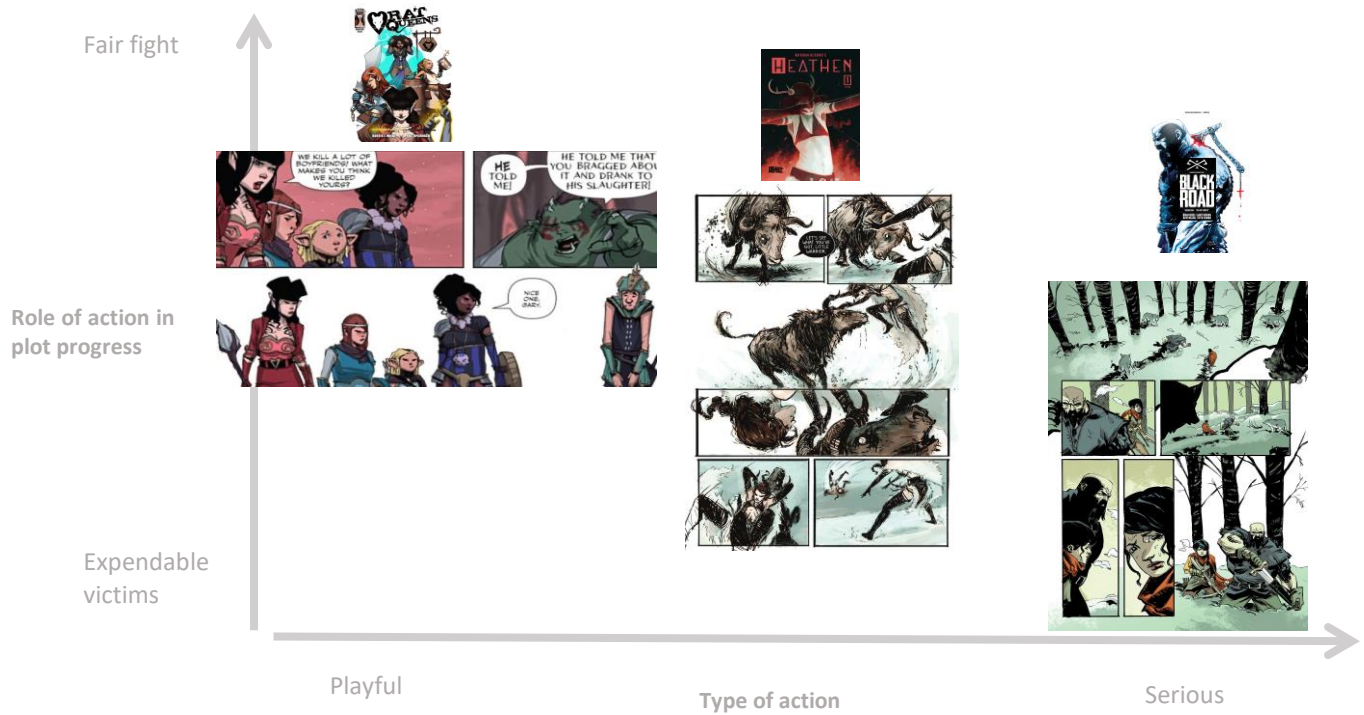
**Figure 45** A rough plotting of different approaches to representing historic material, based on frequency and type of action specifically regarding the role of the female character in the action, and whether the violent conflict took place between matched partners, or a substantially weaker female.

The final permutation of this constellation is that, because the brutality against women often happens in context of their relationship to their male partner, either at his hands or because of him (in both *Northlanders* and *Black Road*, the main romantic companions of both male protagonists are killed simply to provoke the protagonists and fuel them towards rage and violence). When male partners are marginalized, for example in the lesbian-driven stories, there is less space for male brutality (as it is imagined by the authors of the comics), as well as heterosexual romance, and more space for positive representations of queerness. The more abundant queerness the comic offers, the less brutality it contains, and moreover, the further it drifts from claims to historical accuracy, so that the placement of the comics on the spectrum of female victimhood lines up with positive representations of queerness. Correlation is not causation, but it is important to note that, in quantifying the content of these comics, historicity is tied to a negative trait in the suppressed representation of queer characters.

**Figure 46** A rough plotting of different approaches to representing historic material, based on frequency and type of action specifically regarding the role of the female character in the action, building on the previous diagram. This diagram shows how the same comics address the representation of queer characters.

To summarize, the results of examining these comics in relation to each other showed that:

- Perceived medieval historical authenticity (composed of simulacra) is associated with white, heteronormative, male-dominated content;

- Those that would be interested in presenting images of female victimhood, extreme heteronormativity, or brutality can legitimize it by applying a (perceived) historically accurate medievalist context;

- Female, minority, and queer agency are actively associated with fantasy, further legitimizing the perception that brutality and exclusion is inherent to a medieval— in reality, medievalist—content.

As will be seen in the following chapter, which looks at medievalism in Alt-Right media, comics that promote ideology in alignment with the Alt-Right also promote negative presentations of women and queerness. These media not only attract an audience to implicit content (*Northlanders*) but encourages the creation and consumption of explicit content (*Based Stick Man*, which will be

addressed in the following chapter), including real world action (participation in political action or groups such as the Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights, or FOAK). While political ideology may lead to political action, it is worrisome to consider what action misogynistic media consumption can encourage.

In the case of the comics surveyed—*The Leather Nun*, *The Magdalena*, *Rat Queens, Heathen, 1602: Witch Hunter Angela, Northlanders,* and *Black Road*—while opposites exist, neither cancels out the other and instead fans are invited to pick and choose the type of medievalism they would like to consume, in alignment with their political leanings. Interestingly, the female-positive comics are heavily peppered with witches and witchcraft, while the comics which choose to portray females as victims and burdens are conspicuously nun, and witch, free. The attempt to map these trends within an Actor-Network Theory approach demands that the phenomena are only described, but not explained. However, some social behavior associated with the groups who create and, more importantly, consume the comics, has been described and explained, as will be examined further in Chapter 8. For example, Stefanie von Schnurbein discovered in her research on gender and sexuality in neo-Pagan groups, male dominated Pagan groups such as the Odinist Rite view practitioners of Wicca [338]as the "hags of women's lib" and homosexuality as an unnatural illness.[339] It cannot be simply coincidence that powerful female collectives such as covens and convents are absent in male-dominated, Pagan comics. With the institution of red pilling in place, these homophobic and misogynistic texts[340] can have a wider impact today than in the past.

---

[338] EXPLAIN WHAT WICCA IS

[339] Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism*, Studies in Critical Research on Religion, Volume 5 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016), 244.

[340] Although I expect to hear a plea along the lines of "but there *is* a gay character . . . but there *is* a woman with a weapon," as if tokenism and empty gestures were the makings of strong characters). Tokenism itself is an issue regarding representation in comics.

## CHAPTER 6: MEDIEVALISM IN COMICS AND THE ALT-RIGHT

Just as it can be said that history repeats itself, propaganda seems to be recyclable as well. medievalism in the past was used especially in times of building a national identity, as a possible inspiration for utopias and to valorize certain populations to act in times of political change. The latter group includes white supremacist groups who drew on medievalist imagery, mythology, and misinterpretations quite liberally, including those who specifically idealize the plantation era South, as Richard Utz has argued, demonstrating that those who seek to sow nostalgia like to link southern identity to the ideals of medieval chivalry.[341] This chapter looks at how today's anglophone white supremacists, nationalists, and supporters of authoritarians and a strict patriarchy continue to apply medievalism in their media, specifically when looking at the comic book format.

One does not need to look far in order to ascertain the current state of medievalism in white nationalist media because not only have these movements substantially expanded over the last twenty years—a phenomenon well described by investigative journalist David Neiwert who has reported on these movements for two decades[342]—but they are also extremely visible both on the street and online today. Such people are currently united under the umbrella term of "Alt-Right." The more extreme groups comprise one partition of the Alt-Right landscape, so that not all Alt-Righters can be described as neo-Nazis, but if Neiwert's conclusions are to be applied, then many white supremacists have also taken up the banner of the Alt-Right in order to leave behind the publicly distained identifiers used in the past, and therefore I will allow this term to be used as general label throughout the text. The umbrella term "Alt-Right" is large, and there will be disagreement about its exact definition; I will be working with Neiwert's classification of the group and its ideologies.

At the time of writing, there is not central organizing body of the movement, nor has there been a solidification of their ideology or core members. However, several rough outlines can be made along Neiwert's research as summarized below:

- Unlike the American Republicans and Conservatives—the "Right" proper—these groups may support ideologies which can be described as being anti-government,

---

[341] Richard J. Utz, *Medievalism: A Manifesto*, Past Imperfect (Kalamazoo: ARC Humanities Press, 2017).
[342] David A. Neiwert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (London ; New York: Verso, 2017).

anti-Christian Pagan, who use the term "Heathens,"[343] and against the civil rights

progress of the twentieth century;

- Members of this movement are not the uneducated, poor whites. These include a

new generation of academics, business leaders, and people holding political office;

- There is disagreement within the groups themselves as to Alt-Right identity and

ideology.

This movement seems to have adapted to the questions posed by postmodern thought by declaring moral relativism in all aspects of life and embracing the post-truth era full-heartedly. As the Southern Poverty Law Center has described, they can be seen as crass in their disrespect for credulity,[344] as they are quick to laugh and claim that all was just a joke when offense is taken. Alt-Right media's presentation of their lifestyle choices and emphasis on patriarchy are textbook misogyny, but members of the movement (such as Andrew Anglin, Richard Spencer), including the women (for example, Lana Lokteff), consider men to be naturally dominant and violent and women best suited to housekeeping and childbearing,[345] subscribing to a coarse interpretation of social Darwinism claiming that racism and patriarchy are simply biological.[346]

Neiwert further explains that while being willing to exploit or deride the earnestness of others, they exhibit an inclination to conspiratorial thinking combined with media illiteracy and a distrust of so-called experts. Due to their warped understanding of research methodology and the scientific method, they both consumer, conspiracy theories and create vast amounts of media,

---

[343] As members of this movement describe themselves, see, for example: Jennifer Snook, *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement* (Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 2014). Practitioners utilize an amorphous mix of Germanic and Scandinavian reconstructionist traditions which have been translated to the present to reflect contemporary concerns and needs.

[344] This is the philosophy of the so-called "Kekistan" movement, and the driving force behind current phenomena such as "shitposting" and trolling. The movement is fairly new, and there hasn't been much scholarly research on the phenomenon. David Neiwert, "What the Kek: Explaining the Alt-Right 'Deity' Behind Their 'Meme Magic,'" Southern Poverty Law Center, May 9, 2017, https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/05/08/what-kek-explaining-alt-right-deity-behind-their-meme-magic (accessed March 20, 2020).

[345] Kathleen Blee at the University of Pittsburgh is currently researching women in right-wing extremism.

[346] See, for example, Andrew Anglin's post for the Daily Stormer, Andrew Anglin, "What Is the Deal with WMBF Relationships? I Don't Get It.," *Daily Stormer* (blog), September 19, 2016, http://archive.is/3TrgB#selection-551.1-551.19 (accessed March 20, 2020). He makes this argument, and additionally stating "I'm not really triggered by miscegenation if the mixer is a male, because it doesn't really make any difference, biologically. With a woman, there is a lot of anger, because it's OUR WOMB – that's right, it doesn't belong to her, it belongs to the males in her society – that is being used to produce an enemy soldier," [emphasis in the original] which was then quoted by Lokteff and other Alt-Right women who subscribe to this belief.

including graphic media—as confirmed in the study by Viveca Greene who looked at their production of online meme graphics, in particular through the lens of satire, boasting the "truth."[347] Thanks to the speed and flexibility of the medium, many of the comics referred to in this chapter are either published digitally, as Tumbler webcomics, or as memes,[348] a format which is favored by the Alt-Right.[349]

The final uniting characteristic between the various fractions is support of isolationist ideology. This springs from a range of different concerns, such as the artificially constructed fear of white genocide and Pat Buchanan's "Death of the West" theory,[350] or a distrust of the government, a necessary step to creating perfect micro-communities and keeping them under strict control, or a drive to recreate what they perceive to be the pre-historic, so-called natural form of society with the individual or nuclear family (as an appendage to the patriarch) as being ideal.

The aforementioned ideological and actionable points—an emphasis on the "natural" social order, distrust of government, valuing the independent creation of facts and information, and a legitimization of extreme actions—are often validated as being couched in history, often referring to the Middle Ages. In this case, what people believe about the Middle Ages is infinitely more important than what current research can conclude, especially when the individuals concerned are not trained as historians and do not understand the value of peer review and standardized methodology. This is *medievalism*, which Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz define as a term developed in the nineteenth century to describe "engagement either with the historical period known as the Middle Ages or with what was perceived as belonging to this historical period."[351]

One example of this was seen recently in another media project, at the Q&A session with Warhorse Studios at the Academic Film Olomouc festival of 2017.[352] The representatives of the

---

[347] All with a sense of humor, See Greene, "'Deplorable' Satire."
[348] For a full explanation about the inclusion of memes, please see the relevant section in the Methods and Literature chapter.
[349] Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 81.
[350] Patrick Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Culture and Civilization* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2002). Buchanan argues that Western European culture and power are being basically out-bred by other cultures. Though Buchanan himself has no children, he sees the question of cultural hegemony as a demographic numbers game, and he considers Western culture an absolute net good for the planet.
[351] Elizabeth Emery and Richard J. Utz, eds., *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, Medievalism, v. 5 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 2.
[352] This is an unpublished session of the Academic Film Festival in Olomouc, attended by the author.

game company were discussing how they had developed a historically accurate representation of medieval Bohemia for the game *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. They had initially consulted with academic experts (they did not specify who exactly) on the era and had become extremely frustrated with the approach that the historians took. When they asked for simple details—the example they gave was "What color roof would a typical house have?"—the historians hesitated to give a clear answer, instead giving a range of inconclusive evidence and archeological suggestions as to several possible colors. Unfortunately, graphic designers need one color, and fast, so the development team decided to crowd-source the rest of the details, enlisting fans and hobbyists to offer their suggestions. The representatives gushed while recalling how one contributor even suggested a coloring for the chickens, claiming a definitive answer to the question as to what shade farm chickens were in rural Bohemia in the 14th century. The impenetrable naïve certainty of amateur historians never hesitated to supply answers to their questions, nor did fans hesitate to declare the game "historically accurate" and a great choice for self-titled "history buffs."[353] On the Warhorse user forum,[354] players nitpick about the timing of certain events or the representation of certain important historic figures, but they never question the representation of the Middle Ages, nor how the game developers came to their particular representation of medieval Bohemia. Players did not question the violence of the game. Or the other elements which the public is so quick to associate with the Middle Ages, thanks to medievalism.

Many elements of medievalism in the comics mentioned in this chapter triangulate with Alt-Right ideologies. These include: validation of brutality, inflexible social order and hierarchy, exhalation of the individual, nuclear family unit as ideal, the glorification of European heritage and the West, a golden age of homogeneity, and Christian or pre-Christian Pagan purity. The only one of these which could be defended in scholarly literature is perhaps the claim towards inflexible social order on a national level, such as feudalism and strict laws (for example in England) that regulated upward mobility within the class system. This is not the version championed by the Alt-Right, who view social order as being driven by their misunderstanding of the theory of evolution

---

[353] A range of reviews can be seen collected here "Kingdom Come: Deliverance," *Metacritic* (blog), accessed August 12, 2019, https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/kingdom-come-deliverance (accessed March 20, 2020).

[354] "The Accuracy of History in Kingdom Come - Story & Setting - Kingdom Come: Deliverance Forum," *Forum.Kingdomcomerpg.Com*, accessed August 12, 2019, https://forum.kingdomcomerpg.com/t/the-accuracy-of-history-in-kingdom-come/45553/8 (accessed March 20, 2020).

and does not extend to a need for a monarch destined by God and confirmed by the Pope, as would have been the medieval concept. The rest of the assumptions are heavily fictitious and speak more to the mores of our current times than being based on research and evidence.

Medievalism as a subject always had a white supremacy problem, in that these individuals are constantly hijacking the public narrative, as Carol Symes writes to her colleagues in trade magazines,[355] and Andrew Elliot confirmed in the context of the most recent appropriation of medievalist material in the service of internet media.[356] This has led scholars of medievalism—that branch of medieval studies which is directly concerned with the public's perception of the Middle Ages—to call for more action and a greater level of responsibility from medievalists to monitor and communicate when such hijackings occur.[357] Thus, I pursued the hypothesis: if medievalism has been used as propaganda and fodder for bigoted movements of the past, and if the Alt-Right has so much ideology which overlaps the current manifestation of medievalism in anglophone cultures, and if there is a known trend in popular, medievalist comics, then there should probably exist medievalist comics which are produced by or cater specifically to the Alt-Right.

Not only did research confirm that there are Alt-Right comics, but that they were being produced extensively, created by top industry writers and illustrators, who had left major publishers, such as DC and Marvel, and funded by private sources, such as Steve Bannon[358] or crowdfunded by fans, as will be described in this chapter. Moreover, medievalism was rampant, significantly more within the members of the movement involved in protests or real-world action, including playing a large part in identity of a range of contemporary white supremacist groups within the wider Alt-Right movement.

Primarily looking at online media (the broadest platform for media dissemination, in contrast to traditional types of media in print), I collected medievalist images or propaganda

---

[355] Carol Symes, "Medievalism, White Supremacy, and the Historian's Craft," *American Historical Association* (blog), https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2017/medievalism-white-supremacy-and-the-historians-craft (accessed March 20, 2020).

[356] Andrew B.R. Elliott, "Internet Medievalism and the White Middle Ages," *History Compass* 16, no. 3 (March 2018): 1–10.

[357] See Utz, *Medievalism*.

[358] Steve Bannon (b. 1953) is the former executive chairman of *Breitbart News* and served President Donald Trump in 2016 as the CEO of the presidential campaign, later as a senior conselor to the president until he was removed in August 2018. Though he returned to *Breitbart*, Bannon was removed as executive chairman in January 2018. At the time of writing, Bannon is participating in various political activism and media projects.

created by Alt-Righters, developed a picture of the support and subsequent success of Alt-Right, and separately Alt-Right medievalist comics, and considered how the producers of these comics saw the role of medievalism and Alt-Right ideology in their work as evidenced through their statements in interviews and on their own blogs or websites.

I would like to state that the Alt-Right are prolific creators of visual media, in particular memes: those short, single frame or multi-frame text-image graphics. Firstly, they have cleverly
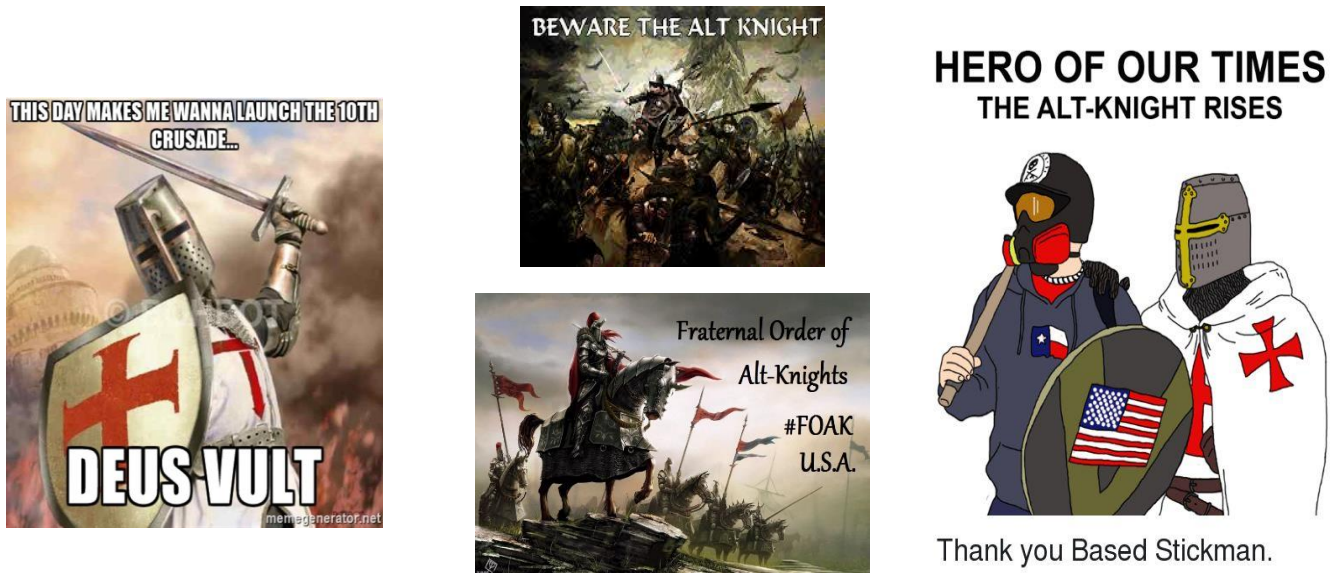


**Figure 47** Sampling of popular internet memes. Due to mass circulation and copying, it is difficult to ascertain the creator of the image.

created the moniker the "Alt-Knight," which is used to signify any fighter for the cause. The imagery of knighthood especially references the Crusades. Secondly, not only are new groups founded which draw heavily on medievalist imagery, such as the Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights (FOAK, a branch of the Proud Boys[359]), but neo-classical artwork styles are used in the group's propaganda: not a medieval art style, nor a style from today's trends in realistic painting, but a medievalist eye looking back from the nineteenth century. Finally, they take existing public figures, such as the one in the image on the far right of the examples (Based Stick Man, a comics project discussed at length below) and exalt them by putting them in a medievalized context, reframing them as a chivalric hero. The movement is clearly visually primed for medievalist

---

[359] The Proud Boys are a designated hate group of "western chauvinists" organized by Gavin McInnes in 2016, who engage in activism promoting an "anti-political correctness and anti-white guilt agenda." See *Proud Boys*, Southern Poverty Law Center, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys (accessed March 20, 2020).

comics. It is just a question of expanding the current images into full issues filled out by ideologically approved writing.

It must be noted that the comics and developments mentioned here have occurred since 2017, and journalistic reporting has been faster than scholarly research in describing the phenomena. Because of this, many of the sources mentioned will be websites, either comic industry websites, or the personal sites of the creators. Many comics nowadays are published in only digital form for ease of distribution, and reviewers and reporters cover developments through short posts on online platforms. By going through digital platforms, groups such as the Alt-Right can get around the traditional gatekeeping of publishers, who would likely refuse such projects on the basis of appropriateness, and cater to like-minded fans directly, taking both their funding and distribution to the shallow end of the underground.

*BASED STICK MAN*

The "Hero of Our Times"—referring to the medieval times or the medievalist present times—in question is an actual member of the public named Kyle Chapman, a middle aged man who attended a Pro-Trump rally on March 4, 2017, on the campus of University of California at Berkeley, dressed in the protective gear depicted in the illustration. The rally became violent and Mr. Chapman was filmed aggressively beating counter-protesters. Already a felon with two strikes, this incident provided him with arrest for five felonies and one misdemeanor, thus putting him in violation of California's "three-strikes" law which threatens life imprisonment if violated. The judge even used medievalist language while sentencing him, saying: "You were armed to the teeth during the protest . . . and the next thing you know it was a melee."[360]

Chapman was seen as a hero by his fellow rally members and in the online community, who tried to petition to have California Governor Edmund Brown Jr.[361] and even President Trump pardon him, which collected 3,937 signatures.[362] Chapman was released on bail thanks to

---

[360] "Right-Wing Activist Kyle 'Based Stickman' Chapman Given 5-Year Probation Sentence," *CBS San Fransico Bay Area*, September 25, 2019, https://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2019/09/25/right-wing-activist-kyle-based-stickman-chapman-given-5-year-probation-sentence/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

[361] Zachary Richman, "Petition: Pardon Kyle Chapman, Dismiss All Charges." (Change.org, 2017), https://www.change.org/p/jerry-brown-pardon-kyle-chapman-dismiss-all-charges (accessed March 20, 2020).

[362] J. O., "Call on President Trump to Fully Pardon Kyle Chapman (Known as 'Stick Man') Wrongfully Arrested!" (The White House, March 5, 2017), https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/call-president-trump-fully-pardon-kyle-chapman-known-stick-man-wrongfully-arrested (accessed March 20, 2020).

crowdfunding support and meanwhile became an internet meme and mascot for the group as a symbol of righteous self-defense. His gear already suggested medievalism, with the shield and the sword-like baton, but the fans from the movement pushed it into all-out medievalism. He is in fact the founder of the Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights, which he insists is not a hate-group, despite having caught the attention of the non-profit legal advocacy organizations for civil rights and public interest litigation, like Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center.[363] The Southern Poverty Law Center has reported that the group has connections to Odinist and Pagan religious groups. evidenced by Travis Pinkerton, a member of the Wotan Network[364] ("Wotan" standing for W.O.T.A.N. makes a perfect acronym for Will Of The Aryan Nation which is promoted by David Lane, Shannon Weber notes that the Network works specifically to spread Heathen memes)[365] and Stephaen McNallen's leadership in the religious sect of Odinism.[366] The media images of FOAK often include the phrase "Deus Vult," a reference to the medieval crusades, on the shields and as text banners around the images of medieval knights.

The escalated speech of the movement and the inclinations towards violence among its members is endemic through the movement, including when discussing comics. In an interview about his newest project, a comic book based on a character representing Kyle Chapman as Based Stick Man, writer Brett Smith said the following:



**Figure 48** *Based Stick Man* promotional cover. © Smith 2017.

> This is not only a culture war, this is war . . . The highest
> form of warfare is to subvert the culture because you do

---

[363] Brett Schenker, "The Alt-Right's Hero Based Stick Man Is Coming to Comics," Graphic Policy, July 29, 2017, https://graphicpolicy.com/2017/07/29/the-alt-rights-hero-based-stick-man-is-coming-to-comics/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

[364] Wotan is a group of Neo-Völkisch spirituality, along with Odinism or Odalism. Believers embrace the dogma of racial, ethnic or cultural essentialism, and promote racial supremacy. See *Neo-Volkisch*, Southern Poverty Law Center, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/neo-volkisch (accessed March 20, 2020).

[365] Shannon Weber, "White Supremacy's Old Gods : The Far Right and Neopaganism," *The Public Eye*, Political Research Associates, no. 93 (Winter 2018): 12.

[366] "Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights (FOAK)," Extremist Files (Southern Poverty Law Center), accessed January 1, 2020, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/fraternal-order-alt-knights-foak (accessed March 20, 2020).

not have to raise a standing army. We're never going to change the culture from Washington. We're going to do it from comics, from movies.[367]

This demonstrates a clear awareness of the use of media, specifically mentioning comic books, for the promotion of ideology, whilst applying very archaic and bellicose language. The idea that civilians would need to raise a "standing army" in order to mount a domestic "culture war" harkens back to the Civil War, and is quite disturbing, even if it is only the Plan B in Smith's scenario. On the heels of his successful *Clinton Cash* comic collaboration with Steve Bannon,[368] Brett Smith was set to launch a new comics project funded by Steve Bannon, which sets Kyle Chapman's "Based Stickman" as an Alt-Right superhero. Though the cover art pilot of the project did not heavily reference medievalism, memes related to the project and to Kyle Chapman do. In the most recent news on the project, in an email correspondence, collaborator Mike Baron stated that he would be leaving the project. A. David Lewis, writing on the *Sacred and Sequential* website, in the same article also reported that the project's IndieGoGo fundraising page had disappeared, being moved to a new crowdfunding platform at FreeStartr, and has not yet gone into circulation.[369]

### *ALT★HERO*

Other well-known collaborators on Alt-Right comics include writer Chuck Dixon,[370] and creator Vox Day[371] (whose given name is Theodore Robert Beale). The latter created a whole series called

---

[367] Chaucey Alcorn, "A Steve Bannon Propagandist Is Turning the Alt-Right's Antihero Based Stick Man," Mic, July 28, 2017, https://www.mic.com/articles/182821/a-steve-bannon-propagandist-is-turning-the-alt-rights-antihero-based-stick-man-into-a-comic-book (accessed March 20, 2020).

[368] Chuck Dixon and Brett Smith, *Clinton Cash,* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2016). This graphic novel is an adaptation of Peter Schweizer's book *Clinton Cash: The Untold Story of How and Why Foreign Governments and Businesses Helped Make Bill and Hillary Rich* (2016), which is a political expose on the Clintons' business dealings before and after their times holding government offices.

[369] A. David Lewis, "UPDATES: Baron Leaves Alt-Right 'Based Stick Man' Comic, Alt★Hero Looms," Sacred and Sequential, November 7, 2017, http://www.sacredandsequential.org/2017/11/07/updates-baron-leaves-alt-right-based-stick-man-comic-alt★hero-looms/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

[370] Chuck Dixon, "About Chuck Dixon," ChuckDixon.net: Online Home of Author Chuck Dixon, accessed January 1, 2020, http://www.chuckdixon.net/p/chuck-dixon-is-veteran-comic-book.html (accessed March 20, 2020).

[371] Vox Day, "Vox Popoli," Official Website of Vox Day, accessed January 1, 2020, http://voxday.blogspot.com/2020/01/twitter-adds-new-feature.html (accessed March 20, 2020).

*Alt★Hero*, which attempts to reclaim the comic book superhero genre for its roots in middle-class, white America. Reviewer Paul Kersey reassures readers that "if you want a good actioner, forget pozzed Hollywood and the New York publishing houses. Instead, try Vox Day's *Alt★Hero* comic book series—an effective antidote to the modern entertainment industry's anti-white, anti-male egalitarian poison."[372] Vox Day designs his comics to be specifically provocative for liberals, whom he accuses of "methodically eradicating traditional values, methodically eradicating Western civilization,"[373] playing into the white genocide fears of the Alt-Right base, and also the nationalistic pride in heritage. This message resonated so much with his base that they crowdfunded the entire project, but the project was cancelled by the crowdfunding platform IndieGoGo.[374] This did not stop the creators, and the comic was successfully published by Arkhaven Comics—the subsequent *Alt-Hero: Q* in the Alt★Hero series*,* which references the Qanon conspiracy,[375] which, as John Trent reported, raised over $13000 within two days through fan support alone.[376]



**Figure 49** Example of meme. Author unknown.

These comics are made for the effect that they are anticipated to produce. "I had a lot of people reach out to me who said, 'I was a Bernie supporter who read Clinton Cash and switched my vote from Hillary to Trump . . . The combination of the graphic novel, the original book, and

---

[372] Paul Kersey, "Tired of Hollywood's Woke, and Failing, Actioners? Try Vox Day's New Comic Book Series," *The Unz Review: An Alternative Media Selection*, November 24, 2019, https://www.unz.com/article/tired-of-hollywoods-woke-and-failing-actioners-try-vox-days-new-comic-book-series/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

[373] Jeff Taylor, "'Alt-Right' Comic Book Meant to 'Trigger' Progressives Is as Awful as You'd Expect," LGBTQ Nation, October 4, 2017, https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2017/10/alt-right-comic-book-meant-trigger-progressives-awful-youd-expect/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

[374] John F. Trent, "IndieGoGo Shuts Down Vox Day and Arkhaven Comics' Alt-Hero Q Crowdfund Campaign," *Bounding Into Comics*, October 11, 2018, https://boundingintocomics.com/2018/10/11/indiegogo-shuts-down-vox-day-and-arkhaven-comics-alt-hero-q-crowdfund-campaign/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

[375] Brandy Zadrozny and Ben Collins, "How Three Conspiracy Theorists Took 'Q' and Sparked Qanon," *NBC News*, August 14, 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/how-three-conspiracy-theorists-took-q-sparked-qanon-n900531 (accessed March 20, 2020).

[376] John F. Trent, "Vox Day Announces Chuck Dixon's Alt-Hero: Q #2 Now On Sale," *Bounding Into Comics*, October 28, 2019, https://boundingintocomics.com/2019/10/28/vox-day-announces-chuck-dixons-alt-hero-q-2-now-on-sale/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

the movie, I think, really swayed young people and voters in general to not vote for Hillary," bragged Smith in an interview.[377] By tying Chapman's character to the Crusades, to a so-called noble and chivalric cause which also emphasizes white heritage and a certain conception of traditional values, Smith is open about using the comics medium as propaganda to sway people's opinions even in the voting booth.

I would like to frame this as usage of medievalism to make a point. This appears in different media from the Alt-Right and associated communications online. Medievalism is not necessary, but it is added as a legitimatizing background, for example in Figure 49. The text alone conveys the ideology and could exist with any number of different images behind the text. However, the image chosen here represents that ideal of a pure past, in all the ways previously mentioned, implying those Alt-Right values which track with medievalism: validation of brutality, inflexible social order and hierarchy, exhalation of the individual, nuclear family unit as ideal, the glorification of Europe and n heritage and the West, golden age of homogeneity, a Christian or pre-Christian Pagan purity. I would like to focus on the ideas of pre-Christian purity, and Pagan imagery.

These are necessarily medieval, because the conception of Paganism most popular today, found in new religions, such as Wicca, Odinism, New-Age goddess worship, reconstructionist Druids, etc., are more often derived from early medieval Pagans, not actual pre-Christian Pagan religions. Moreover, they are shown in opposition to Christianity as an invading religion, moreover a foreign invader from the Middle East and Mediterranean. For so-called American nationalists, or the white nationalists associated with them, a Viking fantasy—or Scandinavian Pagan fantasy— provides an even more homogeneous and lily-white backdrop for performing their ideology than the urban, transnational Christian faith. It is also convenient that contemporary amateur historians think that medievalist Paganism endorses violence, and a strict hierarchy, which (outside of Crusader fantasies) is refuted in Christianity by calls for turning the other cheek and understanding all people as equally God's children.[378]

---

[377] Alcorn, "A Steve Bannon Propagandist Is Turning the Alt-Right's Antihero Based Stick Man."
[378] Kaufman, "Purity," 205.

To provide a specific example of media in a comic format reflecting these ideas, catering to an Alt-Right audience, I will present a webcomic published on Tumblr, *The Iron Pill*. Tumblr doesn't require user information to be posted with the Tumblr profile, so with the account name of the same title as the series, the author is anonymous. The series was posted between 2014 and 2015,
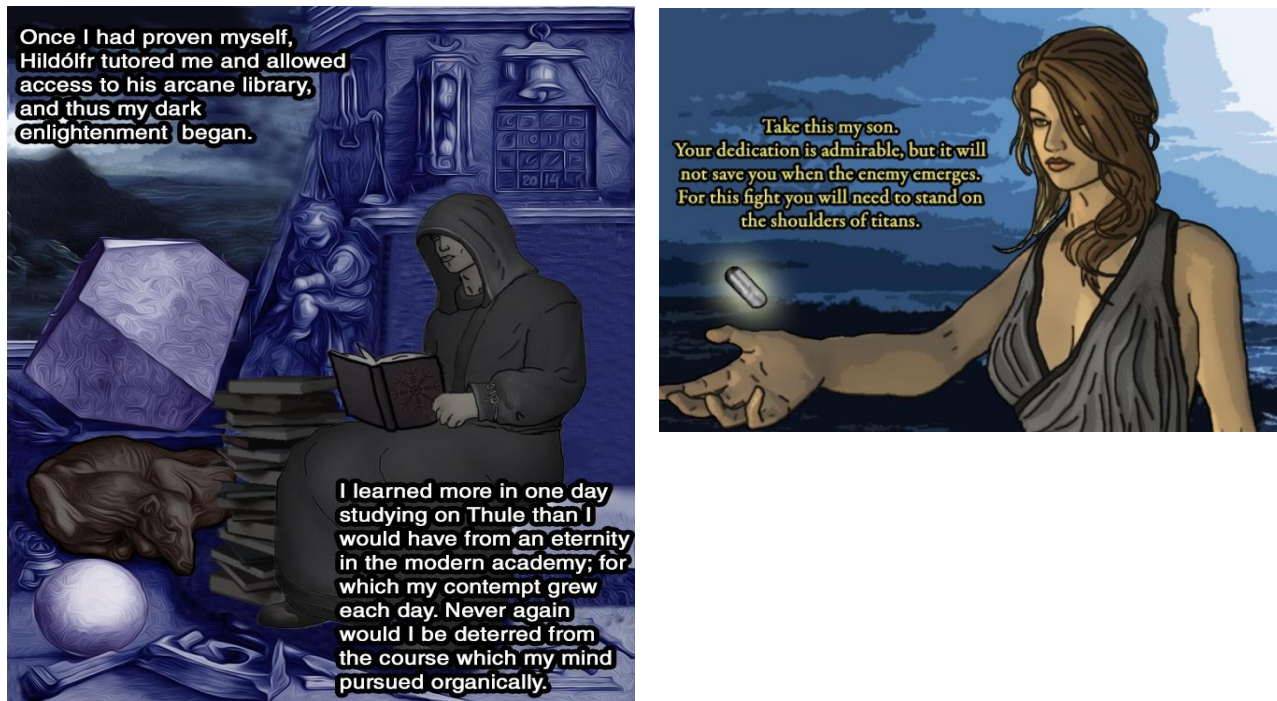


**Figure 50 Details,** *The Iron Pill* © 2014, 2015

with posts being made rapidly over a couple of days in June to August 2014, and then a long post on October 30, 2015. There is no option to see readers' comments, but only an archive of undated "notes" which list rebloggings, likes (there is no option to 'dislike'), and shares; the quantity of notes per post reached over a thousand on the June 16, 2014 post, and the least popular post, with only forty-one notes appeared on June 21, 2014. The series is irreverent and ridiculous at times, but it would seem to be sincere in its overall message of white nationalism, or white pride.

The series presents the main character engaging in interactions with various other characters, while sometimes breaking off into monologues or exaggerated acts of violence, which are partly influenced by the superhero comic book aesthetic and are partly collages of white nationalist imagery. Because *The Iron Pill* is not serialized and distributed in a traditional way, and the author does not try to put the posts in a particular order, I will treat them as individual episodes which are linked through the shared story world and narrative universe which the author

would like to present. I will summarize these episodes according to the chronology of their appearance on Tumblr and respect the author's occasional indications of sequence when provided. Because of the format, instead of using frames, the comic works on a principle of scrolling down to center the new frame on the computer screen, so that sequence is indicated, but when I refer to "frames" I will be referring to the sequentially delineated scene which is separated by the scrolling mechanism.

The episode labeled only as Episode 1 starts[379] with a narrative title stating "meanwhile, at a western college campus," and shows two characters, both disparaging caricatures identified by consumer symbols such as an Apple produce bag, and a logo shirt labeled "ask me about my pronouns;" the female character has a shirt with a pink female-power logo. Their speech is indicated by color coded lines, a blue line for the male and a pink line for the female. The two are physically grotesque, with no necks, short and undefined physique, unattractive faces and wearing glasses: the female is additionally dribbling drool out of her mouth while she speaks. Their exchange tries to show an overly aggressive female, directing the male to do tasks, and rejecting his offer to go with him to Starbucks. The next frame jumps to Iron Pill, with a grey speech line, who steps in to educate the unnamed, faltering male character on the ways of social interaction with females. When accused of being "brutish privileged shitlord frat boy,"[380] Iron Pill (as the character is named) explains an elaborately worded monologue about physical and ideological purity, modern feminism, theorizing that women use weak men to subvert traditional masculine "virtue," calling this a spiritual battlefield. The speech is interrupted by a feminist monster, Big Red (the unnamed female character from the beginning of the episode), and Iron Pill calls on an effigy of Caesar to blast the monster with his laser eyes, which is captioned with the subtitle "[atavistic morality intensifies]," referencing a popular meme format and social Darwinism. The comic ends with the weak male character being declared safe from the monster, and Iron Pill advises him to eat some wild game and get more muscular. When the weaker man says that he is

---

[379] "The Iron Pill," June 16, 2014, Episode 1, https://theironpill.tumblr.com/. https://theironpill.tumblr.com/post/88928988716/the-iron-pill-episode-1 (accessed March 20, 2020).

[380] This touches on several American male stereotypes. Those include reference to the practice of "shitposting," which is the act of publicly posting or circulating more and more outlandish, offensive or cryptic media, most often memes of a poor quality, with the purpose of provoking other users or disrupting an online discussion. This is considered part of "troll" behavior. *The Iron Pill* often borders on "shitposting," but it has consistent and persuasive messaging which would not be considered trolling, but rather earnest propaganda.

vegan and he does not eat meat, the comic switches back to a collage format, which serves to indicate moments when Iron Pill is using his "volkisch" superpowers, and shows a Roman mosaic featuring a hunt scene overlaid with a picture of a steak on the grill and stylized German font stating, "You do now son . . . you do now." Iron Pill's eyes glow red and orange, with little lightning bolts emanating from them. In this way, the series launches into seven episodes of similar content and similar antagonists.

The very title, *The Iron Pill,* references a very important factor in Alt-Right media and propaganda, a process called "redpilling." This is a reference from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, wherein the protagonist is offered two choices: take the red pill and wake up to reality, or take the blue one and stay comfortably asleep. This fits into the movement's recruitment policy, or trying to get others to wake up to the special reality that they are privileged to see. Members of the Alt-Right are extremely frank about redpilling, including long threads on discussion techniques and even guides published online to help people through the steps, including if they want to redpill themselves. *The Iron Pill* also mentions this practice by comparing the protagonist to someone who has not been redpilled, or ironpilled, in this case. "The key is to start by SLOWLY planting seeds into their mind. People are incredibly sensitive when poked in the axioms, as Jordan B. Peterson says, so it is



**Figure 51** *The Iron Pill* © 2014, 2015

170

crucial that you do not attack their feminist beliefs head on," advises Laura Southern, author on the highly dubious website *MasculineDevelopment.com*.[381] Movement leaders see redpilling as a deep and permanent shift in a person's ideology, saying, for example:

> While the bluepilled can always be redpilled, the redpilled can never be bluepilled again. As the World worsens and the West withers under its many problems—demographic, racial, spiritual, social, economic, cultural, and moral—the impetus that drove the Alt-Right will remain and strengthen.[382]

*The Iron Pill* speaks about the protagonists' own redpilling, or their transition into accepting the ideology of "white and proud." This appears in two different threads—one is through actually taking an iron pill, and the other is a more typical process of redpilling through exposure to ideology and peer pressure from group insiders. The author wrote a sequence in Episode 7 which described Iron Pill's origins as a so-called left-leaning university student named Stien Fitzpolsson, until he experiences near death in a plane crash, caused by the evil feminist pilot. The only survivor, Iron Pill lands on the island of Thule,[383] where he is taken in by mythical Norse giants, called in the text "The Jotnar," who teach him how to lift weights, and embrace a light interpretation of classic Stoicism. Upon killing a gigantic wolf, which is possibly a reference to the Fenrir myth, Iron Pill announces that he has become "a traditional man." Upon finishing his training, he travels to Crete, where he sees a vision of the goddess Europa, depicted as a Lunar Cow goddess (astride a white bull, who is Zeus in the Cretan myth[384]). In this interaction, Iron Pill describes his mission as: "I have been trained as a mortal agent with the task of guiding humanity away from vice and dismantling the state of decline."[385] The goddess gives him an iron pill (a

---

[381] Jon Anthony, "Lauren Southern: How to Red Pill Women in Your Life," *Masculine Development* (blog), July 4, 2017, https://www.masculinedevelopment.com/lauren-southern-red-pill-women (accessed March 20, 2020).

[382] Colin Liddell, "Walking Away From a Broken Brand," *Affirmative Right*, April 2, 2018, https://affirmativeright.blogspot.com/2018/04/walking-away-from-broken-brand.html (accessed March 20, 2020).

[383] An antique location at the northern border of the Greco-Roman world, possibly Iceland, the Orkney Islands, or islands of the coast of Estonia or Norway. *The Iron Pill* does not specify which interpretation it prefers.

[384] Popular knowledge confirmed by: Furumark, Arne. "Was there a Sacral Kingship in Minoan Crete?". In Was there a Sacral Kingship in Minoan Crete?, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1959).

[385] "The Iron Pill." Unnamed episode posted on October 30th, 2015

reference to redpilling) and he is reborn into his "volkisch" form, ready to carry out his mission of guiding others. Thus, in addition to many scenes of fighting feminist monsters, Iron Pill dedicates many frames to persuasively talking to lesser men who he hopes to bring around to the truth of reality, as the author sees it.
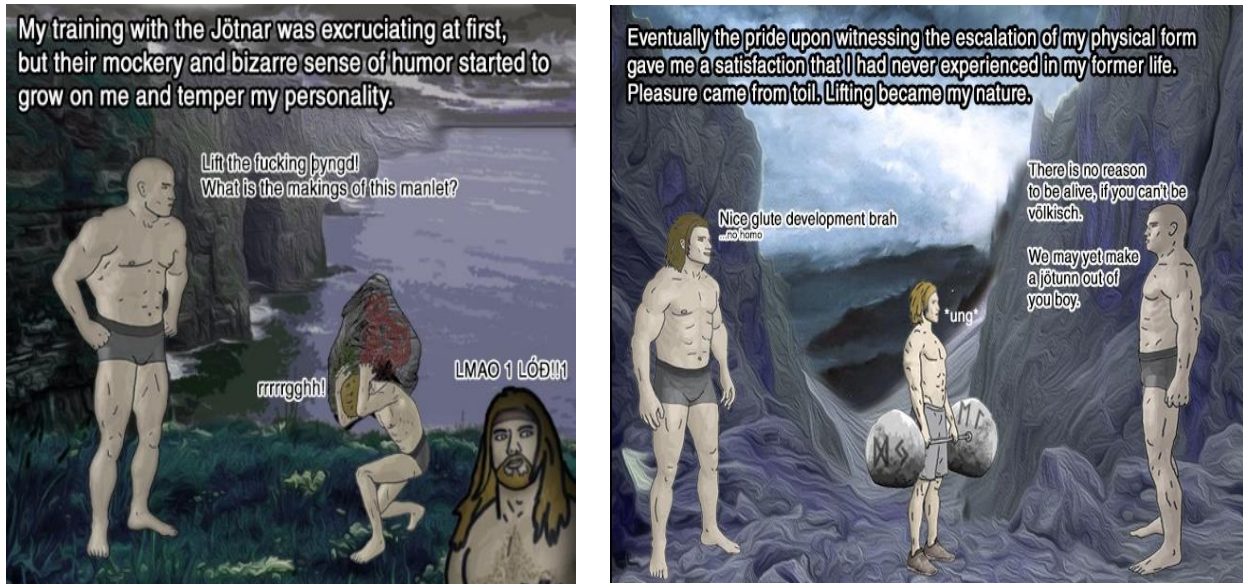


**Figure 52** *The Iron Pill* © 2014, 2015.

The various ways that *The Iron Pill* presents concepts of the decline of the West lines up with Alt-Right ideology. Episode 6 shows Iron Pill interacting with different ideological groups: on one side there are multi-ethnic caricatures in hoodies, anti-fa and Che Guevara shirts, and on the other there are blatant neo-Nazis shouting racial slurs. Iron Pill presents a four-paragraph-long monologue about how the neo-Nazis are just "degenerate hooligans," fools who "did not embrace the Teutonic spirit out of love" but because of the attraction to Hitler's cult of personality. Iron Pill destroys everything in a white nationalist explosion (shown in a graphic collage of classic and medieval imagery), but when one of the neo-Nazis survives the explosion, Iron Pill helps him to embrace his "volkisch spirit." This mirrors the divergence of the Alt-Right from traditional neo-Nazis, who were seen as being low-class and ignorant. The white nationalists today are trying to move beyond the Alt-Right label, with white nationalists like Colin Liddell stating:

Rather than being a movement defined by morality and a positive identity, it has allowed itself to become a forum for Nazi-esque trolling and pointless Jew-baiting (as opposed to

developing a deeper and more palatable understanding of the JQ), all seasoned with a constant drip-drip of racial slurs, aimed at everybody.[386]

Dancing around the terminology of white supremacy is in line with the new branding of "race realism" and groups like American Renaissance presenting a new brand of intellectual racism, who present their speakers in fine attire and library backgrounds, supporting their message that "race and racial conflict are at the heart of some of the most serious challenges the Western World faces in the 21st century."[387] This is a movement of white nationalists, supremacists, and however else they call themselves, to very carefully avoid being photographed making the 'heil' gesture, while still being media-savvy and intentional in spreading their message.

Women are a particularly difficult target because the acceptance of Alt-Right ideology goes strongly against their own interests if they would like to keep equal rights. Especially within the white supremacist Pagan groups, women are declared equal as long as they still know their place below their male counterparts.[388] Women are provided with the special tasks of childrearing and house-keeping and are put on a pedestal for their prowess in these areas, but only if they are in the service of a patriarch: a single mother is a deviant. These groups value strength and heroism; a woman is allowed to be strong so long as a man can still overpower her and make her strength a compliment and confirmation of his own. *The Iron Pill* addresses the subject of feminism, which

---

[386] Liddell, "Walking Away From a Broken Brand."
[387] Jared Taylor, Henry Wolff, and Gregory Hood, "About Us," American Renaissance, accessed January 1, 2020, https://www.amren.com/about/ (accessed March 20, 2020).
[388] Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 222.

is personified by actual monsters. When explaining why he is already married at a young age, Iron Pill explains the institution of marriage:

The Iron Pill often illustrates females, specifically labelled as feminists, as physically



Figure 53 *The Iron Pill* © 2014, 2015

aggressive and violent, either as actual monsters or wearing aggressive logo shirts saying things like "die cis scum," or presented as the pilot who crashes a plane because she thought the radio tower was being too patriarchal. While deaths caused by members of the Alt-Right are a known fact, for example in the 2017 Charlottesville protests where James Alex Fields Jr. killed Heather Heyer and injured 28 protesters,[389] there is no public movement of violent feminism which would seek to murder white nationalists in real life. The female monsters and antagonists are imagined fiercer, more threatening, and more grotesque in order to validate the violence which Iron Pill and the author inflict on them. *The Iron Pill* presents a series of female and minority strawmen for the protagonist to react to before physically destroying them.

---

[389] Maggie Astor, Christina Caron, and Daniel Victor, "A Guide to the Charlottesville Aftermath," *The New York Times*, August 13, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-virginia-overview.html (accessed March 20, 2020).

In neo-Pagan groups like the Asatru,[390] women make up roughly a third or less.[391] This balance between the genders is validated by faux historic authority. The gender roles, like many of the rituals of the Asatru, were developed in the 1980s and after, and emphasize continuity with history, and a required continuity of bloodlines, for example insisting that runes will only speak to those of "pure Aryan blood."[392] They ascribe to ideas of a sacred feminine, clearly delineated from masculine characteristics, as noted in *The Iron Pill* excerpt above (Figure 53). Mothers are held up as the mothers of heroes and keepers of the bloodline, and this false flattery is one path towards redpilling women.

*The Iron Pill* also addresses post-colonial criticism in Episode 5. Another strawman is a vaguely Middle Eastern caricature who shouts, "CONQUER WHITEY!" (emphasis in the original), giving Iron Pill to present the Great Replacement theory, stating that white civilizations are excessively eager to make amends for colonialism and will just "end up with a coalition of insatiable minorities who seem far more interested in supplanting the dominant culture instead of embracing it."

The evils of liberal academia are not spared either. In Episode 5, Iron Pill is also attacked by professor snake-monsters, who he good-naturedly greets saying that he is open for civil discourse. For the author of *The Iron Pill*, the protagonist is always on the moral high ground, and so the evil professors refuse civil discourse, instead demanding Iron Pill to become a "self-flagellating white," and saying that "the white



**Figure 54** *The Iron Pill* © 2014, 2015.

race needs to be abolished." The professor monsters make the first move to kill Iron Pill, and he returns stronger, through Christianity, and destroys them all.

---

[390] Astaru is one of the aforementioned Neo-Volkisch groups focused specifically on German heritage, which is generally not founded on white supremacist dogma, but is currently flooded by racists members. See Sigal Samuel, "What to do when Racists Try to Hijack Your Religion," *Atlantic*, November 2, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/asatru-heathenry-racism/543864/ (accessed March 20, 2020)

[391] Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 89.

[392] Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 115.

This first installation of the comic climaxes with the characters, both physical and ideological transformation (image right). *The Iron Pill*, being so open with its ideology, is still quite fringe compared to the other projects, such as *Alt-Hero*, *Based Stick Man*, and Brian Wood's work. At the strongest confirmable evidence, this series has circulation among a
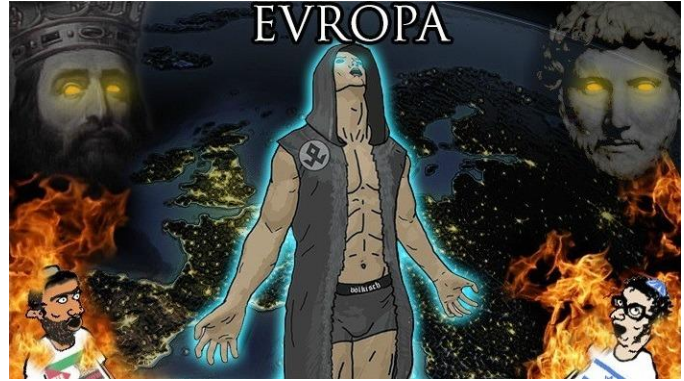


**Figure 55** *The Iron Pill* © 2014, 2015

couple thousand individual users, but those are only the readers who chose to leave a mark, by liking or reblogging a post. One fan even created fan fiction about it, which he shared in a chat with fellow readers on a Reddit thread dedicated to *The Iron Pill*, created in 2019.[393] This would indicate that, even though the project has been inactive since 2015, the text is still being read and circulated further, with such intense fan interest that there are private forums and fan fiction dedicated to its discussion active even today.

In a time before the term "redpilling" was in wide circulation, Von Schnurbein recorded in her field work, that Christian background or not, the most common story Asatruers tell is one of "awaking childhood memories," which are frequently connected with storybook adaptations of Norse mythology or with popular films and comics.[394] Comics are at the forefront of spreading propaganda and recruiting to the Alt-Right (or rebranded branches thereof) and white supremacist groups, but this time a different type of transmission is noted. These are examples not of using medievalism to make a point, but rather of using a point to make medievalism. This includes media where the comic book writers are starting from an ideological standpoint, and then fabricating medievalism to reflect their ideology and presenting that as historically accurate. It goes beyond medievalism as a reference point or a cosmetic choice, into creating material that is not obviously Alt-Right on the outside, but rather carries the ideology in its core. This is the case with Brian Wood's various comic book projects.

---

[393] The link to the author's personal Google Drive was posted, including their name, which I will not repeat here, but the original link accessed for research was: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-GLOjI8v5JMz0grB7xLJpGIJLGHFuTIf (accessed March 20, 2020).

[394] Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 89.

I have not found any interview where Brian Wood claims to be a member of the Alt-Right, but his creative activities demonstrate a deep fascination with the movement and its shared ideals. He has four different projects which I would like to flag for being particularly in tune with the Alt-Right and its cause. *Rebels* (2015–ongoing), a more recent project, follows a militia company during the time of the American Revolution. The art is gorgeous and, more importantly, it explores isolationism, brutality, hierarchy, a glorification of American white heritage, patriotism, and a celebration of individual action. Most disturbingly, reviewers and fans understood it as a history more than fiction. "Brian Wood may be the best history teach you never had," boasts one review by *Paste Magazine*, reprinted on his website[395]— partly indicating the image he would like to create of himself.

The next two projects are also 'historic': *Northlanders* (2008–2012), which is a Viking action drama set in the Middle Ages. Chris Bishop analyzed this series in his 2016 book *Medievalist Comics and the American Century*, but he limited himself to looking at the aesthetic choices in the art rather than the ideological content, even though he had just done such an approach when looking at *Red Sonja*'s legacy.

*Northlanders* embodies all of the values previously mentioned, while making attempts at diversity. A woman is allowed to have a sword, as long as a man is allowed to best her and sleep with her, possibly submitting her to the role of exalted housewife and keeper of the bloodline. The protagonist's lover is supposed to be a fierce archer, who can take down any opponent, except the protagonists, who proves his own strength even over her. There is also foreign woman, but she is the protagonist's previous lover, barely speaks but the readers are assured that she is also clever and powerful, up until she is brutally murdered for the benefit of the protagonist's story. There are moments where several female characters are together, and they start by talking about their men. The series barely passes the Bechdel Test,[396] and meanwhile uses the female characters as props

---

[395] Brian Wood, "Rebels," Brian Wood.com, https://www.brianwood.com/rebels (accessed March 20, 2020).

[396] Also known as the Bechdel-Wallace test, it is a measure of the representation of women in fiction along the simple rubric of the following three points: does the text have at least two named women in it, do the two women talk to each other, do the women talk about something besides a man. Explained in Chapter 4.

and plot devices—hardly a triumph of inclusion and diversity. However, it is very successful in conveying female ideals which fit into Alt-Right ideology.

Wood seems to be unable to untangle his ideology from his artistic production and his identity as a self-proclaimed history expert. "A year and a half of serious research," Wood said, continuing:

> This is where my OCD really kicks in, and as my wife can attest to, any excuse I have to buy a book I will take. The collection of books on the subject I have accumulated over the last year and a half would be the envy of any university library. It is complete overkill, probably, but I did this same thing with 'DMZ,' just front-loaded my brain with as much research as I could fit into each day and it is carrying me through really well.[397]

Brian Wood said this in a 2007 interview with Andy Khouri for CBR.com. Though he would be barely qualified to write a thesis on the topic (considering that he has no awareness of methodology, and seems to confuse secondary and primary sources), not only is he convinced of the historicity of his work, but his fans are as well. "Amid all the enjoyably bloody battles and desperate sex, Wood cleverly plays with the philosophical and religious shifts . . . clashing all over the world during the Dark Ages,"[398] cheers the review by New York's *Time Out*. Which is not what Wood achieved at all. In *Northlanders*, the protagonist of Volume One, Sven, is on a one-man quest to regain his families property, and there are some clashes with Christianity in a goodies-versus-baddies kind of presentation, but it is so shallow and so modern in its concerns, than when the story concludes with Sven and his nuclear family (silently accommodated by his subjugated warrior wife and docile offspring) avoiding oppressive authorities to seek a friendlier harbor elsewhere, the comic has included a range of popular Alt-Right themes.

After a break Wood came out with a similar project, *Black Road* (2015–ongoing) which more starkly portrays the spread of Christianity into Scandinavia. The majority of characters are burly men and their presence is punctuated by a few paltry attempts at diversity, which come off

---

[397] Brian Wood, "Y1K PARANOIA: Brian Wood talks *Northlanders*," interview by Andy Khouri, *Comic Book Review*, October 16, 2007, https://www.cbr.com/y1k-paranoia-brian-wood-talks-northlanders/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

[398] Time Out is quoted on the official website, See "Northlanders," BrianWood.com. https://www.brianwood.com/northlanders (accessed March 20, 2020).

as more offensive than if they had not been included at all. There is a black, possibly lesbian character, but she barely speaks, has no story or agency, and is only a diversity prop for the main character. The main character's wife dies immediately, to provide him with motivation for his angst. There is a Jewish character, but she betrays the protagonist and rather acts as a foil for his big rough masculinity by being drawn as a tiny, inept girl who serves only to cause trouble. The protagonist is again a lone wolf, misunderstood by the world, but on a mission to recover his inheritance and follow the true path: a path littered with violence and misogyny, a rejection of authority, anti-intellectualism, and again, the patina of historicity. In his attempt at creating history, he has instead created a vision of the Middle Ages based on his own very modern ideology—even the Paganism is the type conceived in the twentieth century through movements like the Asatru and Odinists—yet he lacks the training to tell the difference. Wood becomes a "history teacher" for his readers.

The final project which came about right after *Black Road* is *Briggs Land* (2016–ongoing). This series follows a separatist militia who lives in isolation on a compound very strongly dictated by Alt-Right ideology: indeed, it even has a contemporary setting. The story opens with the matriarch meeting resistance to having taken up a leadership role in the community. Her portrayal touches all the points of an ideal woman for the Alt-Right ideology and her rebellion against her husband's dominance is heavily qualified and apologized for, even though violent resistance to her leadership it written into the story. She is alone as a female leader; she relies on the support of her sons, who are all Alt-Right, almost each representing a different branch, one being an all-out white supremacist with a swastika tattoo, one is an off-duty military personnel, one is a libertarian businessman. But the protagonist, Grace, would not be able to stand on her own without them—female strength is only valid when it does not threaten male strength and having a strong female only serves to emphasize how strong the man who dominates her is.

The portrayal of this family is deeply sympathetic to the militia—reminding readers of the care and sympathy shown in the patriotic *Rebels* series, except that these characters are white supremacists, open misogynists, and murderers. The ideology in all four of these series is so uniform that the setting could easily be rotated among them and the stories would still work. History informs the plot very little, rather Wood's ideology informs the history so that each era becomes a new Alt-Right golden age.

These comics present ostentatious neutrality, in contrast to their utility as propaganda, especially with such processes like redpilling so explicitly practiced and spoken about in them. As some of the Based Stickman memes say "Steal this look" (Figure 56), enthusiasts of this fantasy of a pure and white Middle Ages can be tempted to steal that look and convince themselves that it is heritage, not racism, because they have been told from so many of the sources they consume that medieval history was compatible with the ideology of the Alt-Right. No debate about what is
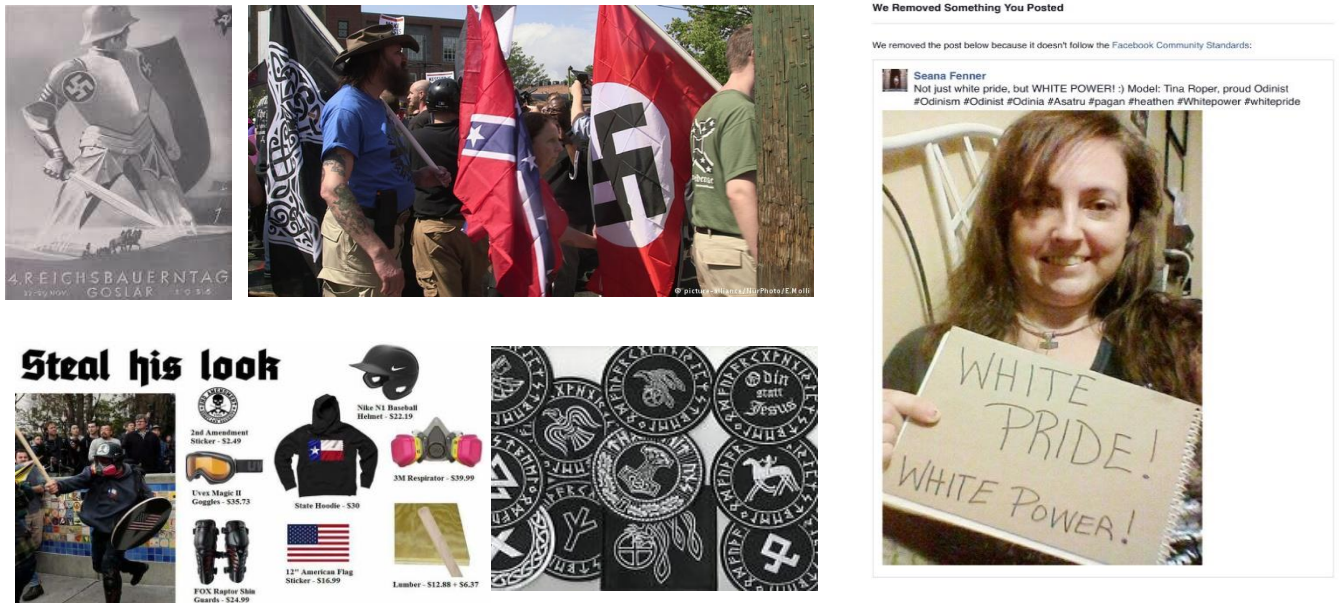


**Figure 56** Examples of application of medieval symbols and imagery in online media. The author of the first image is unknown, the second is from the Facebook profile of Seana Fenner, who posted a screenshot to complain that her photo had been removed (undated).

authentically historic and what is not would be relevant here, except to trace the line of ideology as it reaches backwards and influences our understanding of the past, instead of assuming that old is more correct or natural. These ideologies have real-world manifestations, including rally members who beat counter protesters, racists who tell others to "go home" because they think history has validated their claim to the land, or Odinists who flaunt internationally recognized symbols as hate to harass their neighbors under the guise of pride in their heritage. Members of the Alt-Right and the other branches of the movement are responsible for a range of violent acts, mass shootings, and hateful aggression fueled by their ideology; this ideology appears in comics and can be transmitted through them to fans.

# CHAPTER 7: MEDIEVALIST CHARACTERS AND THEIR FEMINIST READERS

In the application of politically motivated ideology, all medievalism is not employed exclusively for the benefit of white supremacy. In concert with fantasy, medievalism also provides a completely different community of readers with models of progressive ideals, such as sexual freedom, feminism, and liberal ideals.

The problem with medievalist female characters in comics is that it is not enough to identify medievalism in comics; one must also ask the question about how creators of comics use what they think is medieval to move their story line, create the story world, and develop their characters. They must also ask what the implications are in terms of how the text can affect fans. Why should scholars, and much less the general public, care? As Fiona Watson stated, "history quite rightly is public property."[399] Watson is a historian of Scottish history and she wrote this line while dissecting the effects on national identity and national pride elicited by the story of William Wallace, as reimagined by the film *Braveheart*.[400] The way that history is communicated has great influence on how individuals view themselves in the present, as has been demonstrated through research on fandom. Comics fandom is no ordinary public. Comics consumers are uniquely tied to the production of comics through purchase power and crowdfunding and are in close contact with creators through interactions online and at venues, such as comic conventions. Moreover, comics fans allow fandom to seep into their daily lives, both identifying with their object of fandom and performing their fandom through consumption of merchandise, participation in discussion forums, and even wearing or becoming characters in cosplay. It is important that especially international people paint their faces blue as if with woad, dress in studded leathers and scraggly long wigs in imitation of Mel Gibson's rendition of William Wallace in order to embody a Scottish nationalistic identity. Historic evidence, facts, and even authorial intent are irrelevant here—the fan-as-consumer is the ultimate arbiter of meaning.

---

[399] Fiona Watson, "*Braveheart*: More than Just 'Pulp Fiction,'" in *History and Heritage: Consuming the Past in Contemporary Culture*, ed. John Arnold, Kate Davies, and Simon Ditchfield (Shaftesbury: Donhead, 1998), 129.

[400] Mel Gibson, Alan Ladd, Bruce Davey, Sophie Marceau, Patrick McGoohan, Catherine McCormack, James Horner, Steven Rosenblum, and Randall Wallace, *Braveheart*, (Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2000), Film.

Medieval history enjoys the magical position of being both far away enough from the modern experience to be exotic and mysterious while also being familiar enough for people to sense ownership and confidence in their assumptions about the time; what people believe about the era is influential, and what people think of the Middle Ages can be very telling for many reasons. Harry Ziegler demonstrated that the medievalist setting is particularly popular in contemporary fiction because of the fantasy of medieval individualism; the assumption that society and order did not exist, and only the individual and at most the family were the acting units when it comes to problem solving.[401] The fantasy of medieval individualism is a reflection of modern-day values of social Darwinism and the American cult of success.

This leads to the question of what it means to have female characters imagined in a medievalist story world, and, more importantly, what does it mean when a new range of comic book series have reimagined medievalist female characters? This is measured by having mapped out the units of simulacra—individual occurrences of medievalism in comic books—and then making a hypothesis about the way the simulacra (the actor, according to ANT) has an effect on readers as an agent. This chapter will look at new trends in the medievalist presentation of female characters and how that change in representation plays out among fans.

A complete and uncontested definition of feminism or feminist does not exist, so for the sake of this text material that roughly aligns with an agenda of promoting self-sufficiency and self-direction in non-male characters will fall under the category of "feminist." A better term for denoting texts or other media material which is pointedly and intentionally created for the purpose of propagating equality of women, in whatever form the authors see useful, has not been supplied so far, so this antiquated term will have to suffice. Instead of the term feminist, the content and characters of these comics could also be termed simply "pro-female," but identifying this content within the body of scholarly work on feminism gives it an anchor. The reason for focusing on elements of the new wave of comics which can be demarcated as feminist is because the comic book industry, and medievalist comics in particular, have been historically inclined towards misogyny both on the page in and between the creators, as described by Joe Sanders in his study

---

[401] Harry Ziegler, "Anarchy and Order: Re-Inventing the Medieval in Contemporary Popular Narrative," in *History and Heritage: Consuming the Past in Contemporary Culture*, ed. John Arnold, Kate Davies, and Simon Ditchfield (Shaftesbury: Donhead, 1998), 27, 35.

of sexuality in comics, especially in the famous underground comics scene.[402] This is partly due to the popular perception that the Middle Ages were a time when men were men and women were women. In examining this phenomenon, there is no point in constantly disrupting the argument with minor notes about historic accuracy—suffice it to say that medievalism is constructed of inaccuracies and fantastical thinking, and scholars such as Richard Utz have mounted arguments that the study of medievalism should not be distracted by a game of gotcha around misrepresentation.

One interesting example of an instance of medievalist simulacrum, mapped over time is the now classic chainmail bikini, first popularized by the character Red Sonja.[403] It was first abolished in the name of feminism and then later readopted within another wave of pro-female illustration in the 2013 *Red Sonja* series reboot, and other occurrences, such as Aydis's costume in *Heathen*. The chainmail bikini became a symbol of female presence in medievalist comics: it is both military, comprised of the most uncomfortable but practical armor material, while at the same time uniquely gendered and sexual. It should be impossible for the characters to fight in such a get-up, but they defy all odds (and gravity), both in their endurance on the battlefield and in public imagination.

---

[402] Joe Sutliff Sanders, "Theorizing Sexuality in Comics," in *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts*, ed. Paul Williams and James Lyons (Jackson MS: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2010), 15–16.

[403] *Red Sonja* first appeared in comics in 1973 as a fantasy heroine written by Roy Thomas and illustrated by Barry Windsor-Smith, in Marvel Comics's *Conan the Barbarian.* After 2005 she had her own series published by Dynamite Entertainment, and the series was rebooted by Gail Simone in 2013, presenting a younger and reimagined version of the character. The artist Esteban Maroto is credited with first designing her chain mail bikini for Dynamite Entertainment's collection *Red Sonja Adventures Volume 1,* and the style stuck. The full history of the character and her series can be found on the website "History," Red Sonja, accessed January 1, 2020, http://www.redsonja.com/history/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Dress and the illustration of female bodies overlaps with simulacra of medievalism and the horror genre in contemporary culture, John Arnold notes that the dress of a character, or subsequently a cosplayer who wants to embody that character, is not accidental, saying: "costumes, strangely enough, seem to make a difference somehow—history can make violence safe, particularly perhaps medieval history."[404] This is true for the chainmail bikini—the violence is so safe that women can walk through war clad in mere underwear and survive. As more women (and men) have become more sensitive to impracticality and also the inaccuracy of such armor, especially after wearing it as cosplay[405] became a more popular, female



**Figure 57** A comedic artist's rendition of female body armor in games. © wantstobelieve.tumblr 2019

fantasy. The ubiquitous armor has been the object of derision (see fan art, Figure 57). However, it has not gone away, nor have cosplayers stopped dressing in it. Moreover, self-proclaimed feminist comics, such as *Heathen*, have reclaimed the bikini as the medievalist dress of choice. Even Sonja herself, during a phase when she was more fully covered, referenced and joked about the bikini, warning a friend that "it's not too practical and it chafes, you'll see, but I couldn't bear to throw it out."[406] The new Sonja, resurrected for Dynamite Comics, wears an updated chainmail bikini, as do the enthusiastic cosplayers who dress as her for photo shoots and comic con appearances. Recycling or wearing the chainmail bikini (or other character's iconography) is a definitive act, as is recycling the story world, the tropes, and the catch phrases.

---

[404] John Arnold, "Nasty Histories: Medievalism and Horror," in *History and Heritage: Consuming the Past in Contemporary Culture*, ed. John Arnold, Kate Davies, and Simon Ditchfield (Shaftesbury: Donhead, 1998), 40.

[405] Defined as: Literally "Costume Play." Dressing up and pretending to be a fictional character (usually a sci-fi, comic book, or anime character). Mario Rogic, "Cosplay," in *Urban Dictionary*, January 15, 2003, https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=cosplay (accessed March 20, 2020).

[406] Bishop, *Medievalist Comics and the American Century*.

Three comics will be compared here because of their vocal positioning of themselves as being progressive and specifically "feminist" in nature. What does it mean to have a feminist, medieval story world, and what effect, intentional or otherwise, does this have on the readers?



**Figure 58** The evolution of *Red Sonja* —the grandmother of medieval comic book babes.

The genre starts with *Red Sonja*, most extensively studied and described by Chris Bishop, who noted that although her character did not slavishly follow developments of the feminist movement, her entrance into the world of Marvel in the 1980s did coincide with the more liberal wave of female role models in media. Her earliest versions, helmed by male creators, created the iconography that is associated with the medievalist, barbarian babe. It is no accident that with the introduction of female writers and illustrators, such as Mary Wilshire, Gail Simone, and now Marguerite Bennett, Sonja "became a hero, whom girls could look up to rather than one who boys simply looked at."[407] Sonja's transformations from being eye-candy to a feminist staple included costume changes and a cynical embrace of all the medievalist tropes which can be presented with millennial irony, while stripping away the more deeply misogynistic ones. This includes Sonja being completely erased when rebooted by Dynamite in 2013, which looks at Sonja's past, giving Sonja a fresh and empowered background that motivates her character without relying on old

---

[407] Bishop, *Medievalist Comics and the American Century,* Chapter 5, 15.

tropes like a rape story or a supposed sudden turn towards hysterical evil. The barbarian bikini provides a nice bit of iconographic continuity while the series was reinvented primarily by female creators.

If male creators are responsible for thinking up the chainmail bikini, rape origin stories, and subsequent fridging of so many favorite female characters, I will pause here to address the question: is it important if the authors are male or not? Ziegler notes that it is probably no accident that the male writers form the two major extremes in the representation of women,[408] and indeed among the three comics series under examination in the chapter, the one directed by male creators is the one that invests the most time and space into creating attractive, sexy female characters, poised, and idyllic even when fighting. The two female-driven comics have slightly different angles, and the female characters in them are not contorted into pin-up worthy poses on every page. The series authored and directed by a primarily female collective reimagined the presentation of female strength and come with storylines that include addressing modern social issues. Most noticeably, there is a minimalization of aestheticized violence and a complete lack of the "women in refrigerators" phenomenon that has long burdened the comic book industry. While the character of Red Sonja lived through and partly inspired these shifts in the representation of women in medievalist fantasy comics, newer comics (such as *Rat Queens*, *Heathen*, and *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*) have entered publication in the mid-2000s, formed around these new ideas.

While *Rat Queens* allows some of its protagonists to be illustrated with deep *décolleté*, it is also true that the Queens are often presented in what Jeffrey Brown calls a sort of masculine "drag," which includes a bearded character (Violet), no less.[409] The masculine drag is not just appearance; it relates to behavior as well. The Queens are reconnected with traditionally masculine character qualities: belligerent, heavy drinking, coarse, and sarcastic. Over the length of the series, multiple stretches of story are replaced with combat sequences, spanning 8–15 pages at a time, which is a characteristic that does not appear in the female-led productions. However, it would be unnecessary and unfair to attribute all accidental correlations between traditional masculine comic book norms to the presence of a male-led creator teams (for example, in the case of *Rat Queens*),

---

[408] Harry Ziegler, "Anarchy and Order: Re-Inventing the Medieval in Contemporary Popular Narrative," in *History and Heritage: Consuming the Past in Contemporary Culture*, ed. John Arnold, Kate Davies, and Simon Ditchfield (Shaftesbury: Donhead, 1998), 31.

[409] Jeffrey A. Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 22.

especially given the very limited size of the corpus. Do male authors create inherently masculinized female characters when attempting to present their interpretation of a feminist text? This can be answered here as an affirmative in this one isolated case, but not necessarily denoting a trend or a fact for the genre. Moreover, if a male presentation of so-called feminist characters is somehow flawed, the consumers clearly disagree; *Rat Queens* has been wildly popular in sales and in fan feedback and participation in cosplay, even with those who identify themselves as queer, fringe, or feminist.

Feminism and fandom mix in an especially strong way in the world of comics. Comparing fandoms to local communities, Daniel Chadborn, Patrick Edwards, and Stephan Reysen spoke specifically about how fandoms have allowed "stigmatized voices to be heard and accepted within the fan communities."[410] The popularity and support for this new wave of medievalist feminist comics has been strong—demonstrated by successful crowdfunding, enthusiastic fan feedback, and wide circulation. Knowing that what medievalism can communicate through the medium of comics, let us now look at how medievalist simulacra are tied to pro-female content.

The medievalist characteristics have been refitted to feminism in various ways. As Chris Bishop noted, it "is the paradox of medievalism whereby the temporal distance from the historical period magnifies its exoticism to such a point that anything might be possible,"[411] and so authors and illustrators have a wide range of interpretations.

I would like to propose here that certain stock characters are being refitted as feminist tropes in one branch of medievalist comics, one of these tropes being the witch. Originally, the witch was a figure representing the corrupted femininity. Cristina Santos speaks of witch figures in pop culture and focuses on witch characters in Disney films, who represent corrupted femininity because they are "insisting on having a personal sense of identity, sexual and otherwise, aside from . . . motherhood . . . because [they do] not accept the self-abnegating and sacrificial role of the 'good mother.'"[412] In these cases, the witches are not of the Satanist variety of early-modern panic,

---

[410] Daniel Chadborn, Patrick Edwards, and Stephen Reysen, "Reexamining Differences between Fandom and Local Sense of Community.," *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 7, no. 3 (July 2018): 243.

[411] Bishop, *Medievalist Comics and the American Century*, Chapter 5, 4.

[412] Santos, *Unbecoming Female Monsters,* 106. By insisting on having a personal sense of identity, sexual and otherwise, aside from her non-biologically imposed motherhood the Queen is perceived as the "bad mother" or "witch" because she does not accept the self-abnegating and sacrificial role of the "good mother."

as researched by Michael Bailey,[413] but rather part of the neo-Pagan revivalist movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which further associate witches with the feminine goddess figure and nature worship, and most importantly the property of the peasant class rather than the aristocracy, and thus more palatable for modern readers who see themselves as part of a more egalitarian society.[414]

Another trope that has been retrofitted into a feminist framing is that of the barbarian warrior. Chris Bishop explains that *Red Sonja* can fit within the medievalist framework, despite being framed Viking shieldmaiden, because popular imagination "knows" that "women could not be warriors in the Middle Ages and so by imagining a fantasy in which they might be we feel less resistance to emotionally engaging with that period."[415] Medievalist fantasy opens more doors than other historic representations in popular culture. In a similar appropriation of medievalist flourish, in *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, Angela summons the ghost of Serah by laying a spread of tarot cards in an enchanted forest, which burn into a flourishing illusion of a cathedral nave of a Perpendicular Gothic aesthetic, thus alerting the horned, Pagan Enchantress to their presence. Nothing about the sequence suggest the Early Modern or Renaissance, which is the supposed context of *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, but these elements can exist only squarely within a medievalist (not even medieval) context. The medievalist fantasy background bolsters the other elements of the story world, and provide a place for queer romance, feminism, and female heroism.

The final aspect of medievalism which was mentioned in the chapter on nun characters is the pervasiveness of female collectives in these comics. *1602: Witch Hunter Angela* shows the witch hunters as an actual religious order of female monastics led by an abbess and referred to as sisters, charged by the Church with ridding the world of Witchbreed (born witches) and Faustians (voluntary witches). I can assure the reader that there has been no historical evidence of an order of this sort existing in the Middle Ages, although there is proof of some female participation in the Crusades. *Heathen* features the Valkyries as a major force, even though the two protagonists rather stand in opposition to Freyja and the Valkyries insofar as they stand between the young warrior

---

[413] Bailey, "From Sorcery to Witchcraft," 990.

[414] Faye Ringel, "New England Neo-Pagans: Medievalism, Fantasy, Religion," *The Journal of American Culture* 17, no. 3 (September 1994): 66, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1994.t01-1-00065.x (accessed March 20, 2020). "By necessity, these Neo-Pagan medievalists do not identify with the court and the aristocracy, as is usual with academic medievalists, but with the peasants, who were assumed to have retained memories of Paganism the longest."

[415] Bishop, *Medievalist Comics and the American Century*, Chapter 5, 4.

Aydis and the Valkyrie Brunhild, and the god Odin, who is the true antagonist of the series. Though there are male sidekicks (like Shannon and Cedric) the female collective and cooperation stands in the foreground. Finally, though not sworn to celibacy or vows to the Church, *Rat Queens* is a female adventuring team, where the members have consciously relinquished family ties in commitment to each other and their missions. Perhaps having portrayed the characters as being in some way related to nuns would have seemed to limit to their other activities of liberated romantic ties, drinking, recreational drugs and lack of an abbess figure (although Angela and Serah from *1602: Witch Hunter Angela* do not seem limited by their order to pursue these things).

Magic and Paganism, symbolic or performed (no longer bad witches as in the bad mothers and corrupted femininity which Santos identified in Disney, but powerful and independent witches), become a superpower in these comic books. Falling back on the comic book norms of female characters with non-contact fighting skills (for example, the Black Canary's sonic cry or Wonder Woman's defensive cuffs and lasso of truth), it is not surprising to see magic appropriated for this purpose. Sometimes this link is very literal. In *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, the character Anna Maria is lifted directly from Marvel's *X-Men* character Rogue (whose real name is indeed Anna Maria), reimagined here as a witch (in the language of the comic "Witchbreed," meaning a witch by birth). In the original *X-Men* series, Rogue's mutant power was to absorb other mutants' powers through the touch of her bare hands. Anna Maria is being kept in a castle tower and declared mad, but really she has been taken over by the Faerie Queen (The Enchantress) and otherwise remains in command of her wits enough to flirt, using lines from Shakespeare, and in control of her body and powers. She has been so much in control of herself, that she had sought The Enchantress out in order to have her powers amplified by becoming a Faustian. Unlike the male Faustians, Anna Maria is so clever as to use her powers to outsmart the curse of The Enchantress, killing her Faustian form while keeping the girl that she is inside alive, not only honestly confronting her own responsibility in the matter, but solving the problem on her own. Using the traditionally feminine powers of magic, and a new understanding of female heroism, she stands in stark contrast to traditional medievalist characters.

*1602: Witch Hunter Angela* is also aware of the use of magic in the story world as an amplification of its own genre-awareness. Serah, in a poetic flourish irrelevant to the situation, states: "Belief is a spell. Stories are spells. While you were comforting our wayward would-be ward, I was distilling magic of my own," however adding: "Though I rather need your opposable

189

thumbs to fully restore me [from skeleton form]."[416] The break of atmosphere is characteristic of medievalism in the new wave of feminist comics—medievalism is applied very consciously for effect and the authors have not forgotten its implications, constantly poking fun at the self-seriousness of the tropes therein.

Another example of the authors both referencing and undermining medievalism can be found in the very title of the first collection of *Rat Queens*, *Sass and Sorcery*; encompassing the new model of the medievalist female character. The implications of the title, in presenting the characters and story world, plays into a movement which started as early as the 1990s, with media such as the TV show *Buffy*, regarding the central character Sarah Bruton explains that:

> the 'butt-kicking' witch seems, in her very existence, to overthrow the fiercely misogynist boundaries of the hero tale. What we witness in the course of both the television and fictional series is the journey of the witch towards self and sexual fulfilment, often at the expense of the men in her way.[417]



**Figure 59** Examples of different uses of horns: The Enchantress (*1602: Witch Hunter Angela)*, Aydis ( *Heathen),* and Hannah (*Rat Queens*).

Regarding the sidekick character of Willow in the *Buffy* series, her identity as a lesbian was also tied up in witchcraft and the idea of the other. Both lesbianism in this time and witchcraft in this time were "charged with cultural expectations and fears, just as the two groups are often associated with each other in areas of feminist spirituality."[418] The combination of magic and lesbianism appears also in film and literature as a recognizable gateway to confronting the

---

[416] Bennett et al., *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 68.

[417] (Regarding Buffy) Sarah Bruton, "Bedlam and Broomsticks: Representations of the Witch in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Women's WritingThesis," (PhD Thesis, Cardiff University, 2006), 248, http://orca.cf.ac.uk/54301/1/U584115.pdf (accessed March 20, 2020).

[418] Bruton, "Bedlam and Broomsticks," 255.

patriarchy in a way that the barbarian medievalist trope could not, in that "these stories exemplify playing with history and a construction of a feminist mythos," as Lonergan notes regarding the witch-centered television series *American Horror Story: Coven.*[419]

As an aesthetic move present in the comics, and perhaps less effective if it were rendered only in text format, is the reimagined Pagan witch decorated with antlers (which obviously only occur in males of a variety of species) or horns (which could be male or female in nature, but visually have a distinctive effect on one's understanding of a character). Each of the series mentioned make use of horns as a symbol of Pagan, feminist prowess, in two of the comics directly tied to their magic-working ability. The use of antlers is further reflected in the neo-Pagan spirituality movement, referencing the Wiccan male deity, as well as the Celtic god Cernunnos. The appropriation of iconography of male deities for female characters, like attributing swords, practical armor, and leadership roles to characters that would have previously been disqualified due to their gender, serves the impression of feminism on a graphic level, leaving space for the text to fill in the details.

In compliment to their magical abilities, the female characters are also, as previously mentioned, equipped with sharp weapons and the skills to use them: as the *Red Sonja* reboot advertises, "will slay 4 [sic] mead."[420] This is a feature also tied to the nun trope and pervasive throughout the medievalist female characters. The attributes are expanded in these three comics to include archery skills, competency with a spear or trident, and hand-to-hand combat. As mentioned in the



**Figure 60** The "Cernunnos" type antlered figure or "horned god", on the Gundestrup Cauldron, on display, at the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen.

chapter on the nun trope, this is a departure from the traditional presentation of female characters. Moreover, the punches thrown in these comics are not met with a "you punch like a girl" meta-commentary; indeed, the women are mostly fighting each other, each one more powerful and fearsome than the last.

Yet, for all their ferociousness, magic, and gall, the chainmail bikini is still there. In the newest reinvention of *Red Sonja* this "still occupies an ideological and intensely contested space

---

[419] Lonergan, "Witches, Bitches, and White Feminism," 9.
[420] Cover art for *Red Sonja* Vol.4 #23, 2018.

within contemporary feminist thought. Sonja is a powerful and self-assured and a thoroughly modern woman. But she is still wearing that bikini that bikini so many young women still choose to wear at comic conventions."[421]

"The Bikini," as I will label it, is almost as much of a character as it is simulacrum. It appears in *Rat Queens*, *Heathen* and less in *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, which still does not hesitate to make a nod to the female form. *Heathen* arrives at a time when The Bikini has reached rehabilitation (after the relaunch of *Red Sonja* and her millennial bikini), and perhaps the universal
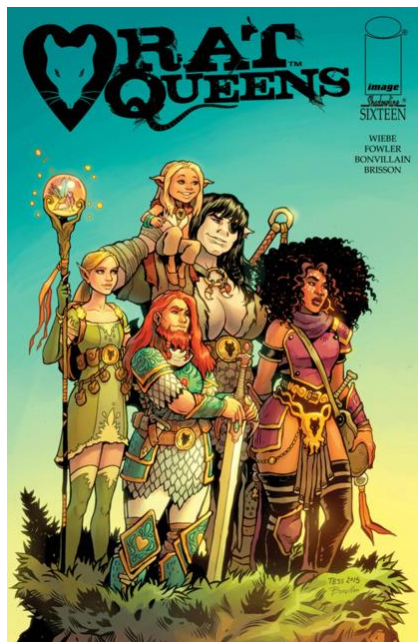


**Figure 61** *Rat Queens* Issue 16 cover art, © Fowler 2015.

'sexy barbarian' dress is also intended as a nod to the genre. *Rat Queens* took a different approach to creating a medievalist babe who can also 'kick butt', by presenting fully clothed and non-conventional female body type, while making her yell, "Rat Queens! Put the sexy back in large wholesale slaughter!" which would certainly give one pause before declaring the work 'feminist' in the traditional sense of the term. The creators of *Rat Queens* try to balance the old female stereotypes by depicting their heroines, for example in one splash page, dressed in frills and push-up bras at a tea party, ironically splattered in blood. While there is still cleavage, the creators of *Rat Queens* tried to include all possible body types, real and fictional, which was further played out by illustrator Tess Fowler.

*Heathen* opens with an introduction to the Valkyries, saying, "they were strong, beautiful, and struck terror in even the bravest men's hearts" next to a depiction of the mythical being posing on horseback in a bikini and an impossibly wind-swept cape. Why has The Bikini come back—in the case of *Heathen,* it is a leather or metal scale variety—in the most progressive of the comics reviewed here, especially when it is set in the cold north? It certainly does not express strength or terror, but it does tap into the medievalist simulacra developed through previous series, such as *Red Sonja*, and riding on the back of this reference the creator can get away with implying ferocity while showing sex. *Rat Queens* avoided too much skin (though not avoiding sex-bomb hourglass figures for all of their characters), as did *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, but *Heathen* leaned into the

---

[421] Bishop, *Medievalist Comics and the American Century*, Chapter 5, 17.

medievalist aesthetics most sexist traits. To be fair, the male characters are also clothed in only leathery loin-cloth and chunky belt, so the author is consistently exploitative. Being an openly lesbian comic, it is possible that the costume design can fall under the category of fan service;[422] like so many other series the characters are presented as eye-candy for the readers, who in this case are assumed to be most likely other lesbians, perhaps explains the sexiness of the costumes, but not the non-heteronormative, more athletic body types.

Another essential ingredient in taking the historically misogynistic genre of medievalism into twenty-first century feminist media is genre awareness. *1602: Witch Hunter Angela* is both aware of the format, the playful historicity, and the comic book universe (in this case Marvel's *Secret Wars* universe), for example demonstrated when King James is stabbed through by Angela's trident spear, having been identified as "Witchbreed," who Angela is on a sacred mission to hunt and kill, the dead king springs back to life, sprouting Wolverine-like blades from his hands (a nod to the *X-men* universe) and unleashes the groan-worthy exclamation "You cannot strike the king, you **Bub**onic Plague!"[423] (the reader is recommended to say this out loud). This so tidily ties in all elements of genre-awareness within the first few pages of the comic, that the reader is primed to read the rest of the text understanding that the creators will irreverently play with history, the Marvel extended universe and with the comic book format to great effect.

*1602: Witch Hunter Angela* also includes graphic and narrative tools to create a historic feeling which the creators often set up only to subvert seconds later. For example, a narrative caption appears in a historicized font on a backdrop of warn and tattered parchment—a departure from the typical narrative caption format, which appears as a clean, white box. The content of the caption begins with pretentious historicity and then maintains this tone while delivering counterintuitive information: "And so with the Witchbreed banished and Good King Charles the First on the throne, the Witch Hunters can turn their attention to this most serious business, such as drinking with ne'er-do-well playwrights,"[424] those playwrights being Christopher Marlowe and

---

[422] Fanservice is the random and gratuitous display of a series of anticipated gestures common in Manga and Anime (See Keith Russell, "The Glimpse and Fan Service: New Media, New Aesthetics," *International Journal of the Humanities*, Aug 2008, Vol. 6 Issue 5, 105-110), a practice which has spread to other popular media and includes a wider range of material intended to titillate the viewer, such as changes to the story based on fan feedback, revealing character costumes, or placing characters into gratuitous scenes, or in some genres this can include big explosions, elaborate battle scenes, glorified weaponry, etc.

[423] Benton et al, *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 9.

[424] Benton, et al, *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 10.

a handful of characters from the Marvel universe. In a later episode, cradling Serah's skull in her hands after mourning her death, the skull suddenly becomes chatty saying, "I told you not to be *afraid*, Angela. I told you this would be a *comedy*. Oh, come now, this is the perfect 'Alas, poor Yorick' moment and you can't even give me that,"[425] thus subverting the mood of the scene, taking a jab at medievalist genre (which usually takes itself so ponderously serious), and a genre-aware reference to Shakespeare.

Rat Queens is also very genre aware, but mostly making light of the stereotypical catch-phrases and macho gestures that are so pervasive in older series, such as *Conan the Barbarian*. For example: at the promise of a fight, Violet eyes her sword blade and exclaims "We can sit around and bitch or we can make some monsters bleed. And my sword is hungry for blood."[426] The statement both acknowledges the modern phrase and gender stereotypes, and inserts a cheesy, hyper-masculine statement. This is met immediately with genre-aware ridicule: Betty raises an eyebrow "Really?," to which Violet replies "I have been sitting on that one for a week. It is terrible, isn't it?"[427] Both Betty and the reader would agree that it was "the worst," but this wink towards the genre and immediate subversion enables the characters to walk two lines, one where they still fit within the genre and play along with its norms, and another where their awareness occasionally lifts them above it and further validates the fresh take on the medievalist adventuring brigade by presenting a band of ladies out to fight for glory and cash rewards.

When introducing the competing adventure parties in *Rat Queens*, each group represents different stereotypes. The Peaches are a bizarrely sweetened version of the *Rat Queens* (though equally crass) with frilly, matching outfits, The Four Daves represent the sort of 'average Joe' figures of medievalist fantasy, including a muscled fighter, a pointy-eared little hobbit, a bearded dwarf, and an Orc. The Brother Ponies present a masculine comic book extreme, bordering on the characters populating martial arts games—they respond to their assignments in unison "***IT WILL BE DONE!***"[428] all in contrast to the ironically demeaning team name. The final jab at medievalist stereotypes refers to Gothic medievalist media, with a party named "Obsidian Darkness," comprised of four pale and gaunt figures clothed in black, two with hoods and the other two featuring pointed ears and long black hair. They are unceremoniously commanded to go "clean the

---

[425] Benton, et al, *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 66. [Emphasis in the original.]
[426] Kurtis J. Wiebe, Roc Upchurch, and Ed Brisson, *Rat Queens: Volume One: Sass and Sorcery*, 13.
[427] Wiebe, Upchurch, and Ed Brisson, *Rat Queens,* 13.
[428] Wiebe, Upchurch, and Ed Brisson, *Rat Queens*, 11.

shitters at the winding pass barracks"[429]—hardly a task for heroes. When the Rat Queens are subsequently attacked on their mission, their first analysis of the attacker is "classic assassin getup,"[430] in addition to a couple of other chuckles at the assassin's expense.

*Heathen* and *1602: Witch Hunter Angela* put queer relationships in the foreground, while *Rat Queens* takes out multiple pages to address queer love. In *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, Serah travels in disguise as a tonsured monk before being taken in "among the holy sisters"[431] at the Abbey of the Queen of Heven (a reference to *Queen of Hel* which is a preceding Angela title, the Hel mentioned being the Scandinavian mythological afterlife); while telling this origin story, the narrative captions stand in stark contrast to the images, drawing a direct parallel between the imagined norms of the medieval past, and visually presenting the medievalist reimagination of the heroine. "We were educated in the most genteel and delicate arts: in fine needlework"[432] captioned above an image of swordplay. With these sorts of constant nods to both the perceived historical medieval, and the medievalism as it traditionally appeared in comics, the reader is given a picture of characters who are aware of their story world and the expectations of female characters within it, all while breezily skirting any actual performance of those roles, except when dripping with irony; "None of these villains will aid an honest women in distress!" [433] declares Serah in a cinematic pose to faint, "Aaand [sic] here we go" quips Angela, mid eye-roll. It is this presence of a self-aware story world that enables the text to address modern issues directly.

The subject of marriage, especially forced and coerced marriage or heterosexual marriage as a corrective punishment for queer characters, often bubbles up so that it may be heroically smashed down. When visiting a strange village, Serah and Angela are told that the wedding taking place (which is revealed to be forced by magical means, and subsequently broken up by the heroes) requires confirmation of consummation, to which Serah comments, "That's rather . . . archaic and anatomical."[434] Angela breaks the story world spell by reminding her, "We do live in the 17th century, my love.," and echoing the comic's own self-awareness Serah retorts: "breaking the fourth wall is *my* purview, Angela, *shhh*." The man, who had enchanted the girl of his dreams to marry

---

[429] Wiebe, Upchurch, and Ed Brisson, *Rat Queens*, 11.
[430] Wiebe, Upchurch, and Ed Brisson, *Rat Queens*, 20.
[431] Benton, et al, *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 14.
[432] Benton, et al, *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 14.
[433] Benton, et al, *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 13.
[434] Benton, et al, *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 34. [Emphasis in the original].

him, after transforming to monster form—called condescendingly here as a "venomous whelp"—and losing the fight confesses at the point of a sword "I was seduced. I did it for Anne, I did it for **love!**" to which Serah corrects him "You did it for **control**."[435] The medievalist scenario here is harnessed to make a point about modern-day gender issues.

        *Rat Queens* makes a few side comments about gender roles, such as "what's with men and tentacles? Sick of this shit,"[436] when attacked by one sorcerer who conjures a monster from the ground, but to be fair, the male authors are pulling a lampshade tactic here which allows them to draw and visually reference tentacle hentai while still positioning themselves as being in on the joke. On another level, *Rat Queens* tries to at least briefly feature every type of relationship imaginable (echoing the range of diversity intentionally included in series like *Star Trek*), including queer, interspecies, and representing the love of Others, such as ogres.

## PUTTING MALES IN FEMALE STEREOTYPED ROLES

"Dystopian and utopian medievalisms seem to reach consensus on very few points. But on this much they agree medieval women were disempowered by their gender."[437] In the aforementioned 'feminist' comic series, the medievalist women are not hampered by their gender. But how are the male characters presented in contrast to a newly empowered female cast? In medieval literature male practitioners of magic were considered feminized, as "a true man does not need . . . magic" further emphasizing that magic was an accessory of women. [438] Interestingly, and partly accordingly, male characters do not practice magic in these comics, except in the case of *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, wherein they are hunted as villains.

        It is not the use of magic that subverts men. In *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, the male characters are placed in delicate situations: they are the villains to be vanquished, but also the subjects of pity for their weakness. One 'Faustian' the Enchantress (the main antagonist of the story, a powerful Pagan Queen of the Faerie) had manipulated was described as "a sweet boy, a frightened boy,"[439] though the man in question was very much of age and ready for a fight as any other macho stereotype. The magic used by the male characters is chided as being a 'wretch' who

---

[435] Benton, et al, *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 36.
[436] Wiebe, Upchurch, and Ed Brisson, *Rat Queens*, 15.
[437] Bishop, *Medievalist Comics and the American Century,* Chapter 5, 3.
[438] Apps and Gow, *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe*, 128.
[439] Benton, et al, *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 23.

196

manages mere 'fireworks' ("Unkind, lady, unkind"[440] is Peadar's response to this quip). In another odd but pointed gender swap, Christopher Marlowe is caught and exposed as a Faustian himself, and is set to be tortured in an "Iron Man" rather than 'maiden'—the mechanism of which recalls the costume of Marvel's Iron Man superhero. The bewitched blood, "the very magic of story runs through these veins"[441] boasts Marlowe meaning it literally, is subsequently tapped and stolen by Serah, who presents it to a helplessly befuddled Shakespeare. She is nudging the Bard to use the blood as ink, and compose a "story of fairies and queens, of love and loss, and most of all, foolishness,"[442] in order to immortalize Angela, who is now the terrifying Faerie Queen after having killed The Enchantress.

*Rat Queens* mostly emphasizes putting the female characters into traditionally male spaces and situations (heavy drinking in taverns, brawling in the streets, heated arguments between the female leadership, hungover, and uninterested in housekeeping or cooking), but they also try to present non-traditional male figures who appear only as love interests or footnotes to the female characters' stories. The Mayor is presented as a sad opportunist who lost his wife, Violet's twin brother loses in hand-to-hand combat with her, after an ogre comes to destroy the Rat Queens to avenge her boyfriend's death ("We kill a lot of boyfriends! What makes you think we killed yours?"[443] Hannah retorts). Orc Dave is fundamentally commanded by Violet to engage in sex, and is meanwhile depicted as coy and flattered with little bluebirds peeping away in his beard to emphasize his passivity. However, unlike the other comics which allow for the male characters to be physically weak and small compared to the heroines, Orc Dave is gigantic and muscled. If he plays at being demure, there is no doubt that he could overpower any of the other characters if he wished.

Perhaps the greatest gesture of feminism is the renovation the characters' origin stories. In 1999, Gail Simone (later responsible for the reboot of *Red Sonja*) founded a website with a list of female comic book characters who had been "fridged,"[444] that is "killed, raped, depowered, crippled, turned evil, maimed, tortured, contracted a disease or had other life-derailing tragedies

---

[440] Benton, et al, *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 31.
[441] Benton, et al, *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 86.
[442] Benton, et al, *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, 87.
[443] Wiebe, Upchurch, and Ed Brisson, *Rat Queens*, 88.
[444] I first heard this term actively used by Charlotte Johanne Fabricius in here conference presentation "Rebooting Cuteness: Supergirl Comics as Affective Storyworlds" at IGNCC in Manchester.

befall her,"[445] or, for example, left to die in a refrigerator for no other purpose than to further another (male) character's plot. The project "women in refrigerators" took its name from an incident and a 1994 issue of *Green Lantern* in which the heroes girlfriend was murdered and her body stuffed into a refrigerator. This sort of character arc indeed haunted *Red Sonja* as well, with regular references to her rape as a source of motivation.[446] The three comics surveyed here avoid rape as a plot point, and in the 2013 reboot of *Red Sonja*, her past is rewritten to eliminate her 'fridging.' Angela also had a long past as part of the Spawn universe which is not referenced in *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*. Angela's relationship with Serah appears in *Queen of Hel* (in this series "Sera") from 2015, but her previous heterosexual relationships, her role as a villain, have been forgotten. It is perhaps not surprising that as these characters gain clothes and agency, their misogynistic pasts are discarded, and they are rewritten with new sources of motivations, such as love or morality.

## CHAPTER 8: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR FANS?

To summarize what the new wave of medievalist, feminist comics offers to reader: these comics present a story world in which the characters are cleverly aware of history, both in the sense of awareness of medievalism, and awareness of the history of the genre in comic book. Moreover, the application of fantasy allows creators to form to normalize queer love, and introduce a range



**Figure 62** Angela's evolution from 1993 to 2016.

of physically diverse characters with diverse abilities, embracing a feminine mythos and showing

---

[445] Simone, "Front Page." http://www.lby3.com/wir/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

[446] Bishop, *Medievalist Comics and the American Century*, Chapter 5, 16.

female heroism and female leadership in a genre which has been traditionally misogynistic, all packaged in the wit of genre awareness.
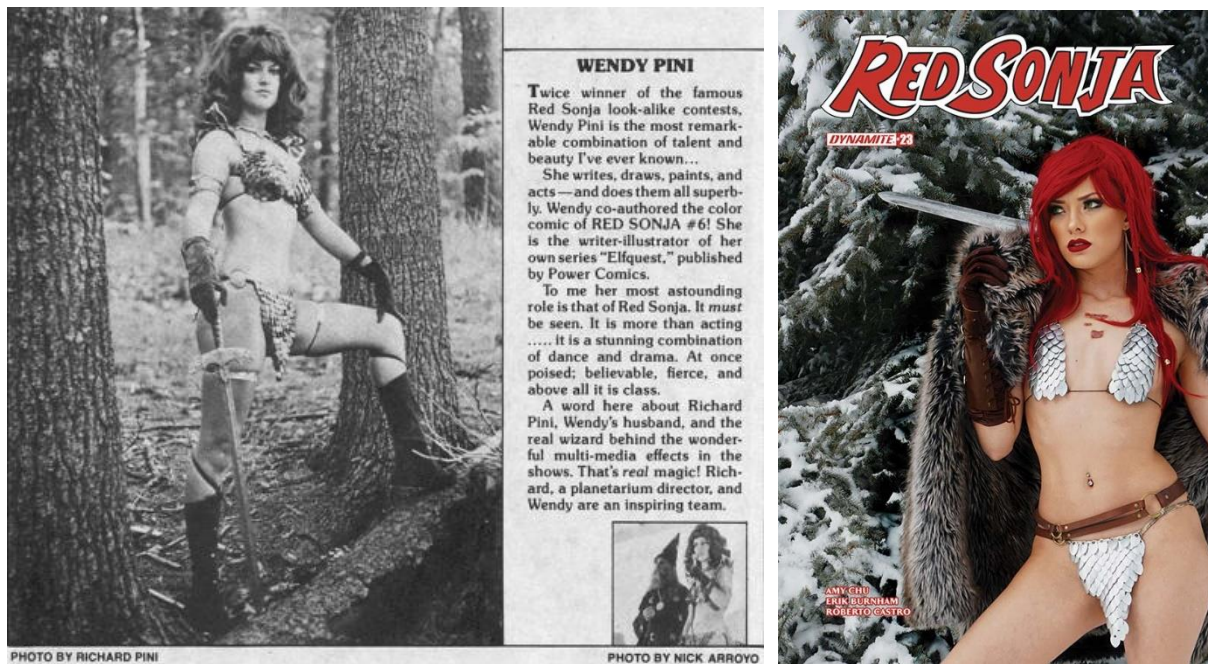


**Figure 63** Wendy Pini article, photos © Richard Pini and Nick Arroyo; Cosplay variant cover for *Red Sonja* Vol.4 #23, © Dynamite 2018.

Readers are an essential factor, because in the comics book industry they both influence the creators' future work, and, as has been demonstrated in fan theory, their consumption of their favorite series has real world implications on how they live their lives and what materials they themselves then create in the world. Take *Red Sonja* fan Wendy Pini, for example. Not only did she consume the comics, but she became the most well-known *Red Sonja* cosplayer of her time and even contributed to issues of *Red Sonja*. Her fandom was not only an outlet for her identity, but it further influenced her to create her own comic book series, *Elfquest*, with her husband and fellow cosplayer, currently distributed by Dark Horse Comics. *Elfquest* was distinctly liberal, sex-positive and feminist, incidentally, also inhabiting a medievalist story world, however further pushed into the realm of high fantasy. The series has won many awards over the years, and some readers have identified it as the first comic which they were exposed to in which queer love was normalized and presented in a respectful way.

In his analysis of *Red Sonja*, Chris Bishop concluded that the success of the character is:

intrinsically connected to the readers' perception of social relevance and the capacity of the character to reflect key elements of the American century no matter how far removed from reality the storylines might be.[447]

Sandvoss confirms this on a personal level, in that whatever the object of fandom, it is intertwined with the fan's conception of self; who they think they are and who they want to be.[448] Rosenberg and Letamendi confirmed this specifically in the case of cosplayers, choosing to play characters to whom they feel similar and on another level, whom they can idealize, and caution that "given the time and energy cosplayers devote to this activity and the importance of cosplaying for their well-being and self-concept, further research is warranted to better understand how decisions—such as who to cosplay—may affect the outcomes of cosplaying."[449]

Applying the measure of cosplay to demonstrate reader enthusiasm for the content promoted by comics, fans have eagerly embraced the new wave of comics. Fans show an interest in referring back to characters' earlier forms, such as Angela still in her costume from the Spawn series (applying the bikini and the sexuality in parallel with the strength and poise, all without the



**Figure 64** Examples of Angela and Violet cosplayers, photo rights belong to the unnamed models. The style of Aydis'ss dress in *Heathen* is also a nod to the standards of female fantasy costume.

---

[447] Bishop, *Medievalist Comics and the American Century,* Chapter 5, 18.
[448] Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 96.
[449] Stephen Reysen et al., "'Who I Want to Be': Self-Perception and Cosplayers' Identification with Their Favorite Characters," *The Phoenix Papers* 3, no. 2 (March 2018): 5.

burden of body shaming or the pressure of second wave feminists to reject anything related to female sexualization as an object of oppression), happily cosplaying even the more fantastical and gender-bending characters such as a fully bearded Hannah from *Rat Queens*, and moreover the newest medievalist feminist comic book characters are cosplaying themselves, as we see a full adoption of the barbarian bikini in *Heathen* in otherwise stark contrast to the story of trying to destroy the symbol of patriarch, Odin.

It is no accident that creators are also fans, especially in the case of medievalist fantasy. It has been demonstrated that among the authors of medievalist fantasy, many are also participates in the Society for Creative Anachronism, an association which organizes meetings and LARPing events.[450] Comic book creators start as comic book fans themselves (as seen in *Elfquest,* or comics like *Nimera*[451]), so it is interesting to see which parts of the genre creators keep and which parts they reject and replace, without leaning too much on the question of authorial intent. Creators engage in the activity of 'poaching' the same as fans do, in that they launch "an impertinent raid on the literary preserve that takes away only those things that seem useful or pleasurable to the reader,"[452] subsequently using that material when they produce their comics. Thus, we have a continuation of a genre that preserves the chainmail bikini (because it seems that fans want to be both sexy and strong) but are eager to forget occurrences of fridging in a characters' canon.

In the case of *Rat Queens*, perhaps the most successful of the three comics surveyed in this chapter, the creator was very aware of the genre, and also aware of fan responses. Writer Kurtis Weibe notes:

> with *Rat Queens* in particular, it is the opportunity to do something different and to make some positive changes in a quickly changing industry. To be part of this new era of creators who embrace the diversity of the real world by representing it in comic books with a diverse cast. It's been amazing to see the love coming from the fans who are gay, straight, black,

---

[450] Ringel, "New England Neo-Pagans," 65.

[451] The creator specifically stated that she always preferred cosplaying male characters because she was uncomfortable presenting herself in the typical female medievalist costumes, so she designed the character Nimona dressed in something she herself would feel comfortable wearing, something more "butch".

[452] Janet Staiger, "Fans and Fan Behaviour," in *Media Reception Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 112.

white, big, small, old and young. I have never seen such a wide variety of fans in my life as a comic writer and I'm absolutely honored to be right there alongside their excitement.[453]

Illustrator Tess Fowler added:

The Queens are simultaneously annoyed and unapologetic of the trappings of their genre; agency and back story never feel forced but a logical organic extension of living in a world originally designed by white manchildren, i.e. they are done taking your shit.[454]

Fandom can seem like an outward performance, in terms of cosplay or turning one's fandom into a creative project, such as fan fiction or a new text within the genre, but Sandvoss proposes that "the first and foremost audience for the performance of the fans, is the fan him or herself,"[455] in the way that a fan chooses a character or series that they feel represents them, and also promotes how they wish to be represented. The proliferation of new medievalist, feminist story worlds clearly shows a need being filled and the popularity of these series is translated into financial support creating a cycle of propagation. The first volume of *Heathen* was supported by crowdfunding on Kickstarter and having asked for only $7500 to complete the project, backers sent $9537. For the second volume, Natasha Alterici returned to the same successful technique, and despite requiring only $11500 to fund the project, raised $21581 and expanded the number of backers by roughly two hundred people. As one backer said "There is definitely not enough queer fantasy like this out in the world. I would gobble it all up if it existed, but it only seems to come in pockets via lovely creators such as yourself."[456] The success of *Angela, Queen of Hel* enabled Marvel to greenlight the second project *1602: Witch Hunter Angela* almost immediately, releasing it within a year of the other. *The Rat Queens* received similar fan enthusiasm, with reviewers gushing that it had "perfected the formula" for witty sword and sorcery tales,[457] but unfortunately the creators became increasingly fettered by personal issues that created public scandals within the fandom.

---

[453] Wiebe, "Rat Queens Interview with Kurtis Wiebe."
[454] Gopal, "We Reviewed 'Rat Queens.'"
[455] Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, 98.
[456] User "Dolley Charlotte", Comment in: Natasha Alterici, "Heathen: Volume 2," Kickstarter, September 10, 2019, https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/alterici/heathen-volume-2 (accessed March 20, 2020).
[457] Gopal, "We Reviewed 'Rat Queens.'"

According to Staiger, it is important to consider what fans say online as a medium for interaction, as forums and fan communities function as social microcosms with their own social order.[458] The internet is not only a place where the fan community is visible, but, as Matt Hills notes, the participation of fans there is also a performative, on the same level as Wendy Pini presenting as Red Sonja at comic cons.[459] This is an issue when the other side of the new medievalist comic wave is examined, in the case of groups that are less publicly visible and thus perform their fandom, and the subsequent confirmation of their identity and ideal selves, online with only occasional manifestations in the real world.

Sandvoss upholds that fandom is a multilevel, conscious and unconscious interaction with the object world, moreover as a form of popular learning.[460] In the context of the new medievalist feminist comics, although they use fantasy as a doorway to opening up social norms that are still not entirely accepted in society at large, the emphasis on fantasy can result in popular learning that that liberalism can only exist in far contrast to reality, and fans may unconsciously internalize a validation of the opposite as well—that history, as we assumed, was miserably and moreover correctly brutish towards women, thus feeding the flames of the naturalistic argument of the most egregious misogynists. If feminism is being championed in the fantasy genre, how do medievalist texts which present themselves with a patina of seeming historical accuracy interpret the role of female characters, and to what effect on fans and future creators?

CONCLUSIONS

I would like to echo Fiona Watson in that the chainmail bikini is, quite rightly, public property. But, among creators and fans, who will direct the legacy of medievalism in comic books? It is promising to see social progress reflected and amplified in comic books, but these feminist comics are not the only on the market who are looking to use medievalism to communicate social ideals. Fandoms emphasize claims of ownership over the objects of fandoms and are aware that different fandoms are using the same material for different purposes: this is a problem which plagues scholars of Medieval Studies since the very origin of the discipline, in the form of white supremacists and nationalists wishing to use the misconception of the Middle Ages as a high point in Christian culture and homogenous European society to forward modern ideologies of racism

---

[458] Staiger, "Fans and Fan Behaviour," 107.
[459] Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 175.
[460] Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, 161.

and intolerance. If it has been true in the past that white supremacist and other extreme groups utilized medievalism, this would predict that modern-day comics, reflecting the resurgence of such groups in the last decade, would also be turning to medievalism as a treasure trove of recognizable tropes. How will these groups choose to portray female characters in a medievalist setting? Moreover, will they present their vision as fantasy, or as something based on history? Finally, how is the fandom of these individuals performed in contrast to the other fandoms discussed in this chapter?

Medievalist Richard Utz, in his *Medievalism: A Manifesto* calls on academics to discuss such issues and intervene in public discussions to stand up to "racist and sexist trolls on blogs, Twitter and the mainstream media,"[461] acknowledging that the Middle Ages in the public discourse and in popular media especially has a problem. He proposes that it is part of a scholar's professional responsibilities to critically examine occurrences of this sort, and this has informed the direction of my dissertation as well.

---

[461] Utz, *Medievalism*, 86.

# CONCLUSION

This dissertation has attempted to look at medievalism in comics through different lenses. The first step of this was to identify how medievalism appears in comics: in the character tropes, in the story world, in the plots, and in the very understanding about the historic authenticity of the comic book story, either as being accurate or intentionally fantastical. The first look at the appearance of these elements as medievalist simulacra is initiated through a comparison of different medievalist comics (Chapter 2), and demonstrates how medievalist simulacra begin to appear in a historic, twentieth century context, through the American comic *The Leather Nun* and the Czech comic *Lips Tullian*. The following chapter takes a wider view and considers simulacra of place, and a comparison of medievalist adaptations of an adaptation of a medieval text: Franz Kafka's *The Castle.*

With this as a background, the dissertation goes on to narrow its focus and examine the phenomenon of medievalism in contemporary comics through the presentation of female characters, as certain tropes are indicated in Chapter 2. This dissertation sought to describe and catalogue specifically female religious characters such as nuns (Chapter 4) or priestesses, female magical and mythological beings (Chapter 5). This project examined both the context of the presence in medievalist comics, and their conspicuous absence comics in the same genre, and how that relates to concepts of historicity (Chapter 5).

Medievalist simulacra were the units of measurement, or actors, which looks at contemporary medievalist comics featuring the above actors: medievalist religious women, medievalist plot tropes, and medievalist story worlds. These actors were mapped as they evolved over time, as in the case of the medievalist trope of the chain mail bikini and the visual presentation of female characters (Chapter 5), through different communities of readers (Chapter 8), and through different adaptations and transcoding of medievalist materials (Chapter 3). In the case of representations of the medievalist simulacrum of violence, trends of interaction appear between medievalist characters who are linked to concepts of historic authenticity (Chapter 5), which are uniquely amplified in the comic book format. This maps a partial network demonstrating the different ways that medievalist actors are applied to achieve different, especially ideological, aims, and to illuminate trends in medievalism in contemporary comics.

The final aim of the dissertation was to step out of the Actor-Network Theory, which limits itself to identifying actors and mapping out their networks of influence or transfer, and to look at how medievalist comics can illicit responses from readers in the real world. Fan theory was applicable in this case, specifically when examining the public presentation and expressed ideologies of the Alt-Right community, and expressions of support for the ideology behind medievalist characters and their perceived feminist underpinnings (Chapter 7). Thanks to the circulation of images, the transparency of private opinions expressed in online forums, and the public nature of crowdfunding projects and their reported earnings, audience involvement in the creation, circulation, and consumption of medievalist comics is easier to measure now than ever before. Although it is not possible to construct an exact picture of all forms and dynamics of consumption and support, this dissertation aimed to clarify a small piece of the puzzle. The description and analysis of medievalist elements in comics in far from complete and the mapping of different medievalist actors will continue to develop.

This research project has made the prevalence of nun characters in comic clearer, as well as offering basic definitions for Pagan and witch characters, and their relation to nun characters. The conclusions drawn from the analytical part of this dissertation include: medievalism in comics varies quite drastically between authors, and is received differently by different audiences; medievalism appears as necessary simulacra in the presentation of certain character tropes, with an accompanying effect on the reading of the comic; medievalism is not always politically neutral, though it may be implemented unconsciously; and medievalist comics have a potentially measurable effect on their fan bases, influencing political and social ideas and possibly leading to real-world behaviors. There is still a lot of research remaining to be done on story tropes related to Pagan women and witches in comics, to identify other pseudo-historic medievalist comics, continuing to follow Alt-Right media production, and most importantly investigating the reception of Alt-Right comics within their own community, as well as their spread in the wider population of comic book readers. In addition to these questions, which could reflect publishing in the comic book industry, fandoms and the employment of different writers and creators, there is a need to understand how ideology spread through the comic book format can play out in real life.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abercrombie, Nicholas, and Brian Longhurst. *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*. London: Sage, 1998.

Alcorn, Chaucey. "A Steve Bannon Propagandist Is Turning the Alt-Right's Antihero Based Stick Man Into a Comic Book." *Mic*, July 28, 2017. https://www.mic.com/articles/182821/a-steve-bannon-propagandist-is-turning-the-alt-rights-antihero-based-stick-man-into-a-comic-book (accessed March 20, 2020).

Alice, Alex, and Xavier Dorison. *Le Troisième Testament, Vol. 1–2*. Glénat, FR: Grafica, 1997.

Alterici, Natasha. *Heathen: Vol. 1*. Bethesda, MD: Vault, 2017.

———. "Heathen: Volume 2." *Kickstarter*, September 10, 2019. https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/alterici/heathen-volume-2 (accessed March 20, 2020)..

Anglin, Andrew. "What Is the Deal with WMBF Relationships? I Don't Get It." *Daily Stormer* (blog), September 19, 2016. http://archive.is/3TrgB#selection-551.1-551.19 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Anthony, Jon. "Lauren Southern: How to Red Pill Women in Your Life." *Masculine Development* (blog), July 4, 2017. https://www.masculinedevelopment.com/lauren-southern-red-pill-women (accessed March 20, 2020).

Apps, Lara, and Andrew Colin Gow. *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press; Palgrave, 2003.

Arnold, John. "Nasty Histories: Medievalism and Horror." In *History and Heritage: Consuming the Past in Contemporary Culture*, edited by John Arnold, Kate Davies, and Simon Ditchfield. Shaftesbury: Donhead, 1998.

Astor, Maggie, Christina Caron, and Daniel Victor. "A Guide to the Charlottesville Aftermath." *New York Times*, August 13, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-virginia-overview.html (accessed March 20, 2020).

Bailey, Michael D. "From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages." *Speculum* 76, no. 4 (October 2001): 960–90. https://doi.org/10.2307/2903617 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Ball, Timmah. "Wrapped in Plastic: *Twin Peaks*, Toxic Masculinity and Resolving My Love of Lynch." *The Lifted Brow*, September 5, 2017. https://www.theliftedbrow.com/liftedbrow/2017/9/4/wrapped-in-plastic-twin-peaks-toxic-masculinity-and-resolving-my-love-of-lynch-by-timmah-ball (accessed March 20, 2020).

Barbarich, Elena. *Sister Claire: Vol 1-2*. Self-published, 2013. http://www.sisterclaire.com/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Barker, Martin. *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989.

Baudrillard, Jean, and Arthur Evans. "Simulacra and Science Fiction." Special issue: Science Fiction and Postmodernism, *Science Fiction Studies*, 18, no. 3 (November 1991): 309–13.

Bechdel, Alison. *Dykes to Watch Out For #1*. Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1986.

Benitez, Joe, Malachy Coney, Nelson Blake, and Eroc Basaldua. *The Magdalena*: *Vol. 1–12*. Los Angeles: Top Cow Productions, 2010.

Bennett, Judith M. "Medievalism and Feminism." *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (April 1993): 309–31. https://doi.org/10.2307/2864555 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Bennett, Marguerite, Stephanie Hans, Kieron Gillen, Marguerite Sauvage, Irene Koh, and Jordie Bellaire. *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*. Scott, QC, Canada: Marvel, 2016.

Bennett, Marguerite, Kim Jacinto, Israel Silva, and Stephanie Hans. *Angela: Queen of Hel - Journey to the FUNderworld*. Salem, VA: Marvel, 2016.

Berger, Helen A. *A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States*. Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 1999.

Bezr, Ondřej. "Recenze: Kafka Band hraje k pousmání i k podřezání žil." *iDnes.cz,* February 19, 2014. https://www.idnes.cz/kultura/hudba/kafka-band-recenze.A140219_094910_hudba_ob (accessed March 20, 2020).

Biddick, Kathleen. *The Shock of Medievalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

Bishop, Chris. *Medievalist Comics and the American Century*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016. Epub.

Booth, Paul, ed. *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2018.

Brand, Roger, Robert Crumb, Jack "Jaxon" Jackson, Spain Rodriguez, Pat Ryan, and Dave Sheridan. *Tales from the Leather Nun*. Berkeley: Last Gasp Eco-Funnies, 1973.

Bretécher, Claire. *La Vie Passionnée de Thérèse d'Avila*. Paris: Dargaud, 2007.

Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006.

Brown, Jeffrey A. *Beyond Bombshells: The New Action Heroine in Popular Culture*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015.

———. *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011.

———. "Gender and the Action Heroine: Hardbodies and the 'Point of No Return.'" *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (1996): 52–71. https://doi.org/10.2307/1225765 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Bruton, Sarah. "Bedlam and Broomsticks: Representations of the Witch in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Women's Writing." PhD Thesis, Cardiff University, 2006. http://orca.cf.ac.uk/54301/1/U584115.pdf (accessed March 20, 2020).

Buchanan, Patrick. *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Culture and Civilization*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2002.

Busse, Kristina. *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*. Iowa City: University Of Iowa Press, 2017.

Butler, Alban. *The Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs, and Other Principal Saints*. Dublin: James Duffy, 1866. www.bartleby.com/210/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Cantor, Norman F. *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1991.

Cassling, Robin, Pavel Kořínek, Tomáš Prokůpek, and Lucie Česálková. *Signals from the Unknown: Czech Comics 1922-2012*. Řevnice: Arbor vitae, 2012.

Casteras, Susan P. "Virgin Vows: The Early Victorian Artists' Portrayal of Nuns and Novices." *Victorian Studies* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 157–84.

Chadborn, Daniel, Patrick Edwards, and Stephen Reysen. "Reexamining Differences between Fandom and Local Sense of Community." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 7, no. 3 (July 2018): 241–49.

Ching, Albert. "Roc Upchurch Off 'Rat Queens' Following Domestic Abuse Arrest." *CBR* (formerly *Comic Book Resources*), November 21, 2014. https://www.cbr.com/roc-upchurch-off-rat-queens-following-domestic-abuse-arrest/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Chute, Hillary L. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Classen, Albrecht, ed. *Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature: A Casebook*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Clements, Pam. "Authenticity." In *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, edited by Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, 19–26. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014.

Clover, Carol J. "The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia." *Scandinavian Studies* 60, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 147–88.

Cohen, Richard. "The 'Wandering Jew' from Medieval Legend to Modern Metaphor." In *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp, eds, 147–75. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.

Cohn, Neil. *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

———. "Un-Defining 'Comics.'" *International Journal of Comic Art* 7, no. 2 (October 2005): 236–48.

Cooper, Brian. "Baba-Yaga, the Bony-Legged: A Short Note on the Witch and Her Name." *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* (1997): 82–88.

Cramer, Michael A. *Medieval Fantasy as Performance: The Society for Creative Anachronism and the Current Middle Ages*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010.

Crumb, Robert. "The Adventures of R. Crumb Himself." In *Tales from the Leather Nun*, 19–20. Berkeley: Last Gasp Eco-Funnies, 1973.

D'Arcens, Louise. "Presentism." In *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, edited by Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, 181–88. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014.

Davey, Jacob, and Julia Ebner. *'The Great Replacement': The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism.* London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2019. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Great-Replacement-The-Violent-Consequences-of-Mainstreamed-Extremism-by-ISD.pdf (accessed March 20, 2020).

Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Day, Vox. "Vox Popoli." Official Website of Vox Day. http://voxday.blogspot.com/2020/01/twitter-adds-new-feature.html (accessed March 20, 2020).

Dennett, D. C. *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.

Diesing, Helen, and Tomáš Prokůpek. *Kája Saudek*. Prague: Arbor vitae, 2013.

Dixon, Chuck. "About Chuck Dixon." *ChuckDixon.net: Online Home of Author Chuck Dixon*. http://www.chuckdixon.net/p/chuck-dixon-is-veteran-comic-book.html (accessed March 20, 2020).

Duncan, Randy, and Matthew J. Smith. *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture*. New York: Continuum, 2009.

Dunn, Ben, and Ted Nomura. *Warrior Nun Areala*: *Vol. 1*. San Antonio: Antarctic Press, 1994.

Dunn, James A. "Charlotte Dacre and the Feminization of Violence." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 53, no. 3 (December 1998): 307–27. https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.1998.53.3.01p00317 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Eco, Umberto, and William Weaver. "The Return of the Middle Ages." In *Travels in Hyperreality Essays*, 59–85. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 2002.

Eisner, Will. *Comics & Sequential Art*. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1985.

Elliott, Andrew B. R. *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017.

Elliott, Andrew B.R. "Internet Medievalism and the White Middle Ages." *History Compass* 16, no. 3 (March 2018): 1–10.

Emery, Elizabeth, and Richard J. Utz, eds. *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014.

Ezzy, Douglas. "White Witches and Black Magic: Ethics and Consumerism in Contemporary Witchcraft." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21, no. 1 (January 2006): 15–31.

Fenton, Josceline. "Hemlock." Hemlock, June 10, 2010. http://hemlock.smackjeeves.com/comics/1132876/2-50/ (accessed November 10 2019, website no longer functional).

———. *Hemlock: Issue Five*. Self-published, printed through Lulu.com: mild tarantula, 2018.

———. *Hemlock: Issue Four*. Self-published, printed through Lulu.com: mild tarantula, 2013.

———. *Hemlock: Issue One*. Self-published, printed through Lulu.com: mild tarantula, 2010.

———. *Hemlock: Issue Three*. Self-published, printed through Lulu.com: mild tarantula, 2011.

———. *Hemlock: Issue Two*. Self-published, printed through Lulu.com: mild tarantula, 2011.

Fowler, Tess, and Kurtis Wiebe. "Rat Queens Untangled with Tess & Kurtis." *Image Comics,* November 5, 2015. https://imagecomics.com/features/rat-queens-untangled-with-tess-kurtis (accessed March 20, 2020).

"Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights (FOAK)." *Extremist Files*. Southern Poverty Law Center. https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/fraternal-order-alt-knights-foak (accessed March 20, 2020).

Freeman, Nick. "'A Decadent Appetite for the Lurid'?: James Herbert, *The Spear* and 'Nazi Gothic.'" *Gothic Studies* 8, no. 2 (November 2006): 80–97. https://doi.org/10.7227/GS.8.2.6 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Women in Refrigerators. "Front Page," March 1999. http://www.lby3.com/wir/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Fugelso, Karl. *Corporate Medievalism*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012.

———. *Studies in Medievalism XVII: Defining Medievalism(s)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. http://universitypublishingonline.org/boydell/ebook.jsf?bid=CBO9781846157639 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Garrett, Clarke. "Women and Witches: Patterns of Analysis." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3, no. 2 (December 1977): 461–70. https://doi.org/10.1086/493477 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Garsha, Jeremiah. "Dictating the Past: The Capture of Medievalism in Nazi Propaganda and the Roots of the Holocaust." *Ex Post Facto: Journal of SFSU History Students* 14 (Fall 2010): 131–47.

George, Diana Hume. "Lynching Women: A Feminist Reading of Twin Peaks." In *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*, edited by David Lavery, 109–19. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995.

Gillen, Kieron, Marguerite Bennett, Phil Jimenez, Tom Palmer, Le Beau Underwood, Scott Hanna, and Romulo Fajardo Jr. *Angela: Asgard's Assassin—Priceless*. Scott, QC, Canada: Marvel, 2015.

Gopal, Vivek. "We Reviewed 'Rat Queens.'" *Vice*, July 26, 2018. https://www.vice.com/en_in/article/zmknx3/we-reviewed-rat-queens (accessed March 20, 2020).

Gray, Jonathan, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, eds. *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. New York: New York University Press, 2007.

Greene, Viveca S. "'Deplorable' Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies." *Studies in American Humor* 5, no. 1 (2019): 31–69. https://doi.org/10.5325/studamerhumor.5.1.0031 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Griffin, Susan M. "Awful Disclosures: Women's Evidence in the Escaped Nun's Tale." *PMLA* 111, no. 1 (January 1996): 93–107. https://doi.org/10.2307/463136 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Gross, Terry. "Patchett: In Bad Relationships, 'There Comes A Day When You Gotta Go." *Fresh Air*. National Public Radio, January 23, 2014. http://www.wbur.org/ npr/265228054/patchett-in-bad-relationships-there-comes-a-day-when-you-gotta-go (accessed March 20, 2020).

Gunne, Sorcha, and Zoë Brigley, eds. *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

H., J. "Před 80 Lety Sněhurka Zbořila Skepsi Vůči Kreslenému Filmu." *Česka televize, ČT24*, December 21, 2017. https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/kultura/2339668-pred-80-lety-snehurka-zborila-skepsi-vuci-kreslenemu-filmu (accessed March 20, 2020).

Hallakarva, Gunnora. "The Vikings and Homosexuality." *Fordham University Internet History Sourcebooks Project*. https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/pwh/gayvik.asp (accessed March 20, 2020).

Harman, Mark. "'Digging the Pit of Babel': Retranslating Franz Kafka's 'Castle.'" *New Literary History* 27, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 291–311.

Harty, Kevin J. *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern, and Asian Films about Medieval Europe*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999.

Harvey, Robert C. *The Art of the Funnies: An Aesthetic History*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.

Hawley, George. *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

Haydock, Nickolas. *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages*. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2008.

Heller, Erich. "The World of Franz Kafka." In *The Disinherited Mind*, 157–81. Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1952.

Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Hirano, Kouta. *Helsing*: *Vol. 1–10*. Tokyo: Shonen Gahosha, 1999.

Red Sonja. "History." Accessed January 1, 2020. http://www.redsonja.com/history/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

"History of the Museum." Accessed November 18, 2019. https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/history (accessed March 20, 2020).

Holland, Norman, and Leona Sherman. "Gothic Possibilities." *New Literary History*, Explorations in Literary History, 8, no. 2 (Winter 1977): 279–94.

Hume, Kathryn. *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*. New York: Methuen, 1984.

Hunt, Peter, and Sheila G. Bannister Ray, eds. *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Hutcheon, Linda, and Siobhan O'Flynn. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2006.

Hutton, Ronald. "Modern Pagan Festivals: A Study in the Nature of Tradition." *Folklore* 119, no. 3 (December 2008): 251–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/00155870802352178 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Inge, M. Thomas. *Comics as Culture*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1990.

Jenkins, Henry. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.

———. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Johnson, Penelope. *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Johnston, Rich. "Heathen #1 Sells Out, Goes To Second Print—And It's All Thanks To Lesbian Vikings." *Bleeding Cool,* March 15, 2017. https://www.bleedingcool.com/2017/03/15/heathen-1-sells-goes-second-print-thanks-lesbian-vikings/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Jowett, Lorna. "Rape, Power, Realism and the Fantastic on Television." In *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, edited by Zoe Brigley Thompson and Sorcha Gunne. New York: Routledge, 2010. http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/11723/1/Jowett_Lorna_Routledge_2009_Rape_power_realism_and_the_fantastic_on_television.pdf (accessed March 20, 2020).

Kafka, Franz. *The Castle*. Translated by Anthea Bell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Kamachi, Kazuma, and Chuya Kogino. *A Certain Magical Index (Toaru Matjusu No Indekkusu)*: *Vol. 1–14.* Tokyo: ASCII Mediaworks, 2004.

Kaufman, Amy S. "Purity." In *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, edited by Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, 199–206. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014.

Kelly, Henry Ansgar. "A Neo-Revisionist Look at Chaucer's Nuns." *Chaucer Review* 31, no. 2 (1996): 115–32.

Kersey, Paul. "Tired of Hollywood's Woke, and Failing, Actioners? Try Vox Day's New Comic Book Series." *The Unz Review: An Alternative Media Selection*, November 24, 2019. https://www.unz.com/article/tired-of-hollywoods-woke-and-failing-actioners-try-vox-days-new-comic-book-series/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Metacritic. "Kingdom Come: Deliverance." Accessed August 12, 2019. https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/kingdom-come-deliverance (accessed March 20, 2020).

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara, and Jonathan Karp, eds. *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.

Kittredge, Caitlin, Roberta Ingranata, and Bryan Valenza. *Witchblade (2017): Vol. 1*. Los Angeles: Top Cow, 2018.

Klein, Sheri. "Breaking the Mold with Humor: Images of Women in the Visual Media." *Art Education* 46, no. 5 (September 1993): 60–65.

Knight, Gladys L. *Female Action Heroes: A Guide to Women in Comics, Video Games, Film, and Television*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2010.

Knox, Leslie. "Audacious Nuns: Institutionalizing the Franciscan Order of Saint Clare." *Church History* 69, no. 1 (March 2000): 41–62.

Krupers, Terry. "Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison." *The Journal of Clinical Psychology* 61, no. 6 (2005): 713–24.

La Rosa, Davide, and Vanessa Cardinali. *Suore Ninja*: *Vol. 1–6.* Bosco, IT: Star Comics, 2013.

Lavin, Talia. "The Boundaries of Whiteness Are Protected With Blood and Bullets." *Nation*, August 5, 2019. https://www.thenation.com/article/replacement-theory-racism-white-supremacy/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Leong, Sloane. "Hemlock." *Comics Journal*, December 4, 2017, http://www.tcj.com/reviews/hemlock/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Leshner, Connor, Stephen Reysen, Courtney Plante, Daniel Chadborn, Sharon Roberts, and Kathleen Gerbasi. "'My Group Is Discriminated against, but I'm Not': Denial of Personal Discrimination in Furry, Brony, Anime, and General Interest Fan Groups." *The Phoenix Papers* 4, no. 1 (August 2018): 130–42.

Lewis, A. David. "UPDATES: Baron Leaves Alt-Right 'Based Stick Man' Comic, Alt★Hero Looms." *Sacred and Sequential*, November 7, 2017. http://www.sacredandsequential.org/2017/11/07/updates-baron-leaves-alt-right-based-stick-man-comic-alt★hero-looms/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Liddell, Colin. "Walking Away From a Broken Brand." *Affirmative Right*, April 2, 2018. https://affirmativeright.blogspot.com/2018/04/walking-away-from-broken-brand.html (accessed March 20, 2020).

Linden, Henrik, and Sara Linden. *Fans and Fan Cultures: Tourism, Consumerism and Social Media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Link, Fabian, and Mark W. Hornburg. "'He Who Owns the Trifels, Owns the Reich': Nazi Medievalism and the Creation of the *Volksgemeinschaft* in the Palatinate." *Central European History* 49, no. 2 (June 2016): 208–39. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938916000352 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Lonergan, Meg. "Witches, Bitches, and White Feminism: A Critical Analysis of American Horror Story: Coven." *Render: The Carleton Graduate Journal of Art and Culture* 5 (2016). https://carleton.ca/arthistory/wp-content/uploads/Lonergan_WitchesBitchesWhiteFeminism.pdf (accessed March 20, 2020).

Madrid, Mike. *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines*. Ashland, OR: Exterminating Angel Press, 2009.

Mairowitz, David Zane, and Robert Crumb. *Kafka*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2007.

Mairowitz, David Zane, and Jaromír (Jaromír 99) Švejdík. *Zámek*. Prague: Labyrint, 2013.

Malešević, Siniša. *The Rise of Organized Brutality: A Historical Sociology of Violence*. Cambridge ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Marshall, David W., ed. *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2007.

Matthews, David. *Medievalism: A Critical History*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2015.

Mayer, Lauren S. "Simulacrum." In *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, edited by Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, 223–30. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014.

McAllister, Matthew P., Edward Sewell, and Ian Gordon. *Comics and Ideology*. New York: Peter Lang, 2001. http://www.personal.psu.edu/mpm15/C&IChapter1.pdf (accessed March 20, 2020).

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993.

McNamara, Jo Ann. *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

The MNT. "Memes Are Comics, and We're Living in a Golden Age," July 3, 2019. https://www.comicsmnt.com/?p=2518 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Mitchell, Stephen A. *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

Moran, Maureen. "The Art of Looking Dangerously: Victorian Images of Martyrdom." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32, no. 2 (September 2004): 475–93. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000610 (accessed March 20, 2020).

N., S. "Medieval Memes: The Far Right's New Fascination with the Middle Ages." *Economist* (January 2, 2017). https://www.economist.com/democracy-in-america/2017/01/02/the-far-rights-new-fascination-with-the-middle-ages (accessed March 20, 2020).

Neiwert, David. "What the Kek: Explaining the Alt-Right 'Deity' Behind Their 'Meme Magic.'" Southern Poverty Law Center, May 9, 2017. https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/05/08/what-kek-explaining-alt-right-deity-behind-their-meme-magic (accessed March 20, 2020).

Neiwert, David A. *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*. New York: Verso, 2017.

O., J. "Call on President Trump to Fully Pardon Kyle Chapman (Known as 'Stick Man') Wrongfully Arrested!" *White House*, March 5, 2017. https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/call-president-trump-fully-pardon-kyle-chapman-known-stick-man-wrongfully-arrested (accessed March 20, 2020).

O'Shaughnessy, Nicholas J. *Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Nazi Brand*. London: Hurst & Company, 2016.

Pagliarini, Marie. "'And the Word Was Made Flesh': Divining the Female Body in Nineteenth Century American and Catholic Culture." *Religion and American Culture* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 213–45.

Palmgren, Jennifer A., and Lorretta M. Holloway, eds. *Beyond Arthurian Romances: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Perry, David M. "How Can We Untangle White Supremacy From Medieval Studies? A Conversation with Australian Scholar Helen Young." PS Magazine, October 9, 2017. https://psmag.com/education/untangling-white-supremacy-from-medieval-studies (accessed March 20, 2020).

Philips, Nickie. *Beyond Blurred Lines: Rape Culture in Popular Media*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

Pille, Keith. "Memes Are Comics, and We're Living in a Golden Age." *Comics MNT*. https://www.comicsmnt.com/?p=2518 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Pollitt, Katha. "Hers; The Smurfette Principle." *New York Times*, April 7, 1991, sec. 6.

Prokůpek, Tomáš. "Dreams Under the Hooves of Totalitarianism." In *Signals from the Unknown: Czech Comics 1922-2012*, edited by Tomáš Prokůpek, 264–99. Prague: Arbor vitae, 2012.

Purkiss, Diane. *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Reysen, Stephen, Courtney Plante, Sharon Roberts, and Kathleen Gerbasi. "'Who I Want to Be': Self-Perception and Cosplayers' Identification with Their Favorite Characters." *The Phoenix Papers* 3, no. 2 (March 2018): 1–7.

Richman, Zachary. "Petition: Pardon Kyle Chapman, Dismiss All Charges." Change.org, 2017. https://www.change.org/p/jerry-brown-pardon-kyle-chapman-dismiss-all-charges (accessed March 20, 2020).

"Right-Wing Activist Kyle 'Based Stickman' Chapman Given 5-Year Probation Sentence." *CBS San Francisco Bay Area*, September 25, 2019. https://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2019/09/25/right-wing-activist-kyle-based-stickman-chapman-given-5-year-probation-sentence/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Ringel, Faye. "New England Neo-Pagans: Medievalism, Fantasy, Religion." *The Journal of American Culture* 17, no. 3 (September 1994): 65–68. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1994.t01-1-00065.x (accessed March 20, 2020).

Robinson, Carol L., and Pamela Clements, eds. *Neomedievalism in the Media: Essays on Film, Television, and Electronic Games*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012.

Robinson, Lillian S. *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Rodriguez, Spain. "The Leather Nun 'Gets Hers.'" In *Tales from the Leather Nun*, 21–24. Berkeley: Last Gasp Eco-Funnies, 1973.

Rogic, Mario. "Cosplay." Urban Dictionary, January 15, 2003. https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=cosplay (accessed March 20, 2020).

Ross, Charles S. "Castles from Epic to T. S. Eliot." *Annali D'Italianistica* 8 (1990): 38–56.

Round, Julia. *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels: A Critical Approach*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014.

Rowland, Nicholas J., Jan-Hendrik Passoth, and Alexander B. Kinney. "Latour's Greatest Hits, Reassembled: Review of Bruno Latour's Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory." *Spontaneous Generations: A Journal for the History and Philosophy of Science* 5, no. 1 (September 30, 2011): 95–99. https://doi.org/10.4245/sponge.v5i1.14968 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Sanders, Joe Sutliff. "Theorizing Sexuality in Comics." In *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts*, edited by Paul Williams and James Lyons. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010.

Sandvoss, Cornel. *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005.

Santos, Cristina. *Unbecoming Female Monsters: Witches, Vampires, and Virgins*. London: Lexington Books, 2017.

Saudek, Kája, and Karel Steigerwald. *V zámku a v nadzámči*. 1967. In *Kája Saudek*, Helena Diesing 202–203. Prague: Arbor vitae, 2013.

Saudek, Kája, and Jaroslav Weigel. *Lips Tullian*. Prague: Albatros, 2010.

Saunders, Robert. "Primetime Paganism: Popular-Culture Representations of Europhilic Polytheism in Game of Thrones and Vikings." *Correspondences* 2, no. 2 (2014): 121–157.

Sayes, Edwin. "Actor-Network Theory and Methodology: Just What Does It Mean to Say That Nonhumans Have Agency?" *Social Studies of Science* 44, no. 1 (February 2014): 134–49.

Schenker, Brett. "Facebook Fandom Spotlight: Who Are the US Comic Fans?" *Graphic Policy*, February 1, 2014. https://graphicpolicy.com/2014/02/01/facebook-fandom-spotlight-who-are-the-us-comic-fans-5/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

———. "The Alt-Right's Hero Based Stick Man Is Coming to Comics." *Graphic Policy*, July 29, 2017. https://graphicpolicy.com/2017/07/29/the-alt-rights-hero-based-stick-man-is-coming-to-comics/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Schifman, Limor. "May The Excessive Force Be With You: Memes As Political Participation." In *Memes in Digital Culture*, 119–50. Boston: MIT Press, 2014. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bs14s.12 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Schmarc, Vít. "Unreliable Lines of History: Czech Comics 1922-2012." In *Signals from the Unknown*, edited by Tomáš Prokůpek, 192–215. Prague: Arbor vitae, 2012.

Schnurbein, Stefanie von. *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism*. Leiden: Brill, 2016.

Scott, Suzanne, and Melissa A. Click, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Sielke, Sabine. *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Skoda, Hannah. *Medieval Violence: Physical Brutality in Northern France, 1270-1330*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Snook, Jennifer. *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2014.

Špičák, Jiří, and Miloš Hroch. "Kafka Band = Alles Gute Bande." *Radio Wave*, March 7, 2014. https://wave.rozhlas.cz/kafka-band-alles-gute-bande-5209059 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Spiegelman, Art. "Introduction." In *Paul Auster's City of Glass*, edited by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, i–ii. New York: Avon, 2004.

Spoehrer, Markus, and Beate Ochsner, eds. *Applying the Actor-Network Theory in Media Studies*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, 2017.

Staiger, Janet. "Fans and Fan Behavior." In *Media Reception Studies*, 95–114. New York: New York University Press, 2005.

Staunch Book Prize. "Staunch Book Prize Home Page." Accessed August 12, 2019. http://staunchbookprize.com/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Strecker, Edward Adam. *Their Mothers' Sons; the Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1946.

Symes, Carol. "Medievalism, White Supremacy, and the Historian's Craft." American Historical Association (blog). Accessed January 1, 2020. https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2017/medievalism-white-supremacy-and-the-historians-craft (accessed March 20, 2020).

T., J., and Kája Saudek. "Lips Tullian Není Superman." *Mladý Svět*, August 5, 1972.

Taylor, Jared, Henry Wolff, and Gregory Hood. "About Us." *American Renaissance*. Accessed January 1, 2020. https://www.amren.com/about/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Taylor, Jeff. "'Alt-Right' Comic Book Meant to 'Trigger' Progressives Is as Awful as You'd Expect." *LGBTQ Nation,* October 4, 2017. https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2017/10/alt-right-comic-book-meant-trigger-progressives-awful-youd-expect/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

televize, Česká. "Před 80 lety Sněhurka zbořila skepsi vůči kreslenému filmu." *Česká televize*. Accessed November 18, 2019. https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/kultura/2339668-pred-80-lety-snehurka-zborila-skepsi-vuci-kreslenemu-filmu (accessed March 20, 2020).

"The Accuracy of History in Kingdom Come - Story & Setting - Kingdom Come: Deliverance Forum." Accessed February 1, 2020. https://forum.kingdomcomerpg.com/t/the-accuracy-of-history-in-kingdom-come/45553/8 (accessed March 20, 2020).

"The Accuracy of History in Kingdom Come - Story & Setting - Kingdom Come: Deliverance Forum." *Forum.Kingdomcomerpg.Com*. Accessed August 12, 2019. https://forum.kingdomcomerpg.com/t/the-accuracy-of-history-in-kingdom-come/45553/8 (accessed March 20, 2020).

"The Far Right's New Fascination with the Middle Ages." *Economist*, January 2, 2017. https://www.economist.com/democracy-in-america/2017/01/02/the-far-rights-new-fascination-with-the-middle-ages (accessed March 20, 2020).

"The Iron Pill," June 16, 2014. https://theironpill.tumblr.com/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Thomas, Allen. "Review: Angela: Queen of Hel #1." *Comicosity*, October 28, 2015. http://www.comicosity.com/review-angela-queen-of-hel-1/ (accessed March 20, 2020)

Trent, John F. "IndieGoGo Shuts Down Vox Day and Arkhaven Comics' Alt-Hero Q Crowdfund Campaign." *Bounding Into Comics*, October 11, 2018. https://boundingintocomics.com/2018/10/11/indiegogo-shuts-down-vox-day-and-arkhaven-comics-alt-hero-q-crowdfund-campaign/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

———. "Vox Day Announces Chuck Dixon's Alt-Hero: Q #2 Now On Sale." *Bounding Into Comics*, October 28, 2019. https://boundingintocomics.com/2019/10/28/vox-day-announces-chuck-dixons-alt-hero-q-2-now-on-sale/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Ullyot, Jonathan. "Kafka's Grail Castle." *German Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2010): 431–48.

Utz, Richard J. *Medievalism: A Manifesto*. Kalamazoo: ARC Humanities Press, 2017.

Utz, Richard J., Jesse G. Swan, and Paul Plisiewicz, eds. *Postmodern Medievalisms*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005.

"V Zámku a v Podzámčí - Božena Němcová" Databáze Knih. https://www.databazeknih.cz/knihy/v-zamku-a-v-podzamci-604 (accessed December 6, 2019).

Vault. "HEATHEN Returns!" *Vault Comics,* January 15, 2019. https://vaultcomics.com/heathen-returns/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Watson, Fiona. "Braveheart"—More than Just 'Pulp Fiction.'" In *History and Heritage: Consuming the Past in Contemporary Culture*, edited by John Arnold, Kate Davies, and Simon Ditchfield, 129–140. Shaftesbury: Donhead, 1998.

Weber, Shannon. "White Supremacy's Old Gods : The Far Right and Neopaganism." *The Public Eye*, no. 93 (Winter 2018): 11–16.

Wiebe, Kurtis. "Hail to the Queens!" *Inside the Mind of Kurtis J. Wiebe* (blog), January 24, 2019. https://kurtiswiebe.com/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

———. "Rat Queens Interview with Kurtis Wiebe." *Geek and Sundry*, May 5, 2014. https://geekandsundry.com/rat-queens-interview/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

———. "This Is Me Now." Inside the Mind of Kurtis J. Wiebe, January 24, 2019. (accessed March 20, 2020)

Wiebe, Kurtis J., Roc Upchurch, and Ed Brisson. *Rat Queens: Volume One: Sass and Sorcery*. Edited by Laura Tavishati. Berkeley: Image Comics, 2015.

Wiggins, Bradley E, and G Bret Bowers. "Memes as Genre: A Structurational Analysis of the Memescape." *New Media & Society* 17, no. 11 (December 2015): 1886–1906. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814535194 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Willmore, James, and Darryl Hocking. "Internet Meme Creativity as Everyday Conversation." *Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture* 2, no. 2 (2017): 140–66.

Winkelman, John. "An Interpretation of Kafka's 'Das Schloss.'" *Monatshefte* 64, no. 2 (1972): 115–31.

Wohl, David, Brian Haberlin, and Michael Turner. *Witchblade*: *Vol. 1*. Los Angeles: Top Cow, 1996.

Wolfe, Gary. *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.

"Women and the Alt-Right," *Economist*. February 1, 2017. https://www.economist.com/democracy-in-america/2017/02/01/women-and-the-alt-right (accessed March 20, 2020).

Woock, Elizabeth. "Nuns Having Run: Popular Graphic Representations of a Historical Issue." In *Where Is History Today?*, edited by Marcel Arbeit and Ian Christie, 159–70. Olomouc: Palacky University Olomouc, 2015.

Wood, Alexander. "About Crumb Biography: Present Day." The Official Crumb Site. Accessed August 12, 2019. https://www.crumbproducts.com/Present-Day_ep_121.html (accessed March 20, 2020).

Wood, Brian. "Rebels." Brian Wood.com. Accessed January 1, 2020. https://www.brianwood.com/rebels (accessed March 20, 2020).

———. Y1K PARANOIA: Brian Wood talks "Northlanders." Interview by Andy Khouri. *Comic Book Review,* October 16, 2007. https://www.cbr.com/y1k-paranoia-brian-wood-talks-northlanders/ (accessed March 20, 2020).

Wood, Brian, Gary Brown, Dave McCaig, and Steve Wands. *Black Road: Volume One "The Holy North."* Berkley: Image Comics, 2016.

Wood, Brian, Dean Ormston, Danijel Žeželj, Davide Gianfelice, Marian Churchland, Ryan Kelly, Dave McCaig, Travis Lanham, and Massimo Carnevale. *Northlanders: Book 1 "The Ango-Saxon Saga."* Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2016.

Wood, Juliette. *The Holy Grail: History and Legend*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012.

Wylie, Philip. *Generation of Vipers*. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1996.

Yagi, Norihiro. *Claymore*: *Vol. 1–27*. Tokyo: Shueisha, 2001.

Yoshida, Sunao, and Thores Shibamoto. *Trinity Blood*: *Vol. 1–2.* Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 2001.

Young Adult Library Services Association. "2018 Great Graphic Novels for Teens," ALA.org. http://www.ala.org/yalsa/2018-great-graphic-novels-teens (accessed March 20, 2020).

Zadrozny, Brandy, and Ben Collins. "How Three Conspiracy Theorists Took 'Q' and Sparked Qanon." *NBC News*, August 14, 2018. https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/how-three-conspiracy-theorists-took-q-sparked-qanon-n900531 (accessed March 20, 2020).

Ziegler, Harry. "Anarchy and Order: Re-Inventing the Medieval in Contemporary Popular Narrative." In *History and Heritage: Consuming the Past in Contemporary Culture*, edited by John Arnold, Kate Davies, and Simon Ditchfield, 27–38. Shaftesbury: Donhead, 1998.

# APPENDIX

## COUNTS OF VIOLENCE AND BRUTALITY

*1602: WITCH HUNTER ANGELA* (128 PAGES)

Violence (total pages 25/128=19%)

- Fighting Faustian monster (pp 6–10)
- Fight scene (pp 15–16)
- Fight scene (pp 18–21)
- Fight scene against the Enchantress (pp 23–24)
- Fight against a Faustian (pp 41–45)
- Angela fights the Enchantress (pp 72–80)
  Brutality (total pages 3 almost 2%)

- Anne Marie is killed by the Enchantress (after fight trying to get powers, technically outmatched) (p 61-63), not sexualized, buried with respect.

## *HEATHEN* (112 PAGES)

Violence (total pages 6/112 = 5%)

- Aydis fights a god Ruadan disguised as a bull (no death, pp 11–15)
- Minor bar fight (p 65)
- Scene of Beowulf fighting Grendel, a retelling (p 79)
  Brutality (total pages O/112 = 0%)

## *RAT QUEENS* (128 PAGES)

Violence (total pages 91/128 = 71%)

- Implied street brawl, (p 7–9), only aftermath shown
- Assassin attack and fight (pp 20–41)
- two team leaders temporarily grab each other by their throats for a single frame (p 45)
- Brother and sister fight equally matched (pp 68–69)
- Fight (pp 81–85)
- Battle (pp 92–100)
- Continuation of previous battle (pp 104–112)

Brutality (total pages 6/128=5%)
- unnamed Mercenary is killed by assassin (pp 14–15)
- Beating training equipment (pp 60–61)
- Gerrig grabs Bernadette by the throat and kidnaps her (p 103)
- Scene of Gerrig holding Bernadette tied up (p 224)

*NORTHLANDERS* (464 PAGES)

Violence (total pages 83/464 =17% )

- Battle (pp 43 –46)
- Man challenges boy to fight (boy wins by stabbing the older man in the leg) (pp 50–51)
- Battle (pp 55–56)
- Armed confrontation (women and men) (pp 66–67)
- Armed confrontation (women and men) (pp 77–80)
- Armed confrontation (pp 91–92)
- Fighting (pp 108–111)
- Surprise punch (p 117)
- Fight (p 122)
- Fight (p 124)
- Memories of battle (p135–136)
- Fight (pp 142–144)
- Fight (pp 164–165)
- Fight (pp 167–170)
- Guard gets killed (p 179)
- Child kills attacker (p 212)
- Fighting (pp 224–225)
- Battle (pp 254–263)
- Public execution (pp 296–297)
- Dog attack (pp 325–328)
- Attack (pp 348–351)
- Fighting (p 354)
- Fighting (pp 368–370)
- Battle (pp 383–390)
- Fight (pp 406–407)
- Beating prisoner (almost brutality but not quite), (pp 411–414)
- Flashback of battle (p 426–429)
- Execution (p 453)
    * Suicide (p 101)

    * Dad killed off scene (p 306)


Brutality (total pages 44/464=9%)

- Child is abused by father (pp 13, 18–19)
- Viking attack on monastery (pp 36–39)
- Child being struck (p 49)

- Escaping women and children slaughtered (pp 61, 62)
- Archeress shoots at Sven (pp 132–133)
- Ambush (Sven on archeress) (pp 146–149)
- Peasant slaughtered by earl (p 185)
- Elderly husband and wife slaughtered (corpses dramatized, killing not depicted) (p 190)
- Corpse of Sven's girlfriend (corpse dramatized, killing not depicted) (p 194)
- Rape scene (p 198)
- Rape scene (p 203)
- Battered women on display (pp 238–239)
- Sexualized mercy killing of Thora (pp 264–265)
- More sexy dead body (pp 277–278)
- Peasants slaughtered scene (p 317)
- Peasants slaughtered scene (pp 355–357)
- Peasants slaughtered scene (pp 378–379)
- Attack unarmed shepherd (p 399)
- Harass peasants, woman's head on stake (pp 400–401) (p 403 referenced)
- Scene of massacre (p 435)
- Punch a woman (p 443)
- Choke and throw a woman (p 445)

## BLACK ROAD (136 PAGES)

Violence (total pages 16/136= 12%)

- Fight scene (pp 17–20)
- Semi-fair fight (pp 33–35)
- Battle (pp 44–45)
- Fighting wolves (pp 72–74)
- Battle (pp 90–92)
- Contracted assassination (p 108)

Brutality (total pages 14/136=10%)

- An unnamed woman is buried, romanticized corpse (pp 6–8)
- An unarmed priest is killed after the fight is over (pp 21–22)
- A man is assumed to be fighter is interrogated, gets killed, (pp 38–40)
- Julia hacks at a body (pp 46–47)
- Village attacked (pp 94–96) resulting in the death of the women from the first pages
- Julia shoots the guy with an arrow and runs away (he survives) (p 110)
- Priest burns down village (p 120)