

# Introduction

## Queer History, Cinematic Medievalism, and the Impossibility of Sexuality

Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Tison Pugh

“The queer present negotiates with the past, knowing full well that the future is at stake,” observes B. Ruby Rich, as she points to history’s complicity in the continual creation and re-creation of contemporary queerness.<sup>1</sup> Surely history matters in the fraught dialectic between the past and the present as we discover new paths into the future, but we must also ponder how history is even possible, since it involves the recuperation of that which is, by definition, already lost. In the urge to understand history—and, often, out of a desire to experience history—period films attempt to re-create the past, but can only do so through a revisioning that inevitably replicates modernity and its concerns. To say so is to invoke a familiar trope on which scholars depend when writing about films set in any period earlier than our own, and in the following Introduction and chapters, we hope to test the boundaries of this trope through foregrounding the queerness of movie medievalisms. Queer past, queer present, and queer future merge in films of the Middle Ages as they address issues of gender and sexuality relevant to contemporary audiences yet nonetheless mediated through a fictionalized and historicized past.

In combining these terms—*queer* and *movie medievalism*—we take as a premise that modernity is a “condition” (to borrow from Lyotard), a condition characterized by an elaborate and conflicted preoccupation with the past, and therefore deserving of interrogation.<sup>2</sup> Building on this premise, we hope to make two points: that queer theory is a useful mode by which to begin such an interrogation, in part because queer theory has the power to disrupt our notions of linearity and of a differentiating temporality (that is, how difference might

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1 B. Ruby Rich, “The New Queer Cinema,” *Queer Cinema*, eds. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (New York: Routledge, 2004), 53-59, at p. 58.

2 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (1979; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984).

be experienced as past/present/future); and second, that we see the cinematic Middle Ages as an especially rich and even singular site for queer/ing study, in part because moderns so often construct the medieval period as emphatically opposed to modernity.

Modernity—and its hyperbolic epiphenomenon that we sometimes call postmodernity—might be said to manifest itself as a relation to the past. Modernity, in spite of those moderns who phantasize otherwise, does not necessitate a break with the past; rather, it expresses itself through quotation, imitation, invocation, and allusion to the past. Modernity represents a kind of temporal hybridity, as it were. Queerness has often been constructed as a modernist project in part because of the Foucauldian narrative of a *before* and an *after* of homosexuality, a binary upon which modernity depends for the construction of today's sexualities.<sup>3</sup> However, many scholars, and many medieval scholars among them, demonstrate the falsity of this binary with respect to subject formation. There is no *before* the subject; there are historically specific subjectivities as well as historically specific queer subjectivities. Queerness and its theorizations ask us to question the assumptions that progression and direction are evolutionary processes that result in stable identities; queerness might be said to run not along a linear, straight path, but along a helical, looping arc.

Scott Bravmann offers an alternative to a rigid historicist project when he articulates the need for scholars of queer history “to stretch rather than reinforce the boundaries that define queer history and its academic study, to think outside the historically specific formations that distinguish absolutely between the literal and the figurative, the real and the imaginary—between, in other words, ‘fact’ and ‘fiction.’”<sup>4</sup> Several medieval scholars, including Judith Bennett, Carolyn Dinshaw, Karma Lochrie, and James Schultz articulate the value of exploring the figurative and the imaginary with respect to queer subjectivities in the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> As is well known, post-Foucauldian scholars have maintained that the “birth” of homosexuality, and hence heterosexuality, can be located in the nineteenth century, and Lochrie and Schultz provocatively argue for the paradoxical scene of the Middle Ages as innocent of heterosexuality, urging us

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3 Foucault famously dates the birth of the homosexual to the 1870s, in which a transformation of perception occurred: “The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (*The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley [New York: Vintage, 1990], p. 43).

4 Scott Bravmann, *Queer Fictions of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), p. 129.

5 See Judith Bennett, “‘Lesbian-Like’ and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9.1-2 (2000): 1-24; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1999); Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005); and James Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006).

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to reconsider using heterosexuality as the default hermeneutic for understanding medieval sexuality.<sup>6</sup> Such scholarship has already influenced how we read the Western European Middle Ages; that is, the texts, the visual and plastic arts, and the monuments and artifacts produced between 500 and 1500 C.E. We define the Middle Ages rather ploddingly as a time or period (albeit with fuzzy borders) to make the point that there is another “Middle Ages”; that is, all the accretions since, thereof and thereon. It is *this* Middle Ages in which we are interested in this collection—a Middle Ages that has been historically recast as a place and a time of an intransigent and romanticized vision of heterosexuality.

Contributors to this collection work on several levels, for they must be familiar with the insights of medieval scholars who address queer territory and current queer theory, attend to the medieval “source” texts themselves as well as to cinematic retellings of medieval texts, and utilize current film theory. Contributors do so to demonstrate, even showcase, how rich readings of movie medievalisms can be by undercutting notions of linear temporality. Contributors ask over and over again, “what is ‘queer’ anyway?” It is a question that informs each essay in this collection, and one that we are not invested in answering fixedly, for we acknowledge that it is a protean and contested term. A partial answer, useful for introducing this collection, is that we believe that *queer* is used most energetically as a disruptive mode of inquiry, one that destabilizes expectations of normativity. Queer theory has the power to disrupt not only the normativity of heterosexuality, but also the normativity of history, for it is how history is written, received, and understood that establishes master narratives in the first place. To queer “medieval” cinema is challenging work, in that we must contend with two separate time periods—the medieval past and the filmmaker’s present—and two different phantasies—again, that of the medieval past and the filmmaker’s present—and tease out how historical coherence (another phantasy) and the possibility of a unified sexual subject (yet another) play out in narratives created to tell a tale relevant to the present through negotiations of the past.

We posit that negotiating past and present in “medieval” films is often a queering process because it strips away foundational arguments of gender and sexuality as embodied in time. Past and present cannot be neatly distinguished from each other because the present uses the past to confront itself, and these confrontations are often intimately connected to issues of gender and sexuality. Think, for instance, of Disney’s cinematic princesses and the marketing juggernaut that they have sparked, as well as the ways in which they introduce, if not inculcate, young girls into paradigms both archaic and contemporary, yet seamlessly and insistently heterosexual: what are the personal, cultural, and ideological ramifications of young girls locating role models of identity in a

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<sup>6</sup> See Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, pp. xi-xxviii, and Schultz, *Courtly Love*, pp. 51-62.

medievalized past, when these models are both connected to and severed from modern conceptions of female identity? Here is where we see the queerness of gender formation in the negotiations of past and present: that the seamless union of such unions between present and past proclaims a normativity phantastically and historically implausible yet nonetheless stunningly persuasive.

Many scholars decry the ubiquitous solecisms of films set in the Middle Ages, but anachronisms are not always to be lamented; rather, might they not be embraced as a means of understanding the cultural work of medievalism? Ostensible flubs (a twelfth-century Norman woman wouldn't wear that!) can indicate the ways in which contemporary filmmakers infuse their work with modern concerns—often political, especially with respect to gender and sexuality. For in the mediation between past and present, history becomes misty, and so, too, do constructions of gender and sexuality as incarnated by the historical and/or fictional characters who populate these films. Time fluctuates according to perspective, as Johannes Fabian notes, and in his work he takes anthropologists to task for a locational presentism, as it were: too often, according to Fabian, anthropologists situate themselves in the “here and now” and the peoples under study in the “there and then.” The place and space of the Other are constructed as earlier in time—as “primitive”—when, of course, the researchers and their subjects of study are contemporaneous. Fabian calls this confusion of categories in which space is figured as time the “denial of coevalness.”<sup>7</sup> While medievals are indeed separated from us by time, and only traces of medieval places remain, it strikes us that there is another kind of “denial of coevalness” operating here, resulting in what has, to date, served as a fortuitous divide between “modern us” and “pre-modern them” when we are, to take the long view, still coeval. We are, it may be argued, always, already, still, medieval.<sup>8</sup> From high culture to low culture—from Denis de Rougemont to Disney—the break with the past that constructs the Middle Ages as indeed another country also creates the medieval period as an important, if not primary, site for culturally productive and serious, phantastical play.

When it comes to cinematic representation, what sets apart the Middle Ages from ancient Rome, say, or Shakespeare's time, or the Victorian era, is the master narrative of courtly love, a trope that itself defies boundaries, for it is a result of the cooperation and the connivance of the medieval and the modern. Courtly love was heterosexualized by medievals, but also relentlessly so by moderns, who have also metonymized the clichéd materialities of a certain kind of medievalism—the knight in shining armor, the damsel in distress—as heterosexual. Thus, courtly love (a unifying modern term for a diverse medieval

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7 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983).

8 This conceit is reverse-mirrored in Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993).

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phenomenon: it is not a fact of history; it is a phenomenon of literary history) invokes the Middle Ages through an iconic shorthand of heterosexuality that resonates powerfully in today's culture.<sup>9</sup> Because of the power of the master narrative of courtly love, the Middle Ages as a site for modern films differs intrinsically from films set in other eras; in fact, many of the films discussed in this collection include some representation of what is thought to be courtly love—or what is phantasized thereof. As all those who teach medieval humanities know, courtly love remains an extremely tenacious idea in popular culture; its premises, descriptions, and definitions are rarely questioned. Even though courtly love is often parodied, such parodies point to a “belief” in courtly love in the first place. As with most robust master narratives, tenor and vehicle have collapsed together in the popular imaginary, admitting of no interrogation of the concept. Queering movie medievalisms helps to prise apart the tenor and vehicle of courtly love to allow for alternative readings along the axes of time and space. Movies set either in the Middle Ages or in contemporary times with medievalized themes, in part through their sheer popularity, ask their audiences to think metadiscursively about the representation of the past.

While archetypal figures of jousting knights and fair maidens may well be put to use to create a recognizable though othered medieval past, such knights and maidens simultaneously serve as models of behavior for modern-day audiences engaged in complex identifications with who, or what, is projected on the screen. If, as we are arguing, history moves in two directions, so too does the experience of viewing and consuming a film. Janet Staiger identifies spectatorship as a perverse dynamic between viewer and viewed, in which “each act of deviant (*and normative*) viewing requires historical and political analysis to locate its effects and ‘judge’ its politics.”<sup>10</sup> “Medieval” sexualities on screen represent a modern revisioning of the past, yet the past nonetheless provides a historical model for its own depiction, and viewers likewise participate in the construction of meaning as an oscillating effect between past and present. Hence the impossibility of heterosexuality, or of any sexuality, predicated upon cinematic medievalism: identity as constructed through the past cannot escape the charge of presentism, and thus queerness serves as a defining metaphor for studying both sexuality and historical films. The medievalism of modern movies presents a vision of reality, all the while not being what it ostensibly *is*.

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9 For the literary history and invention of courtly love, see David Hult, “Gaston Paris and the Invention of Courtly Love,” *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper*, eds. Howard Bloch and Stephen Nichols (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), pp. 192-224.

10 Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators* (New York: New York UP, 2000), p. 32; her italics.

Consider, for example, the website [www.kiltmen.com](http://www.kiltmen.com), where one may read a manifesto against “trouser tyranny”—that is, against the Western cultural imperative that men wear trousers. Historically, men from around the world have worn more anatomically appropriate clothing than trousers, such as robes, caftans, tunics—and, of course, kilts. Some men who prefer kilts call themselves “Bravehearts,” and these Bravehearts deny that wearing kilts represents any interest in crossdressing. Instead, they argue that, since so many women (in the West) now wear trousers, “if a man wishes to distinguish his masculinity through clothing, he would do much better by strapping on a real Scottish kilt.”<sup>11</sup> Mel Gibson’s *Braveheart* (1995) provides the eponymous and cinematically “authentic” inspiration for modern kilt-wearing identity, despite the fact that no Scot wore a belted plaid or anything kilt-like in the late thirteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Costume is only one of many historical inaccuracies in this cinematic phantasy about William Wallace, as reviewers and critics have noted since the film’s release. Still, bad cinematic history has its uses, not only for Bravehearts, but also for the many medievalists, fans, and armchair critics who investigate movie medievalisms to explore representations of the past and their cultural function in the present. By embracing an anachronistic and cinematic reconstruction of the past, Bravehearts mediate their masculinities through a queering historical process in which the performance of masculinity is made possible by the movies, yet is undone by history. In this move, they unite themselves more closely with the fans of Disney’s princesses (with their phantasies of heterosexuality) than with medieval men (and a version of masculinity that these men never lived).

Thus it would be useful to return to *Braveheart* to read the costumes, not in terms of their historical egregiousness, but in terms of how masculinity is made manifest. Indeed, masculinity splits along English/Scottish lines in the film: the English (and the French Queen) wear bright silks, elaborate chain mail, and careful coifs; the Scots, hair braided or wild, wear rough homespun, leather, and kilts. The English are well-groomed and orderly soldiers; the Scots are mud-stained and ragged guerrillas. And therein lies another queer tale, only to be suggested here: is the English claim to Scotland illegitimate because the English aristocracy minces in such effeminate trappings? After all, the film ends as King Edward II, who was reputedly homosexual and possibly executed with an iron rod inserted into his anus, ascends to the throne.<sup>13</sup> Is Scotland’s

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11 See [www.kiltmen.com](http://www.kiltmen.com), last accessed on 10/08/2008.

12 See Colin McArthur, “*Braveheart* and the Scottish Aesthetic Dementia,” *Screening the Past*, ed. Tony Barta (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 167-87, who points out that both the English and Scots were “of Anglo-Norman origin, had attained broadly the level of material development, [and] inhabited the same European code of chivalry” (p. 168).

13 For Edward II’s possible homosexuality and his relationship with Piers Gaveston, see Roy Martin Haines, *King Edward II* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2003), pp. 42-

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claim to freedom also a claim to a nationalized masculinity, as signified by the overdetermined and anachronistic kilt?

In *Queer Movie Medievalisms*, we turn to films set in the Middle Ages not only to explore the uses of the medieval past to investigate, represent, or even challenge modern concerns, but also to foreground the queer tales that so often underwrite the projections of modern desires regarding gender and sexuality onto the medieval past. In 1992, film critic B. Ruby Rich published a meditation on the “New Queer Cinema”—that is, what she saw as an innovative trend to interrogate heteronormative representations on the screen and to address the tensions between cinematic representation and cultural ideology.<sup>14</sup> Since Rich, film critics speak simply of “Queer Cinema”: it has (already) arrived. Thus we think it is time to turn a critical eye to movie medievalisms and the ways in which they complicate notions of cinematic queerness. “Medieval” films receive a good deal of scholarly attention these days,<sup>15</sup> yet the relationships between the medieval material and the director, as well as between the material and the audience, need continually deeper exploration. What has gotten in the way of doing so, of taking movie medievalism on its own terms, is the desire, even obsession, to expose the many anachronisms and inaccuracies that often characterize films about the Middle Ages. But let the artistic voices speak for themselves on this issue. For example, Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* may be seen as the novelistic precursor of much movie medievalism in its deployment of the oft-repeated trope of time travel to the Middle Ages, but Twain cared little about historical accuracy, as he announced in his Preface:

The ungentle laws and customs touched upon in this tale are historical, and the episodes which are used to illustrate them are also historical. It is not pretended that these laws and customs existed in England in the sixth century; no, it is only pretended that inasmuch as they existed in the English and other civilizations of

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43; see also John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980), pp. 298-300, for a discussion of Edward’s purported anal execution.

14 B. Ruby Rich, “The New Queer Cinema,” pp. 53-59.

15 Recent studies of “medieval” films include Lynn Ramey and Tison Pugh, eds., *Race, Class, and Gender in “Medieval” Cinema* (New York: Palgrave, 2007); Susan Aronstein, *Hollywood Knights: Arthurian Cinema and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Palgrave, 2005); Martha Driver and Sid Ray, eds., *The Medieval Hero on Screen* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004); John Aberth, *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Kevin Harty, ed., *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays*, rev. ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002) and *King Arthur on Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999). See also the special issue of *Exemplaria*, “Movie Medievalism,” 19.2 (2007).

far later times, it is safe to consider that it is no libel upon the sixth century to suppose them to have been in practice in that day also.<sup>16</sup>

It appears that Twain excused himself from much library research during his creation of *Connecticut Yankee*; he cites the historicity of his fictions only to dismiss the necessity of historical accuracy to engage in his social critique of nineteenth-century America through the lens of the medieval past. In the cinematic milieu, a similar sentiment is expressed in “Life Could Not Better Be,” the jaunty opening song of Danny Kaye’s comedy *The Court Jester* (1955):

We did research,  
Authenticity was a must.  
Zooks! Did we search!  
And what did we find? (Achoo!)  
A lot of dust!<sup>17</sup>

With its humorous and dismissive sneeze, this tune highlights the spirit in which many films revisit the Middle Ages: the cinematic experience, above virtually all other considerations, should be fun, and if history becomes too taxing in the re-creation of the medieval past, the artists can return to the pleasure of the narrative at hand, leaving those musty tomes in the archive far behind.

The contributors to this volume take as a starting point that most of the artistic forces behind the medieval film genre, including directors, writers, stars, cinematographers, and set and costume designers, are not as concerned with constructing a historically accurate past as much as they are attempting to make an artistic piece of entertainment (within the financial restraints of the profit-driven economy of most cinemas). For scholars to focus attention solely on anachronism is thus to miss the ways in which medieval films create a fictional world largely independent of a verifiable historical past. We are thus free to consider seriously the popularity of medieval film, and to study how the legendary and mythic aura of the Middle Ages serves the interests of modern artists and viewers, and in ways often detached from anything

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16 Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, The Oxford Mark Twain, series editor Shelley Fisher Fishkin (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), p. xv.

17 *The Court Jester*, dir. Melvin Frank and Norman Panama, perf. Danny Kaye and Glynis Johns, 1955. For another Hollywood version of “research,” see Kathleen Coyne Kelly, who, in her study of the marketing for *The Knights of the Round Table* (Richard Thorpe, 1953), quotes the souvenir booklet: “A staff of research experts . . . started the most intensive search yet made of the habits and customs of sixth century Britain.” History, as she says, is fungible, whether real or invented (“Hollywood Simulacrum: *The Knights of the Round Table* [1953],” *Exemplaria* 19 [2007]: 270-89).

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medievalists would recognize as their area of study. Although films reflect the artistic decisions of their creators, they also participate in dominant ideological structures that further imbue such structures with meaning. Ideology does not depend upon historical accuracy to inculcate its values successfully, and, in this manner, modern ideologies can be encoded through medievalism, as they can also be resisted through medievalism.<sup>18</sup> It should be further noted that “medieval” does not mean the same thing to a French or an American director, say, or to an actor/actress working in the 1930s, the 1960s, or now. The Western European Middle Ages was not a monologic entity (as much as the phrase suggests otherwise), and its histories, modern appropriations of, and influences are indeed various yet culturally specific.

It also bears mentioning that our sense of queer cinema differs markedly from traditional uses of the term in film studies. Quite simply, most analysis of queer cinema focuses on films depicting homosexuals and homosexual relationships, and numerous excellent studies elucidate Hollywood’s history in this regard. In *The Celluloid Closet* Vito Russo pioneered the study of cinematic representations of homosexuals, and now numerous scholars examine film’s portrayal of homosexuality, often in terms of varying tactics among national cinemas.<sup>19</sup> Our approach, however, takes queer cinema as a tactic of interpretation rather than primarily as a subject matter for portrayal. What is queer about movie medievalisms is markedly different from the queerness of, say, *Making Love* (1982), *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995), *The Birdcage* (1996), *Beautiful Thing* (1996), or *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), in that these representative films focus on gay love and relationships, whereas the queer movies under examination in this collection appear to focus on heterosexuality in the Middle Ages only to show the historical and representational implausibility of transhistorical sexuality.

Thus, we focus, as our pluralized title suggests, on representations of genders and sexualities in films with medieval settings. We are interested in exploring why the Middle Ages proves to be such a fruitful period for filmmakers interested in critiquing gender roles and/or in offering alternative sexualities. The chapters in

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18 For a theoretical basis of ideology, we rely on Louis Althusser, who suggests that “ideology has no history, which emphatically does not mean that there is no history in it (on the contrary, for it is merely the pale, empty and inverted reflection of real history) but that it has no history of its own” (*On Ideology* [1971; London: Verso, 2008], p. 34).

19 Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (Harper & Row, 1987). For examples of queer studies of national cinemas, see Alica Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000); Robin Griffiths, ed., *British Queer Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2006); Raz Yosef, *Beyond Flesh: Queer Masculinities and Nationalism in Israelia Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2004); and David Foster, *Queer Issues in Contemporary Latin American Cinema* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2003).

this collection begin with the premise that modern preoccupations with gender and sexuality are often inserted, intentionally or not, into a setting that would normally be considered incompatible with modern ideologies concerning these concepts. The Middle Ages provides an imaginary space far enough removed from the present day to allow for critical analysis of contemporary gender and sexuality. The result, as we hope to show, is a queered vision of medieval and modern sexualities, for both dialectically underscore the impossibility of maintaining the illusion of a normative (hetero)sexuality. Indeed, as we have noted, recent critical work on the Middle Ages argues it is misleading to assume that heterosexuality is the default position when studying medieval sexuality. From this perspective, the possibility of medieval normative heterosexuality—whether as reflective of reality in the Middle Ages or as an interpretive tool today—appears ever more chimerical.

Two terms should be introduced at this point, not necessarily to define them, but to note the difficulties attached to each, and to keep in mind that such difficulties have their uses. These are not terms that are usually discussed together, but both are essential to our project in this collection: namely, *camp* and *medievalism*—or, better, *camps* and, as we have been saying, *medievalisms*. The queer may be campy, and the campy may be queer, but they are not always and everywhere synonymous terms. At the most general level, *camp* might be described as a subversively humorous intervention in the union of form and content. However, where to locate that intervention proves problematic: is camp lodged in a given performance or artifact, or is it found in the sensibility of readers, viewers, and consumers? To what degree are disjunctions between form and content historically specific? What sort of aesthetic sensibility produces and perceives camp, and to what degree does this sensibility exist along a trajectory that includes the stuff of high culture and the schlock of low culture? Moreover, to what degree is camp the result of, or the province of, an exclusively gay aesthetic? Consider the “knowing wink” in cinematic medievalisms that might inform the audience that the performers intend to deflate their performances of any hint of gravitas, and which might just signal the queer. Locating that wink—whether it is found in the artist, the art, the viewer, or their complex interaction—proves to be the elusive yet distinctive feature of camp(s). Defining camp, then, faces similar critical cruxes notable in defining humor and pornography: when dissecting humor, one faces the likely possibility of bleeding the comic from it, and when parsing pornography, one is faced with a critical category so nebulous that U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s famous nondefinition—“I know it when I see it”—best sums it up by refusing to taxonomize it at all. Despite Susan Sontag’s landmark analysis of camp in which she pinpoints no less than fifty-eight articles lining

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its parameters, the protean humor of camp resists and undermines efforts to pin it down and name it.<sup>20</sup>

Andrew Ross succinctly describes camp as the “mimicry of existing cultural forms.”<sup>21</sup> In this view, camp is a symbiotic effect that needs a foundation upon which to build its subversive meaning. Fabio Cleto, also understanding camp as derivative, declares: “Representational excess, heterogeneity, and *gratuitousness* of reference . . . both signal and contribute to an overall resistance to [a] definition” of camp.<sup>22</sup> In its dependence upon reference points in history and culture, camp sometimes faces the possibility of its own belatedness, and, in some cases, of becoming entirely static, as Quentin Crisp humorously observed of some drag queens:

The strange thing about “camp” is that it has become fossilized. The mannerisms have never changed. If I were to see a woman sitting with her knees clamped together, one hand on her hip and the other lightly touching her back hair, I should think, “Either she scored her last social triumph in 1926 or it is a man in drag.”<sup>23</sup>

Camp in this respect always needs the past; it is an aesthetic and artistic response, however sly and knowing, to what comes before. And thus campiness—which often defines visions of the Middle Ages through excess citationality overdetermined with meanings—pervades much movie medievalism.

But Moe Meyer argues that such descriptions of camp wrongly conflate camp and pop, thus evacuating camp of its political power to signify the queer. In fact Meyer argues against a plurality of camp altogether:

[T]here are not different kinds of camp. There is only one. And it is queer. It can be engaged directly by the queer to produce social visibility in the praxis of everyday life, or it can be manifested as the camp trace by the un-queer in order . . . to provide queer access to the apparatus of representation.<sup>24</sup>

Meyer’s understanding of camp makes “camp” and “queer” synonymous, if we understand queerness as a destabilizing feature of dominant discourses of power. Here camp participates in the representation of queerness as its defining

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20 Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *Camp*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1999), 53-65.

21 Andrew Ross, “Uses of Camp,” *Camp*, 308-29, at p. 325.

22 Fabio Cleto, “Introduction: Queering the Camp,” *Camp*, 1-42, at p. 3.

23 Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968; New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 21.

24 Moe Meyer, “Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp,” *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), 1-22, at p. 5.

feature. Queerness and camp, in this formulation, are always already *here*. Since ideology can never fully shield itself from its own contradictions, queerness works from the inside to achieve its contradictory effects of reproduction and resistance. In this volume, we make room for both camps and recognize that they may well manifest themselves simultaneously, and that movie medievalisms, in their hyperbolic historical play, provide fruitful settings for camp to flourish.

Understanding camp as effects, or even celebrations, of tensions between high and low culture (differences that are contingent, not fixed), and understanding camp as contested critical ground, also helps us to understand some of the critical difficulties attendant upon defining medievalism. Umberto Eco juxtaposes icons from high and low culture (Jacques Le Goff and Darth Vader, Rabelais and Monty Python, manuscripts and comic books), and thus dramatizes the differences between a medievalism that is taken as a serious, scholarly subject and a medievalism that manifests itself in pop culture and is a consumable product.<sup>25</sup> The medievalism located on each end of this spectrum elicits laments from the ostensibly opposed factions: stereotypically humorless professors who bemoan students with an encyclopedic knowledge of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* but with little interest in the medieval sources that underlie these narratives, or the medieval fair enthusiasts who resent interruptions into their pastime by eggheads with a good deal of knowledge yet little sense of fun. Finding common ground between these factions often proves difficult, despite that their shared appreciation of the Middle Ages should smooth over many of the disagreements arising from differences in perspective.

As we consider the problem of defining *medievalism*, we begin with a simple, although deliberately tautological, definition: it is the postmedieval representation of the medieval. Part of the tautology, of course, lies in defining "medieval" itself. As Eco famously puts it, "every time one speaks of a dream of the Middle Ages, one should first ask which Middle Ages one is dreaming of."<sup>26</sup> Medievalism as a subject has created medievalists, as it were. Every historical period subsequent to the Middle Ages reinvents the era in its own artistic media, and scholars of these periods are perpetually interested in contending with the longstanding influence of medievalisms upon more recent histories. From Shakespeare's readings of Chaucer to southern slaveholders' post-bellum turn to Anglo-Saxonism, from eighteenth-century novelists reimagining the meaning of Gothicism to twentieth-century science fiction and fantasy, the allure of the Middle Ages invites the present to consider itself through the past.<sup>27</sup>

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25 Umberto Eco, "Living in the New Middle Ages," trans. William Weaver, *Travels in Hyperreality* (1973; New York: Harcourt, 1986), pp. 73-85.

26 Umberto Eco, "Living in the New Middle Ages," p. 68.

27 The range of medievalist studies is too wide to capture in a footnote, but representative studies touching these various re-creations of the medieval past include

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Medievalism is often construed as the unwanted stepchild, as it were, of medieval studies, and we do not believe that we should suture over these difficulties. Rather, by highlighting them, we ask our readers to consider the purposes behind such roadblocks between scholarly and pop-culture constructions of the Middle Ages. For us, medievalism includes the possibility of a virtually inherent queerness, in that medievalism obliterates historical foundations of subject and object. The scholarly subject, who ostensibly leads the inquiry, is lured into a relationship with the past as object, but these foundational positions are subverted due to the dissolution of past and present through their interconnections. Likewise, the essayists in this collection explore how and why movie makers exploit the Middle Ages to tell their stories; they do not tally anachronisms but play with the queer potential of “intertemporality.” Furthermore, they are interested in how actors, screenwriters, and other creative forces behind a film play with medieval material while remaining mindful of the debates about cinematic historical accuracy. That is to say, these artists depend on historical reality in strikingly different ways, and the multiplicity of medievalisms at play in cinema offers a vantage point into how and why present artists turn to the past. For example, Susan Hayward, Lisa Manter, and Lorraine Stock discuss films set in the Middle Ages in the context of a director’s oeuvre. Tison Pugh, Kathleen Kelly, and Martha Bayless address the Hollywood star system and how star personalities are mediated through medievalism. Most essayists take note of the initial reception of a given film, and explore the trajectory of a film’s cultural status, which indeed returns us to history—not of the Middle Ages, but of the times and places that produced the film(s) under examination. Both histories—the past and the present—mingle in a given movie, and thus queerly dissolve the gendered fiction of past and present as separate.

Intertemporality, the fusion or combination of *then* and *now*, nicely complicates current theories of the gaze: the medieval scene into which a viewer inserts her/himself, either as seeing or been seen, being or having, is doubly phantasmatic, in that the medieval scene never existed *then* and does not exist *now*—whether filmed on site (always already not there) or on a set (a simulacrum). There is no “medieval” body, but only an actor whose body is an overdetermined signifier. Gendered identifications—plural, for the gaze is not the absolute Mulveyian male (white) heterosexual gaze, but is various and diverse, and even multiple within any given spectator—thus must traverse time as well as the terrain of

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Talbot Donaldson, *The Swan at the Well: Shakespeare Reading Chaucer* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985); Bernard Rosenthal and Paul Szarmach, eds., *Medievalism in American Culture* (Binghamton, NY: MRTS, 1989); Allen Frantzen and John Niles, eds., *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1997); Chris Brooks, *The Gothic Revival* (London: Phaidon, 1999); and Angela Jane Weisl, *The Persistence of Medievalism* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

cinematic convention and codes that allow for, even propel, queer viewing.<sup>28</sup> We know an effeminate courtier or prince in hose and hyperbolic hat when we see one; we recognize the virginal heroine by her jeweled cross and modest dress—which shall we be, and which shall we have? Is our gazing desire to be or to have William Wallace or Mel Gibson? Morgan le Fay or Myrna Loy? This *frisson* of pleasure is thus many-layered, and located, perhaps, in a perverse experience of the anachronistic body—incongruous, impossible, *then* and *now* and *never* but mediated through a gaze that likewise shifts through time and body. Our cover image captures this shift: modernity confronts the queered medieval in the 1931 *A Connecticut Yankee* as Hank Martin/Will Rogers, dressed in a contemporary white shirt and black overcoat, looks awry at Amyas le Poulet/Frank Albertson in his pageboy, tunic and hose. Under interrogation is gender, for Martin is uncertain how to read Amyas' body—but also under interrogation is the gaze itself, for who is looking at whom—actor or character? Can we intervene and triangulate this gaze? Must we, do we, choose—or be chosen—to identify with the modern gaze that questions, or the medieval/ized recipient of that gaze *who looks back* without a qualm?

Our volume begins with a series of chapters that interrogates the meaning and function of male relationships, in that the propagation of the family ostensibly depends upon heterosexuality in reproduction, yet families are often inflected with queerness despite any struggle to define the nuclear unit as normative. In “The Law of the Daughter: Queer Family Politics in Bertrand Tavernier’s *La Passion Béatrice*,” Lisa Manter looks at the ways in which the family is queerly reimagined in terms of paternal and maternal alignments. Tavernier’s retelling of the Cenci family tragedy upends expectations of familial normativity by queerly reconfiguring the meaning of patriarchy. In “Queering the Lionheart: Richard I in *The Lion in Winter* on Stage and Screen,” Barton Palmer explores the ways in which familial and patriarchal masculinity defines the film’s narrative tension: which of Henry II’s sons is man enough to be his heir? Questions of masculinity are inflected through suspicions concerning (homo)sexuality, and thus the film reveals the ways in which masculinity and sexuality are staged as competitive factors in a successory struggle. Lorraine Stock, in her “‘He’s not an ardent suitor, is he, brother?’: Richard the Lionheart’s Ambiguous Sexuality in Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Crusades*,” likewise turns a critical

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28 Laura Mulvey’s essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (*Screen* 16.3 [1975]: 6-18) changed film theory profoundly, even when (if not *especially* when) other critics disagree with her. For examples of work that has opened up the theory of the gaze in productive ways, see Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Clark, eds., *Screening the Male* (Routledge: London and New York, 1993), Richard Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film* (1977; New York: Zoetrope, 1984), and Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classic Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999).

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eye to the legend of Richard the Lionhearted, examining the ways in which DeMille's depiction of the famed king in *The Crusades* tackles historiographical questions concerning Richard's sexuality in regard to his hesitancy surrounding heterosexual union in marriage. In her reading of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, "In the Company of Orcs': Peter Jackson's Queer Tolkien," Jane Chance moves our collection from the domestic sphere of the family to the homosocial milieu of hobbits, demonstrating that masculinities are performed with various inflections of male homosociality, and that these performances reflect a queer tension in which masculinity must be assessed through attempts to control the feminine. Chance's reading of *Lord of the Rings* depends upon issues of cinematic intertextuality, most notably the film's engagement with contemporary cinema in its construction of homosocial/erotic masculinity.

Campy queerness underscores the tension between the historical past and its current re-creations, and the following chapters explore the potential of camp to subvert the gendered fictions of medieval films. Few fans would link archetypal western hero John Wayne with queerness, yet Anna Klosowska, in "The Eastern Western: Camp as a Response to Cultural Failure in *The Conqueror*," explores how this campy epic queerly erases cultural boundaries between East and West by casting Wayne as Genghis Khan. By so doing, the film obscures the cultural differences that must be in place to make the narrative intelligible. Extending the analysis of camp in this volume, Susan Aronstein, in "In my own idiom': Social Critique, Campy Gender, and Queer Performance in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*," explores the performance of homosocial and fraternal bonds. The Monty Python troupe is famous for its cross-dressing antics (campy, according to some definitions), but Aronstein argues that this parodic impulse cannot contain the queer potential unleashed in the deliberate, winking, performance of gender. Susan Hayward analyzes the queerness inherent in the Joan of Arc legend with her "Performance, Camp, and Queering History in Luc Besson's *Jeanne d'Arc*." Joan's crossdressing ostensibly casts her as a queer figure, yet Hayward articulates the ways in which queerness is thrust upon Joan—both historically and cinematically—in ways antithetical to her own desires; furthermore, in her attention to Milla Jovovich's performance as Joan, Hayward explores how film stars engage with the medieval past to address modern concerns over gender through the performativity of celebrity.

Celebrity culture is inextricably tied to movie performances and star personae, and Tison Pugh, Kathleen Kelly, and Martha Bayless examine this phenomenon in their respective chapters. In "Sean Connery's Star Persona and the Queer Middle Ages," Pugh interrogates the ways in which Connery's masculinity, defined iconically as super-spy James Bond, is reimagined and queered through "medieval" films that posit other paradigms of masculinity for an aging action hero. In "Will Rogers' Pink Spot: *A Connecticut Yankee*," Kelly investigates postures of celebrity and heterosexuality, reading Rogers' iconic cowboy figure

as one who fears heterosexual consummation and thus queers his own image for comic effect. Bayless questions the myth of Danny Kaye's homosexuality in relation to his comic performances in the "medieval" past. Her essay, "Danny Kaye and the 'Fairy Tale' of Queerness in *The Court Jester*," traces the tension between cultural expectations of modern male normativity against the medieval antics of un-masculinity in the film. Kaye's film roles queered him in real life, as the contaminative force of his characters left him a sexually suspect subject despite great evidence of his heterosexuality. Surely this is perhaps the queerest of movie medievalisms, as it creates a "real world" homosexual out of movie fantasies.

The final chapters of *Queer Movie Medievalisms* consider queerness as a constitutive method of interrogating cinema itself. In "Mourning and Sexual Difference in Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Parsifal*," Michelle Bolduc examines the multiplicity of gender depicted in the film to consider the melancholic register of movie medievalism and its role in cultural mourning. In his "Superficial Medievalism and the Queer Futures of Film," Cary Howie interrogates the meaning of the past and how the future is mediated through a melancholic view of medievalism. History cannot help but be lost, but melancholia imbues it with a hazy and queerly informative perspective on the present. In their Afterword, Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger offer their views on how the queerness of movie medievalisms kaleidoscopically refracts startling visions of historical and anti-historical sexualities.

In sum, the contributors to this volume articulate a belief in the "double queerness" of medieval film in both its deployment of time and its constructions of sexuality and gender. Understanding the past is ultimately a queering process that undermines coherent conceptions of the self in the present, and the process of defining the self in relation to history is richly tied to the construction of gender and sexuality, as so clearly illustrated by the *Bravehearts* and any number of people who re-create the past (such as the members of the Society for Creative Anachronism and gamers) while re-imagining their genders and sexual identities in the present day. This queer tension between past and present, between genders and sexualities of yesterday and of today—between, even, medieval studies and medievalism as a process, mode, or subject of study—is fundamentally illustrated in virtually every film that addresses the medieval past, and this volume articulates this diachronic queer tension between past and present as mediated by the movies.

For certainly (queer) tensions still exist even as western society makes great strides in dismantling the ideological structures of homophobia. Frequently such tensions surface in silences—the job letter unanswered, the promotion ungranted, the invitation unextended—and indeed, we encountered such queer silences when requesting permission to use film stills for many of the chapters in this contribution to queer studies. We recognize that film stills add a necessary

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component to the scholarly interpretation of cinema, and we apologize to our readers for their relative dearth in this volume. But many of these requests went unanswered, and thus these silences trouble us as to the meaning accorded queer studies within the culture at large. We cannot know who—whether singularly or collectively—made the decisions to ignore our requests, but we offer these chapters despite the silence that was the film studios' response to our invitation to partake in this project. The work of queer scholarship continues apace, with no apologies, but with some appeal to the imagination and the memory.