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Clothed in History: Costume and Medievalism in Fantasy Film and Television

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Art History

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Abstract

This thesis examines representations of the medieval in popular fantasy film and television. Emphasizing costume design, this paper explores themes of identity, nation, past and present. Analysis is organized through three case studies, Andrew Adamson's *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) and David Benioff and D.B. Weiss' *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). Each work demonstrates different strategies for constructing the past and referencing history to authenticate fantastic worldbuilding. They exist within broader traditions of medievalism and exploring present concerns through the veil of the past. Despite overt anachronism and invention, their foregrounding of historically-based aesthetics contributes to popular imaginings of the past and constitutes a type of historical engagement. This thesis explores the implications of this style of historical representation as it relates to constructions of personal, cultural and national identities.

Keywords

Costume, Medieval Film, Television, Medievalism, Identity, Medieval Britain, Fashion History, Visual Culture, Popular Imagination, Fantasy

Summary for Lay Audience

This thesis examines the relationship between fantasy and history as it pertains to the use of medieval aesthetics in popular fantasy film and television. Discussion is organized around three case studies, Andrew Adamson's *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) and David Benioff and D.B. Weiss' *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). Each chapter begins with an analysis of the role history plays in the construction of the fantasy world and how the fantastic past is located in relation to the present. This is followed by an in-depth examination of the costumes and their function within the context of the film as well as how they relate to the world of the viewer. This process reveals the ways in which ideas of history and nation are visually constructed onscreen. Costume plays an essential role in these constructions because clothing is intrinsically linked to time, place, culture and identity.

Although the case studies share many similar generic conventions (focus on political turmoil, set in a pseudo-medieval Britain, etc.), each demonstrates different approaches toward historical representation. Despite their imaginative historical settings, each case study exists as a modern cultural work that uses the past as a site to explore ideas and anxieties of the present. Therefore, part of the value of these works is their ability to convey information about the audiences for which they were made and the social climate of the 2000s.

The popularity and financial success of all three productions demonstrates the effectiveness of this type of storytelling and audiences' willingness to engage with these narratives. However, alterations from source material and controversies surrounding production (in particular the reception of *Game of Thrones*) highlight a need to update generic conventions to suit changing social norms. Visual culture plays a significant role in determining popular ideas about the past as well as informing present-day notions of individual, cultural and national identities. These products do not exist in isolation but work within broader traditions of storytelling and historical engagement that shape and reaffirm audiences' worldview.

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Introduction: Designing the Imagined Past

All representations of history on film navigate a tension between historical truth and modern invention. Scholarly debates surrounding the merits of representing history on film have been particularly active since the latter part of the 20th century and into the 21st.¹ However, official concerns and attempts to censor how and what type of history can be presented on film were prevalent in the decades prior.² These debates speak to the value we place on authenticity, an assumption that some sort of singular, “real” historical truth exists. They also speak to film’s power to influence popular imaginings of the past. Filmic history or, to borrow Hayden White’s term, historiophoty, is often charged with accusations of inaccuracy or anachronism if it strays too far from written history (historiography) which stands as the institutionally-sanctioned measure of historical truth.³ However, for the majority of the population, visual media is now their primary source of historical knowledge.⁴ Considering the essential role history plays in the formation of national, cultural and individual identity, historical representation on film carries significant weight in informing or even defining these identities. Yet historical accuracy in itself can be a fraught idea. Andrew Elliott meticulously outlined how many of the charges against historiophoty as an inaccurate conveyor of the past can be equally applied to written History as both mediums employ necessary invention.⁵ Furthermore, many films employ historical aesthetics but are not intended to be an educational resource.

Outside the bounds of “serious” history films, most commonly biopics and war movies, we find films that play with the past, mixing periods and aesthetics in order to strategically lean

¹ *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (Dec., 1998) is often credited as a watershed publication that included several influential texts about the academic considerations of presenting history on film.

² Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Drama* (London: BFI Publishing, 1994), 3.

³ Hayden White, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (Dec., 1988): 1193.

⁴ Rosenstone, “History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film,” *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (Dec., 1988): 1174.

⁵ Andrew Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages: The Methods of Cinema and History in Portraying the Medieval World* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2011), 29.

into anachronism or even undisguised invention. Fantasy film constantly plays with a balance between the real and the imagined. At times, the demands of the narrative might favour one of these elements more overtly or even to the detriment of the other but ultimately, all fantasy contains both. According to generic convention, medieval Britain is often employed as the backdrop, the grounding realism, for mythical creatures and supernatural characters. This tactic imbues the imaginative with an historically-derived authenticity as audiences are immersed in a fictional world with the trappings of an apparent historical reality. The most successful stories weave elements of the familiar (which translates into realism) with the imaginative without glaring juxtaposition between fact and fiction. Because the goal is to create a product with mass appeal suitable for optimal public consumption, entertainment is privileged over education. This creates the paradoxical result that fantasy exists as a site of historical engagement without the pretense of actually communicating any real history.

This thesis examines the relationship between fantasy and history as it relates to onscreen narrative, worldbuilding and costume. Analysis of the use of history and function of costume is directed through three case studies: Andrew Adamson's *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), and David Benioff and D.B. Weiss' *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). Each case study develops a fantasy world situated in a pseudo-medieval Britain. Each is an adaptation of a generically-significant literary work; however, they also exist as individual products that are accessible to viewers who have not read the source material. They demonstrate three distinct strategies for engaging with the past as either a parallel universe, a means of myth-making or a world superficially distinct from our own. In all cases, costume is heavily relied upon to perform a primary authenticating function. Costume is essential to communicating the historicity of the world as well as its departure from traditional history, making it a site of temporal interplay reflective of the broader workings of the genre.

The division between historians who study History from primary source material and the public who learn through popular culture makes it tempting to hierarchize these differing approaches, downplaying the significance of un-academic renderings of the past. However, Marcus Bull reminds us that these two approaches do not exist in isolation from one another and

that popular culture can allow for productive engagement with the past.⁶ By rejecting what has become known as the fidelity model of criticism, we can examine these films as cultural artefacts that teach about the present through the lens of the past.⁷ Marc Ferro understands historical fiction as “a kind of document chronicling the way that man [sic] understands his own history.”⁸ Therefore the goal of this study is not to cast value judgements based on a film’s ability to translate written history but to understand what it means to borrow and recontextualize historical elements, repackaging them for (very lucrative) entertainment. Why were these creative decisions made? How do they function? What do they say about the filmmakers and consumers who willingly engage with this type of fiction?

It may, at first, seem strange to affiliate history with fantasy, a genre whose identity, whose very name, is defined by its unreality. The fantastic is specifically constructed to exist outside the realm of real possibility. Yet it is not despite the overt fiction but *because* of it that fantasy must strategically employ the markers of a recognizable reality to ground the unbelievable. Alec Worley asks, “how else can one define what doesn’t exist except by what does?”⁹ A relational definition emerges where fantasy is “not reality” and reality is identified as whatever is not fantasy. This dynamic is echoed in constructions of past and present which are also defined in relation to each other. Janice North et al. take Ferro’s notion one step further and argue that historical fiction is not only a chronicle of how we understand history but also how we understand the present.¹⁰ Fantasy film explores the delineations between fantasy and reality as well as past and present, understandings that are critical to the formation of identity and our ability to locate ourselves in space and time.

⁶ Marcus Bull, *Thinking Medieval: An Introduction to the Study of the Middle Ages* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 8.

⁷ Richard Burt, “Getting Schmedieval: Of Manuscript and Film Prologues, Paratexts, and Parodies,” *Exemplaria*, vol. 19, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 217.

⁸ Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages*, 11. See also Marc Ferro *Cinema and History*, trans. Naomi Greene (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988).

⁹ Alec Worley, *Empires of the Imagination: a critical survey of fantasy cinema from George Méliès to The Lord of the Rings* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), 4.

¹⁰ Janice North, Alvestad Karl and Elena Woodacre, eds., *Premodern Rulers and Postmodern Viewers: Gender, Sex and Power in Popular Culture* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2018), 7.

Clothing constantly evokes ideas of the past through fashion cycles that resurrect old styles, cultural dress deeply rooted in tradition, inheritance or intergenerational gift-giving. Pastness is evoked through broad social systems as well as on the individual level. Jenss and Hofmann call fashion and clothing “forceful agents in the articulation of historical ideas or social concepts.”¹¹ An analysis of how history is constructed in film requires an examination of costume. Its medium is not only intrinsically linked to the past, but it is also one of the primary visual cues to help the audience locate the time of the narrative. The core themes of the case studies—identity, history, past and present, culture and nationhood—all converge in clothing. Although each case study borrows aesthetics from the same general time and place, they demonstrate diverse approaches to costuming that are tailored to the individual goals of each narrative.

If clothing in the real world speaks to a society’s cultures, values, beliefs, politics and economics, in order to achieve verisimilitude, costume in fantasy film must function similarly and speak to these elements as they are established in the fictive world. Clothing exists as proof of these systems at work. Costume is therefore not just an interpretation of historical dress, but an interpretation of how governing social structures manifest themselves on the level of the individual. This, in turn, influences broader group dynamics. Fantasy costume is a site of necessary temporal play as it must navigate three worlds: the historical period that serves as its inspiration, the fantastic world in which it exists, and the present world of the audience. Costume functions as a means of establishing temporal distance grounded in history (or, at least, the trappings of familiar cinematic portrayals of history), communicating the alienness of the imagined world as well as responding to present-day understandings of clothing and filmic shorthand. The costume designer must act as both historian and inventor in order to achieve the most effective balance of these elements.

Costume design in cinema has been paid minimal scholarly attention and marginalized to the point that Pam Cook describes it as a “symptom.”¹² Yet she also highlights that costume “is one of the few areas in film-making where women have consistently been able to make their

¹¹ Heike Jenss and Viola Hofmann, eds., *Fashion and Materiality: Cultural Practices in Global Contexts* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 7.

¹² Pam Cook, *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 1996), 41.

mark.”¹³ One of the goals of this thesis is to recognize the valuable perspectives and ideas that costume designers—who for every case study happen to be female—contribute to what is not only a male-dominated industry but also a traditionally masculinist genre. Because of their reliance on costume and *mise-en-scène*, medieval fantasy film can be understood as a type of male-centric costume drama. The implications of this contribute to a growing awareness and destabilization of the gendered value judgements placed on certain film categories that mark “feminine” genres such as the costume drama as “frivolous” or “light” while medieval fantasies are “epic” and “quality.” Costume does not suddenly become a worthy object of serious study because of its affiliation with “serious” cinema.¹⁴ However, it exists as a space for women to meaningfully contribute to these types of films and, in some cases, a means of communicating the depth or nuance of a female character that is not otherwise conveyed through dialogue or cinematographic framing.

The films are analyzed through an interdisciplinary approach that accounts for filmic and generic convention as well as fashion theory. Cinematically, the case studies span a number of film categories including history, medieval, costume drama and heritage films. Elements from these preestablished categories come together in fantasy to create a cohesive, multi-layered narrative experience. Analysis of costume will consider both sociological (fashion as a system or aesthetic influenced by social change) and anthropological (clothing imbued with cultural meaning and symbolic communication) perspectives. It intersects with popular ideas from material culture studies concerning how meaning and culture can be conveyed through objects and an object’s role in constructions of identity.¹⁵ The approach to “reading” costume is informed by Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralist model or “system of signs” that considers the relationship between signifier and signified within the structure of a culture.¹⁶ Following Dick

¹³ Cook, *Fashioning the Nation*, 44.

¹⁴ Julianne Pidduck, Belen Vidal and Pam Cook have provided meaningful, in-depth analyses of the importance of costume dramas.

¹⁵ See Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 2007) for an overview of these topics as they relate to material culture studies.

¹⁶ Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory 2nd ed.* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 67. Entwistle also provides a clear summary of Roland Barthes extension and application of Saussure’s semiotic theories to fashion texts.

Hebdige's example, the object of the costume will be textualized in order to read its design semiotically.¹⁷ This type of object close-reading connects to art history or visual culture studies where the art object (in this case both the film as a whole as well as the costumes within it) exists as a tangible symbol of the character or essence of an era.¹⁸

However, recognizing the limitations of approaching costume as art object, clothing will also be viewed in relation to the agency of the wearer (in this case the character) and how it moves and functions within the space of the film.¹⁹ One of the benefits of analyzing costume in film as opposed to historical fashion objects is the ability to observe how the clothing is styled, its intended physical condition and how it moves within specifically designed spatial and temporal contexts. I will also consider its social context, locating costume within systems of production, gender, class, race and culture both within the imagined context of the fantasy world and the real world of the viewers for which its symbolic meanings are designed.

Costume's representation in film does not make it immaterial but a specific form of materialization.²⁰ Acknowledging what Lou Taylor identified as the "Great Divide" existing in fashion scholarship between fashion as a social and economic concept and fashion as an object, this thesis endeavours to discuss both sides.²¹ Therefore, the information used to inform arguments and conclusions is gathered from costume as it is presented in film as an active, moving, lived-in element as well as its status as art object in coffee-table style books, museum installations or behind-the-scenes creation process videos.

The case studies are presented in order of increasing complexity in the way that costume is employed. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* primarily makes use of stereotypical costuming, drawing upon basic, populist views of medieval dress to differentiate fantasy from reality. *The Fellowship of the Ring* uses dress to define several different cultures within the

¹⁷ Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, 69.

¹⁸ Jennifer Craik, *Fashion: The Key Concepts* (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 116-7.

¹⁹ Entwistle argues the relationship between dress and the body is an essential yet often neglected relationship to consider in order to fully understand fashion and dress. *The Fashioned Body*, 75-6.

²⁰ Jense and Hoffman, *Fashion and Materiality*, 2.

²¹ Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 64.

fantasy world, strategically representing different types of historical dress to influence audience identification. Meanwhile, *Game of Thrones* demonstrates fashion as a complex and dynamic system intrinsic to changeable politics and individual power. Complexity does not necessarily equate to successful costuming or render simpler costuming ineffective, it simply demonstrates a range of possible approaches and creative avenues for sartorial expression.

The case studies are also organized to tell a story of how an individual might encounter fantasy stories throughout their life as well as fantasy's development on a broader cultural level. The first case study is a tale written for children and therefore intended to be one of the earliest exposures someone might have to fantasy narrative. The second case study is a seminal work whose source material has largely defined the genre itself while its filmic adaptations set a new precedent for mainstream fantasy film (including helping to shape the consumer climate that made the other two case studies possible). Both of these stories are imbued with nostalgia—childhood or literary. The third case study is a television series recently completed at the time of this writing whose legacy, as a result, remains largely undefined. Even its source material is yet to be completed by the author. Of the three, it is the final case study that demonstrates not only how history is most currently employed for entertainment but perhaps gives an indication of where history will be heading in the future.

Chapter 1

1 Hand-Me-Down History: Sartorial Medievalism in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

Andrew Adamson's *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005) provides a child-friendly introduction to medieval-inspired fantasy fiction. It is a filmic adaptation of C.S. Lewis' 1950 children's fantasy novel of the same name and the first installment of the *Chronicles of Narnia* filmic franchise. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* tells an adventurous coming-of-age tale with strong moral themes through thinly-veiled Christian allusions. The story follows the Pevensie siblings, Peter (William Moseley), Susan (Anna Popplewell), Edmund (Skandar Keynes) and Lucy (Georgie Henley), who are evacuated from London during the Blitz and sent to live with professor Kirke (Jim Broadbent) in the English countryside. They quickly discover that an old wardrobe in the professor's house is a gateway to the magical kingdom of Narnia. Upon entering Narnia, they learn that they have instigated a prophecy that will determine the fate of the land and become instrumental figures in a battle of good versus evil.

The film's PG rating and young protagonists tailor its content to younger audiences while its widely read source material lends it a nostalgic appeal for adults. The story's longevity within popular culture, spanning more than fifty years, speaks to its continued relevance and ability to convey culturally-sanctioned messages. Storytelling holds a privileged place in society and demonstrates a human impulse to teach, learn and make sense of the world through narrative. Children's stories represent the lessons or ideas a culture believes are appropriate and necessary to teach from an early age. That the medieval is used as a temporal setting to tell this story, highlights a preoccupation with the time and its central position in tales of adventure, imagination and learning.

The stories that are retold become the stories that are remembered. J. Hillis Miller argues that we need to hear the same stories repeatedly in order to affirm the basic ideology of our own culture.²² Adamson's film is a reiteration of Lewis' tale, telling the same story through a new medium. It brings the story forward to a new generation but does so with a few notable

²² Janice North, Alvestad Karl and Elena Woodacre, eds., *Premodern Rulers and Postmodern Viewers*, 6.

adaptational changes. These changes reveal the ways in which storytelling convention and cultural truths have shifted over time. The film downplays some of the tale's heavy Christian allusions, puts greater emphasis on individual choice over notions of predestined fate and updates the female roles to align with 21st-century notions of appropriate role models for young girls.²³ By making these alterations, the storytellers are able to reuse old stories while ensuring that audiences are not alienated by outdated details. The history of the alterations made to stories that span decades or even centuries, reads as a history of social change. They document the evolving ideology of a culture through the same basic narrative framework. Instead of abandoning the narrative, it is updated; a process that continually reasserts its cultural significance, ensures its continued relevance and establishes its legacy.

1.1 Cinematic Medievalism

Narnia is designed as a distinctly medieval land. Locating the unreal within an identifiably medieval setting is a common fantasy strategy and hallmark of the genre. Alison Searle argues that the function of the medieval is to facilitate the creation of a world that is other but still “oddly familiar.”²⁴ The familiarity of the Middle Ages comes from its continued legacy. As Umberto Eco points out, many inventions or concepts from the Middle Ages have directly shaped today's society from the seemingly banal—eyeglasses and compasses—to broader, often controversial, concepts of the national state, capitalism, conflict between church and state and technological transformation of labor.²⁵ The Middle Ages has an ongoing presence in today's society, a tangibility that does not exist for earlier periods. “[T]he Middle Ages have never been reconstructed from scratch: we have always mended or patched them up, as something in which we still live. We have cobbled up the bank as well as the cathedral, the state as well as the

²³ For an in-depth examination of these and other adaptational changes between Lewis' book and Adamson's film, see Paul Tankard, “The Lion, the Witch and the Multiplex,” in *Fantasy Fiction into Film: Essays*, ed. Leslie Stratyner and James R. Keller (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 80-92.

²⁴ Alison Searle, “Fantastical Fact, Home of Other? The imagined ‘medieval’ in C.S. Lewis,” *Mythlore* 25 no. 97/8 (Spring, 2007): 6.

²⁵ Umberto Eco, “Dreaming of the Middle Ages,” in *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1986), 64.

church.”²⁶ Remnants of monarchical governments, legendary battles and pre-industrial society are visible in the world today, making it seem like these are things 21st-century peoples can truly know. Yet there also remains a conspicuous gulf between us and the medieval and an unavoidable awareness that our experience of this time is always mediated. It is perhaps because of this that medieval films displays such a dizzying—and often contradictory—array of visions of what this particular time and place looked like. A quick survey of popular medieval films shows the Middle Ages as a time of filth, disease, spiritual enlightenment, ignorance, riches, poverty, romance, oppression, mystery, and/or rugged adventure. Kevin Harty locates medieval film within the broader practice of medievalism which he defines as “a continuing process of creating and recreating ideas of the medieval that began almost as soon as the Middle Ages had come to an end.”²⁷ Medieval film, including fantasy film that leans on medieval cinematic conventions, exists as a continuation of medievalism, a repeated return and a cultural preoccupation with this time that appears to be at once mysterious and accessible. If the medieval period itself is both familiar and other, it is then unsurprising that a genre seeking to strike such a balance in its narrative incorporates signs of medievality into its cannon.

Medieval film, despite its creative liberties, is still informed by history and relies on assumptions about an audience’s awareness of history. When audiences read a medieval film, they draw upon what Pierre Sorlin termed “historical capital.”²⁸ Historical capital refers to the past events and figures that are familiar to a community and assumed to be common knowledge. Drawing on common knowledge allows for more efficient storytelling because the filmmakers only have to explain ideas that diverge from a community’s historical capital. Because historical capital is culturally or regionally-specific, films that target international audiences must either draw upon very broad, popular historical concepts or devote more of their run-time to audience education. The process of reading a medieval film is complex because the audience must synthesize the new information presented in the film with their previous understanding of

²⁶ Eco, “Dreaming of the Middle Ages,” 67-8.

²⁷ Kevin J. Harty, *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern and Asian Films About Medieval Europe* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 1999), 3.

²⁸ Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, *Cinematic Illuminations: The Middle Ages on Film* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 36.

cinematic convention as well as their knowledge of history—a completely separate discipline.²⁹ However, as Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman point out, this process seems to occur in the minds of viewers with “astonishing facility.”³⁰

The familiarity of the medieval is also established through self-referential filmic tradition. Despite the broad array of medieval depictions mentioned above, Elliott points out that many medieval films generally look the same and draw upon the same filmic conventions.³¹ Icons such as a knight in armour or a king wearing a crown, are ideas based in history and used to evoke mediocrity or even “‘stand for’ the Middle Ages as a whole.”³² These signs can be thought of as “history effects” which are distinct from historical references because they often relate more to other medieval films and popular ideas about the medieval period than to history as it is understood in academic scholarship.³³ This steadily growing body of work develops and reinforces the signs of what Richard Burt calls cinematic or “movie medievalism.”³⁴

Audiences watching a medieval film draw on their knowledge of other similar films in order to inform their understanding of the images onscreen. This means that icons or symbols that are not historically accurate, may appear more authentic to audiences because of their repetition across several films. Each time the icon is used in a context surrounded by other markers of the medieval, that icon acquires a sense of authenticity through repeated association. Paradoxically, historically accurate symbols or details that filmmakers have not accepted as generic convention may appear out of place or less authentic to audiences.³⁵ An audience’s acceptance of these icons as representations of medieval culture should not necessarily be condemned as the ignorance of the masses but instead understood as a demonstration of their

²⁹ Finke and Shichtman, *Cinematic Illuminations*, 36.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Elliott, “Remaking the Middle Ages,” 182.

³² Elliott calls these icons ‘historicons’ and likens them to the Barthesian concept of an empty signifier. Ibid.

³³ Finke and Shichtman, *Cinematic Illuminations*, 36. See also Burt, “Getting Schmedieval,” 217.

³⁴ Burt, “Getting Schmedieval,” 219.

³⁵ Anne Hollander remarks on this tendency in relation to historical theatre costume. See “Film and Theatre: Costume and Convention,” *The American Scholar* vol. 42 no. 4 (Autumn, 1973): 672.

competency in reading filmic shorthand.³⁶ Furthermore, these “inaccuracies” are not in themselves void of value as Elliott asserts that even historically inaccurate icons can still signify an authentic referent.³⁷ This also supports Rosenstone’s theory that intentional anachronism can better communicate certain historical ideas to audiences.³⁸ Fantasy film takes the conventions of medieval film one step further by bolstering narrative action with mythical creatures, magic, supernatural phenomena and other elements clearly outside the realm of history.

1.2 World Setup

Narnia is set up as distinct and removed from the real world. It exists as a sort of parallel universe with a clear point of entry and exit (the wardrobe). The film begins firmly rooted in the real world which is defined as 1940s England. This specific time and place exists as the Pevensies’ (and audience’s) point of reference for what constitutes reality which then informs what they understand to be fantastic. Although the audience is removed from this time by at least 65 years, it remains within the realm of normalcy even if the clothing has a nostalgic vintage quality and the effects of the war exist outside the bounds of ordinary, everyday life. Thanks to Hollywood’s enthusiasm for regularly producing (and critically acclaiming) 20th-century war movies, audiences are accustomed to identifying with characters in these types of settings. World War II is strongly embedded in the public consciousness and is not so removed as to feel foreign or unreal. It does, however, provide a point of comparison as a moment of history that feels much more accessible and immediate than the mysterious and loosely defined Middle Ages. Representing these two moments in time within the same film also reveals how certain sensibilities are attributed to different time periods and how the audience’s relationship with a specific era informs its onscreen representation.³⁹ This explains, in part, why 1940s England, a

³⁶ Finke and Shichtman, *Cinematic Illuminations*, 36.

³⁷ Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages*, 46.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁹ Andrew Higson argues that representations of the past are as much about conveying a sensibility as they are about a historical period. He points to the refinement and respectability of the modern in contrast with the danger and epic scale of the medieval both of which contrast with the “recent past” (which he argues begins with World War II) that more often focuses on the ordinary, working-class, or “self-made.” *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 201, 208.

period known through living memory and copious surviving artefacts and documentation, is represented as relatively drab and ordinary. Meanwhile the distant and mysterious medieval presents action, adventure and danger on an epic and most dramatic scale. Even the Pevensies are transformed from regular children to kings and queens upon entering the medieval land.

The strong wartime parallels between the two worlds help audiences connect with Narnia. Eventually the children come to understand the conflict in Narnia and realize that they have some degree of control over its outcome, something they did not have in the real world. Because of this, Searle suggests that the alternate medieval world becomes more real and feels more like home than the actual world from whence they came which is rendered “alien and unreal.”⁴⁰ After winning the war, the children feel so at home in Narnia that they choose to stay for many years instead of returning through the wardrobe.

The film’s general aesthetic trend begins with 1940s English realism. As the action progresses and becomes increasingly fantastical, medieval characteristics become more and more prominent. By the film’s climax, the final battle sequence, the children and their environment are outfitted in all the accoutrements of a typical movie medievalism. The film presents the medieval in two distinct manners. There is the living, breathing medieval that exists in Narnia and is intrinsically connected with the fantastic and then there is the “historical” medieval made up of stationary artefacts in the professor’s house associated with reality and, to the children, boredom.

Professor Kirke’s house is decorated with signs of the medieval including swords, shields and suits of armour. It presents these artefacts as a serious, academic engagement with history which is further underscored by Kirke’s profession. Upon entering the house, the stern housekeeper yells at Susan when she reaches out to touch a bust, “No touching of the historical artefacts!”⁴¹ The medieval, as it exists in the real world, is for intellectual adults. Its artefacts are presented in a traditional museum format, as sacred objects meant for viewing and quiet contemplation. The objects are not only inaccessible to children, but the Pevensies’ curiosity actually poses a threat to their preservation. When the children accidentally knock over a suit of

⁴⁰ Searle, “Fantastical Fact, Home or Other,” 13.

⁴¹ *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, dir. Andrew Adamson (Walt Disney Pictures. 2005). In the film, it remains unclear whether or not the medieval artefacts are from the “real world” Middle Ages or from Narnia. If they were taken from Narnia, one could argue they are more like travel souvenirs than historical artefacts despite their medieval symbolism.

armour, they fear punishment and hide in the wardrobe. This moment is the catalyst for their discovery of and subsequent adventures in Narnia. Although the two approaches to history are distinct, they are not completely separate. The interaction with “serious” history resulted in an engagement with an imagined history. While the wardrobe may be the door to Narnia, the suit of armour, a quintessential marker of the medieval that is both costume and artefact, was the instigator that lead them there.

The medieval in Narnia (which is not shown as history but the present) is immediate, engaging and child-friendly. It functions more like a 21st-century children’s museum that privileges experiential and tactile learning. It is in this medievaesque environment that the children grow and learn not about history but about themselves. This echoes the broader themes of medieval film in which cinematic medievalism serves as a tool for understanding the present more so than the past.

Much of the controversy surrounding the history film derives from its apparent anachronisms and supposed inability to shirk the zeitgeist of the present. Paradoxically, this can be seen as a strength of the medieval film which often unabashedly injects modern sensibilities into the past. Caroline Jewers argues that “[d]ressing, masking, or cloaking the present in the drapery of the past can enhance, neutralize or disguise” and that an Arthurian backdrop creates a productive site for the exploration of sociopolitical concerns.⁴² Modern intervention not only updates the tale to better resonate with audiences but also enables the film to perform its function and convey its messages more effectively. While Jewers’ analysis focuses on the relationship between audience and narrative, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* performs this function doubly. The Pevensies use Narnia to navigate their anxieties about World War II (their present) while the filmmakers use Narnia to explore relevant modern themes of family, identity and morality. The Pevensies model audience behaviour, a useful feature to help young audiences relate to the story. Because this process is built into the narrative, the film is perhaps more transparent than other films in its strategy to use the past to explore the present. Furthermore, fantasy has often been accused of being an escapist genre with the assumption that escapism is

⁴² Caroline Jewers, “Hard Day’s Knights: *First Knight*, *A Knight’s Tale*, and *Black Knight*,” in *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, eds. Martha Driver and Sid Ray (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2004), 194.

somehow a “bad” practice, however, the Pevensies’—and the audience’s—escape from the real world is actually quite productive.⁴³

1.3 Heritage Film and National Identity

Each case study in this thesis locates its medieval fantasy in an overtly British or English-centric context. Several Western nations experienced the Middle Ages, including France, the birthplace of gothic architecture whose pointed arches, perhaps more than any other symbol, are immediately associated with the medieval. However, these films claim this period as a significant part of a specifically British history. The Pevensie children do not compare Narnia with Earth or even Europe but to England.⁴⁴ Therefore, analysis of these films must also consider the traditions of British heritage cinema which, as Andrew Higson explains, “have traditionally played a major part in determining how the heritage and identity of England and Englishness have been understood.”⁴⁵ Heritage film, named for its relationship with England’s heritage industry and broader practice of commodifying the past, offers a representation of what seems to be a quintessentially English past, its history and its culture.⁴⁶ This identity—which most often focuses on England but can also extend to the other nations of Great Britain—is constructed not only for the benefit of British citizens but also for international audiences who may know little else of British culture outside of major motion pictures. Heritage film is not only a reflection of how a nation perceives itself but how it would like to be perceived by others.⁴⁷ By bookending

⁴³ David Butler, *Fantasy Cinema: Impossible Worlds on Screen* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 3.

⁴⁴ Tankard, “The Lion, the Witch and the Multiplex,” 86.

⁴⁵ Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama Since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1.

⁴⁶ Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema*, 11. Popular examples of heritage films include Jane Austen adaptations such as *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) and *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), films about the monarchy such as *Elizabeth* (1998) and *The Young Victoria* (2009) and narratives concerning other culturally-significant English icons including *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *Bright Star* (2009).

⁴⁷ Ironically, when medieval films draw upon very generalised or cliché markers of the medieval that are so overused in popular culture, they become unspecific to England and the Englishness must be constructed and reinforced in other ways. This often occurs through hiring known British actors, relying on heavy accents, and filming in locations across the U.K. New Zealand has become a popular filming site for a preindustrial England and was used as a filming location for both *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *The Fellowship of the Ring*. These elements (dialect, sweeping landscapes, etc.) become signposts of “Englishness” that belie both the constructed nature of this version of the English past as well as the filmmakers desire to seek out this specific vision.

the story with 1940s England, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* speaks to a doubly heroic national past connecting Britain's WWII efforts to a mythologized medieval triumph. This theme is especially carried through Peter's character. Before leaving London, he notices a group of boys similar in age in uniform ready to be deployed overseas. Instead of coming-of-age as a soldier, Peter transforms into a knight mirroring the same stoic heroism. This implies a continuous thread between the Middle Ages and the 20th century, connecting them through national values of strength and courage.

Both heritage film and the productions examined in the case studies of this thesis stem from canonical literary origins and often—though as demonstrated in *Game of Thrones*, not always—engage with themes of nostalgia or romanticism towards the values and lifestyle of a pre-industrialized past.⁴⁸ Heritage film has been criticized for its tendency to present the English past as socially cohesive with little regard for its working-class, acknowledgment of the cultural diversity or sociopolitical fragmentation between the nations that compose Great Britain.⁴⁹ However, the influence of the fantasy genre and its focus on political conflict makes the works investigated in these case studies quite successful in this regard. Their conflicts center around the unjustness of social disparity, amplify the voices of the downtrodden and emphasize the ramifications of overlooking their concerns. Characters like the White Witch who underestimate the heterogeneity of their societies do so to their detriment. The severe repercussions of this mistake play out in extensive battle sequences that have become an essential component of any fantasy film in a post-Peter Jackson trilogy industry climate. Adamson's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* transformed the story from Lewis' fairy tale into an action-packed epic that more closely resembles the other filmic case studies. This is perhaps a logical choice since, as Paul

⁴⁸ Of the works examined in this thesis, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the literary inspiration for *Game of Thrones*, is the only source text that was not written by an English author. As an American, George R.R. Martin provides a different perspective on the British past, one that is possibly informed by his country's less than nostalgic memory of monarchical authority. However, directors Andrew Adamson and Peter Jackson are both New Zealanders while D. B. Weiss and David Benioff are American. All three visual adaptations and subsequent visual representations of the English past were led by non-English creators.

⁴⁹ Belén Vidal, *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 10.

Tankard reminds us, an epic in the traditional literary sense, is a style of poem most often concerned with the fate of a nation.⁵⁰

According to Belén Vidal, “The heritage film thus has become a supple term to refer to the ways in which national cinemas turn to the past at different moments in their histories in search of their own foundational myths.”⁵¹ This demonstrates a method of identity construction and recognizes a tendency to search for answer about the present in past actions. Each case study frames its narrative within an important stage of national development closely linked to the infancy of England. Even fictionalized pasts offer a point of departure to refine and redefine conceptualizations of the present.

1.4 Costume

Costume in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* plays an active role in plot development, worldbuilding, and communicating narrative themes. The Narnian costumes rely on standard symbols of medievality (crowns, long, modest gowns, suits of armour) to convey a general sense of time and place. This strategy is known as “stereotypical costuming” where costume is used to identify a “type” that relies on dominant ideas about a certain class, person or, in this case, time period.⁵² Without costume, Narnia’s vast landscapes could conceivably be any pre-industrial time; however, because of the costumes and mise-en-scène, the audience knows that this land is specifically medieval.

Making historically accurate costume is a seemingly impossible task. Not only does costume ascribe to the same difficulties addressed in critique of the history film but its materiality and semiotic meanings further complicate its relationship with the past. Images of clothing and remaining samples demonstrate a survival bias skewed to favor the upper-classes and most valuable materials.⁵³ Any type of fashion reproduction necessitates interpretation and,

⁵⁰ Tankard, “The Lion, the Witch and the Multiplex,” 85.

⁵¹ Vidal, *Heritage Film*, 3.

⁵² Sarah Street, *Costume and Cinema: Dress Codes in Popular Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2001), 107.

⁵³ Sarah-Grace Heller provides an excellent overview of the material difficulties in studying medieval fashion. Sarah-Grace Heller, “Introduction,” in *A Cultural History of Dress and Fashion in the Middle Ages* ed. Sarah-Grace Heller (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 3-5.

in many cases, would be difficult or impossible to avoid using modern materials or production methods. Furthermore, complete accuracy, if it could be achieved, may not even be desirable if it does not correspond with an audience's current understanding of clothing semiotics. Pam Cook explains that "[t]he symbolic carriers of period detail—costume, hair, décor—are notoriously slippery and anachronistic. They are intertextual sign systems with their own logic."⁵⁴ The intertextuality that informs our reading of these signifiers is vastly different than that of the people who lived during the Middle Ages. The meaning and connotations of certain articles of dress have changed significantly over time. As a result, the visual components that are most essential for conveying historicity have the most nuanced and changeable meanings. Therefore, instead of aspiring to strictly historically-based reproductions, "costume signals are used to give a broadly correct sense of period, and a more playful use of historically inaccurate detail which can transmit contemporary information about beauty and fashion."⁵⁵ This balance is essential to effectively communicate with modern audiences who, for the most part, primarily encounter historical dress through film and have become accustomed to reading established filmic conventions that mix the new with the old.

Fantasy costume can lean into this strategy even more than the history film. Because of its overt markers of fiction, audiences are more willing to accept obvious anachronism as an authentic part of the fantasy world. This technique is typical of a costume drama which "despite its dependence on extensive research and advice from consultants, and despite its setting in the historical past, to a greater or lesser extent eschews authenticity in favour of fantasy."⁵⁶ Because of its transparent use of history, it does not masquerade as a "serious" history film but highlights how ideas of history and the past are constructed through aesthetics. Through this process, Cook argues that costume dramas make viewers more aware of the necessarily fictive or imaginative components in all types of historical reconstruction including history writing.⁵⁷ These films draw

⁵⁴ Cook, *Fashioning the Nation*, 67.

⁵⁵ Ibid. See also Anne Hollander, "The 'Gatsby Look' and Other Costume Movie Blunders," *New York Magazine*, May 27, 1975, p. 54-62.

⁵⁶ Pam Cook, "Contemporary Costume Drama," in *The Cinema book 3rd ed.* ed. Pam Cook (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 294.

⁵⁷ Cook, "Contemporary Costume Drama," 295.

attention to the practices and techniques of historical reconstruction and building historical narrative many of which are used in “official” histories. The dependence on aesthetics is especially true for *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* where history is not conveyed through known events or figures but predominantly through an aesthetic.

1.5 The Wardrobe

The gateway to Narnia is a wardrobe, a piece of furniture that is used to store clothing and all that it symbolizes: identity, transformation, growth (both physical and psychological), creativity and abundant possibility. Clothing is both a reflection of identity (marker of gender, class, occupation, etc.) as well as a tool to create or try on an identity.⁵⁸ The wardrobe is the container that holds this potential. For the Pevensie siblings, it is the doorway to a magical world that helps them grow into who they are destined to be. In the real world, and for members of the audience, the wardrobe is a similar site of transformation that helps to determine (and reflect) personal values, how someone wants to be perceived by those around them, how they want to move in the world and who they want to be.⁵⁹

Sophie Woodward utilizes the wardrobe as an ethnographic site where dressing, which she characterizes as a means of self-construction, takes place.⁶⁰ In this way, Narnia exists as the ultimate walk-in closet. The Pevensie siblings step into the wardrobe and have to push through the hanging coats to reach the other side. This is a very tactile experience as they become surrounded by clothes on all sides, stumbling over each other, vision obscured, until they enter the forest. It is only after this mandatory immersion that their first inner transformations take place. For Lucy, this transformation was the discovery of an alternate world that expanded her understanding of the realm of possibility. Her siblings later achieved this same epiphany coupled with the realization that Lucy was telling the truth of its existence and that they had been wrong

⁵⁸ This is true for theatre, film as well as in the everyday. This practice is more apparent in particular life stages such as young children playing dress up or adolescents engaging with sub-cultural styles, however, the relationship between an individual and their clothing is lifelong.

⁵⁹ These ideas do not speak exclusively to individuals who are actively interested in cultivating a personal style. Many people choose not to directly engage with fashion and spend minimal time and effort thinking about what they wear and how they present themselves. Through their sparsity and simplicity, the wardrobes of these individuals still reflect their values.

⁶⁰ Sophie Woodward, *Why Women Wear What They Wear* (Oxford: Berg Press, 2007), 31.

to doubt her. Thus, clothing is not merely representative of their transformation but the means by which they are able to transform.

It is also notable that the gateway to destiny and adventure is located in a symbol of domesticity. The wardrobe is inside a room closed off to visitors within a private residence. It is not even immediately accessible to the children who spend some time in the house before finding it in a spare (as opposed to an essential) room. Narnia is located within increasing layers of privacy—or secrecy—that one must penetrate.⁶¹ Suddenly, a mundane, oft-overlooked piece of furniture becomes the site of something extraordinary. The gateway to Narnia could have been anything: a train at King’s Cross station as in *Harry Potter* or an enchanted password-protected doorway in the side of a mountain such as the Doors of Durin in *Fellowship of the Ring*.⁶² In fact, other portal locations are revealed in later *Chronicles of Narnia* books.⁶³ However, the children’s very first life-altering encounter with Narnia emphasizes the creative potential in the mundane. It does not disparage the domestic, a traditionally female realm, but recognizes it as a site of growth, action and learning. It makes an appeal to audiences to re-evaluate their assumptions about the everyday through a highly accessible symbol that easily translates to their regular life. Suddenly, one does not need to leave the private sphere in order to find adventure and fulfillment.

1.6 Children’s Costume

Isis Mussenden, the film’s costume designer, described the experience as though they were making three separate films—such was the contrast between filming at the professor’s house, in Narnia and the final battle sequence.⁶⁴ These divisions are reflected in the Pevensies’ costume changes. The children’s first outfits are wartime period costumes [Fig. 1.1]. They wear a

⁶¹ Woodward likens these increasing layers of privacy to Russian dolls, locating the wardrobe at the centre of the most private, inaccessible enclave. *Why Women Wear What They Wear*, 40.

⁶² The *Harry Potter* franchise is another example of a 2000s literary-adapted film series that constructs a fantastic England deeply rooted in history and tradition. Similar to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Harry Potter* presents the magical world as a hidden but existing alongside that of the real.

⁶³ Most notably the ponds in the Wood Between the Worlds from *The Magician’s Nephew*.

⁶⁴ “Cinematic Storytellers,” in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (4-Disk Extended Edition)*, DVD, dir. Andrew Adamson (Walt Disney Pictures, 2006).

coordinated, muted colour palette typical of films set in the 1940s that evokes the seriousness and dreariness of the time. The construction of the costumes reflects the clothes rationing and utility clothing scheme implemented by the British government during the war to conserve labour and materials involved with clothing production. This accounts for the stylistic simplicity and the similarity between outfits.



Figure 1.1: Screenshot, “Lucy, Susan, Peter and Edmund entering Narnia in their 1940s period costumes,” *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), Walt Disney Pictures.

The girls’ skirts hang just to the knee and their blouses and dresses are always short-sleeved in order to conserve fabric. Cardigans are layered on top for warmth and added style. Lucy’s smock dresses are very simply designed with youthful Peter Pan collars as their main decoration. Susan wears a series of coordinated separates consisting of matching wool skirts and plain blouses. This strategy allows for the limited number of pieces to be interchanged in a variety of combinations, the same principles of a capsule wardrobe. Edmund exclusively wears shorts and both boys wear collared shirts layered under practical jumpers and sweater vests. Peter’s suspenders serve as reminders of the ban on zip fasteners and elastic waistbands for

civilian clothes.⁶⁵ Pockets, buttons, pleats and seams are kept to a minimum while added flourishes like pant cuffs, ribbons or embroidery are non-existent. Their shoes are closed-toed and sturdy.

Despite these measures, utility clothing was not meant to be unattractive. In a 1942 press release, the Board of Trade stated that they “have no wish to adopt the role of fashion dictator.”⁶⁶ This combined with a fear that if women let their “standards slip,” it would have a very serious, negative impact on morale, meant that wartime fashions promoted a smart, eye-pleasing aesthetic.⁶⁷ Although they are subdued, the children’s outfits are clean, well-fitted and make use of classic lines and simple tailoring. Their period costumes effectively communicate the balance between wartime-necessitated functionality and durability and maintaining stylish, clean-cut standards.

The 1940s costumes impart a seriousness on the children’s characters. Sent away from their home and mother while their father fights overseas, they must act responsibly and take care of each other. When they arrive at the professor’s house, the housekeeper informs them of all the rules against childish behavior. Peter and Susan are forced into caregiver roles they do not know how to navigate and Edmund especially pushes against their sudden authority over him. Although the children are presumably dressing themselves, their outfits are clean, unwrinkled and sensible. Shirts are tucked in and hair is smooth and brushed. All of the children, but especially Susan and Peter, are dressed as miniature adults or, at least, in clothing adults would approve of and children would be unlikely to choose for themselves. This idea is supported by Mussenden’s remarks that upon shifting the filming from the professor’s house to Narnia the actors were “so happy to get out of those old clothes.”⁶⁸ She describes how excited the children

⁶⁵ Laura Clouting and Amanda Mason, “How Clothes Rationing Affected Fashion in the Second World War,” *Imperial War Museum*, January 5, 2018. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-clothes-rationing-affected-fashion-in-the-second-world-war>

⁶⁶ Julie Summers, *Fashion on the Ration: Style in the Second World War* (London: Profile Books, 2015), 94.

⁶⁷ Laura Clouting, “8 Facts about Clothes Rationing in Britain During the Second World War,” *Imperial War Museum*, July 4, 2018. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/8-facts-about-clothes-rationing-in-britain-during-the-second-world-war>

⁶⁸ “Cinematic Storytellers,” DVD.

were for their Narnian costumes and remarked upon distinct behavioural changes brought out by the clothing.⁶⁹

In order to survive in the real world, the Pevensies were forced to act older than their age and suppress natural childish impulses and forms of expression. This context is set up in direct contrast to their experience in Narnia where they have the freedom to reconnect with a childlike wonder and meet older mentors who will guide them along their journey. The nature of the costume changes from a serious practicality to a playful dress-up activity that is facilitated through the fanciful medieval clothing.

The first major costume change occurs once all four children enter Narnia for the first time together. They decide to explore Narnia before returning back through the wardrobe. Peter gives each of his siblings a large fur coat (which he finds in the wardrobe) to adapt their outfits to the colder climate [Fig. 1.2]. Edmund complains that he has been given a women's-style coat to which Peter states "I know."⁷⁰ This could be read as an instance of general sibling antagonism, an assertion of Peter's authority over Edmund or as a form of sexism implying that Edmund is displaying "feminine behaviour" although his attitude is unlike that of his sisters. Either way, Edmund is forced to wear a coat that contradicts his conception of his own gender identity (an opportunity the others are afforded). Both modern and medieval literary sources demonstrate how gender can be constructed apart from the body and through clothing.⁷¹ In this light, Edmund's remark is not simply an instance of his ornery behaviour (which is how his siblings interpret it) but there is likely an underlying genuine concern about being misgendered. Instead of validating his feelings, his older brother insults him, further alienating Edmund from the rest of the group. The accumulation of these instances of alienation leads Edmund to later betray his siblings. This first costume change highlights their initial unpreparedness for the new landscape, marks their first conscious choice to adapt themselves to suit the new world as well as emphasizes the antagonism between the siblings and their fractured relationships.

⁶⁹ This was especially noticeable in Anna Popplewell who became less reserved and more playful and outgoing when she first put on her final scene blue dress. "Cinematic Storytellers," DVD.

⁷⁰ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, DVD.

⁷¹ E. Jane Burns, "Gender and Sexuality," in *A Cultural History of Dress and Fashion in the Middle Ages* ed. Sarah-Grace Heller (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 94.



Figure 1.2: Screenshot, “Winter coats,” *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), Walt Disney Pictures.

As Peter, Susan and Lucy become more comfortable in Narnia, their 1940s costumes become more stripped-down and disheveled. When they walk into the battle camp for the first time to meet Aslan (Liam Neeson), their shirts are untucked and stockings, cardigans and suspenders have been removed. Their “regular” clothes are accessorized with medieval-inspired weapons (Peter’s sword, Susan’s bow and arrows and Lucy’s dagger and healing potion) which makes for an incongruous mashup of sartorial symbols. They remain with one foot in their homeland and one in Narnia, not fully belonging in either. They stand out from the crowd not only because of their race but also because of their dress. This dislocation informs a more generalized anxiety around identity that Susan eloquently summarizes when she yells at Peter, “Just because some man in a red coat gave you a sword, doesn’t mean you’re a hero!”⁷² This marks a moment of conflict during the transformational process. Clothing is not only an expression of the inner self but also “enacts an internal behavioural change in the [wearer].”⁷³

⁷² *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, DVD.

⁷³ Woodward, *Why Women Wear What They Wear*, 21.

Just the fact that Peter is considering using a sword to defend his sisters, something he's presumably never done, demonstrates a behavioural change brought about by this accessory. Yet, as Susan points out, the transition is not seamless (despite the popular medieval film trope where every "good" man with a sword is, in fact, a hero). Clothing that is incongruous with identity may be aspirational but might also betray the wearer, highlighting the disjunction between who they are and who they appear to be.

Changing into "medieval clothes" marks their true immersion into Narnian culture. Mussenden describes a very specific approach to the type of medievalism she wanted to convey through dress. Because the in-universe lore states that Narnia was created in 1900, Mussenden's costume designs are rooted in turn-of-the-century medievalism.⁷⁴ She cites Pre-Raphaelite paintings as a major source of inspiration and purposefully disregarded the original Pauline Baines book illustrations because of their strong 1950's influence.⁷⁵ Therefore, the costumes are not so much a fantastic interpretation of how the medieval is imagined today but an interpretation of an Edwardian-era medievalism. It is the medieval twice-removed. The costumes' romanticism, rich colours, swathes of fabric and general simplicity of design can also be found in the details of Pre-Raphaelite (and Pre-Raphaelite-style) artworks such as James Archer's *The Death of King Arthur* (1860) or John William Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott* (1888). This period of medievalism also appears to be responsible for many of the hairstyles used in medieval and fantasy film. While women of medieval England would have covered their hair with veils and headdresses, the long, flowing locks that have come to serve as the default female hairstyle in medieval film are frequently present in Pre-Raphaelite-style works.

While the Pevensies' acquisition of the fur coats is explained by their presence in the wardrobe, the logistics of acquiring the medieval dress is not remarked upon. We as the audience do not know where the clothing came from or how it was made. It functions less as a worldbuilding component by way of illuminating Narnian economics, trade or methods of production and more as a general indicator of culture. If one is to become a part of Narnian society, this is the culturally-sanctioned aesthetic that must be adopted. The Pevensies' adoption

⁷⁴Narniaweb, "The Wardrobe Door Interviews Isis Mussenden," November 24, 2005, <http://www.costumes.narniaweb.com/mussendeninterview.asp>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

of this aesthetic signifies their integration into Narnian society and it is in these costumes that they come to accept their prophesized roles. The stereotypical costumes function as an externalization of an inner transformation. The costumes also underscore narrative themes. The light fabric of the medieval costumes contrasts with the heavy fur coats. This emphasises the changing climate, a running theme of the movie where winter is equated with the witch's oppression and spring signals the coming of a new, just era of rulership.

Susan and Lucy wear brightly coloured flowing dresses that lace up the back [Fig. 1.3]. The long sleeves, floor-length skirts, embroidery, and added flourishes are striking departures from wartime austerity regulations. Although Narnia is also preparing for battle, the way in which the conflict manifests on the individual is quite different and does not dictate clothing choice. The dresses' feminine silhouettes contrast with 1940s wartime "masculinization" of female dress; however, they also speak to an impracticality for action.⁷⁶ Despite their preparation for battle, the girls' "war effort" consists primarily of performing emotional labour, mourning the death and witnessing the resurrection of Aslan while their brothers actively engage in combat.

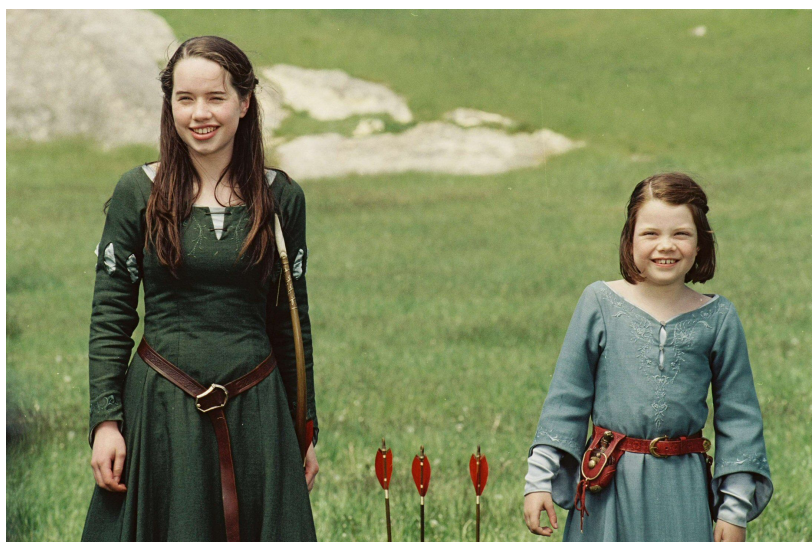


Figure 1.3: Screenshot, "Susan and Lucy's 'medieval' dresses," *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), Walt Disney Pictures.

Peter dons a long, belted tunic, trousers and knee-length leather boots indicating his knight-in-training status. He is later upgraded to a full suit of armour for the battle. After betraying his siblings, Edmund is reunited with them in a scene where his dress very pointedly

⁷⁶ Cook, *Fashioning the Nation*, 57.

marks him as an outsider. While his three siblings have changed into their medieval-inspired dress, Edmund remains in his English apparel [Fig.1.4]. His clothing contrasts not only with that of his siblings but also his surroundings. The camp is filled with tents, armoured knights, blacksmiths and forges and banners with lion sigils.⁷⁷ The surrounding scenery is colour-coded with bright red and gold, imbuing the camp with warmth and liveliness (and to contrast with the cool tones of the villains' costumes and set pieces). Because medieval dress is equated with moral goodness and the bright future of Narnia, Edmund's 1940s apparel, somewhat ironically, now appears old-fashioned and regressive. It takes Edmund longer than his siblings to understand the witch's villainy but once he takes responsibility for his mistakes, he too, changes into a medieval tunic. Despite being dressed contemporaneously with his home culture (and in closer temporal proximity to the audience), Edmund's 1940s apparel signifies an alienness from his siblings and the "good" side of the battle.



Figure 1.4: Screenshot, “Edmund returns,” *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), Walt Disney Pictures.

While the Middle Ages were not necessarily wholly more progressive than the 20th century, the proliferation of mechanized warfare and horrors of the Second World War disrupted any previous notion of social progress as consistently linear and technological progress as success without consequence. This meeting between Edmund and his siblings, is a sartorially poignant scene that questions the way in which we cast moral judgements onto certain time

⁷⁷ The sigils function as Aslan's seal or pictorial signature but sigils are also traditionally used as signifiers of the magical.

periods whose history can be located within an identifiable aesthetic. It also speaks to broader themes of the fantasy genre (most influentially found in Tolkien's work) that call for a return to nature and the "simpler" times of pre-industrialization. These "simpler" times are framed as a remedy to the chaos and moral perturbation of modernity and, in this context, the egregious humanitarian failings of the 1940s. Thus, an inversion occurs where the real world becomes strange, confusing and backward while the medieval fantasy provides familiarity, comfort and moral clarity.

At the end of the film, the siblings return through the wardrobe. They do not keep the opulent Narnian clothes they were wearing but reappear in their original 1940s outfits. This quick change emphasises the contrast between the two aesthetics. Yet, despite this abrupt costume change, a knowing look exchanged between the children tells the audience that they have not necessarily reverted back to who they were before.

1.7 Witch's Costume

The White Witch (Tilda Swinton) wears a series of dresses with similar silhouettes throughout the film. They are made of heavy fabrics and feature a floor-length skirt with a slight flair, highly structured bodice and off-shoulder neckline. Instead of having distinctive costume changes, her wardrobe "evolves" in relation to her power and authority over Narnia.⁷⁸ Both the Pevensies and the Witch have style transformations over the course of the film but instead of several distinct looks to mark important moments of transition, the approach to the Witch's costumed transformation is subtler. She wears several dresses identical in style but different in colour to create the illusion that the socio-political changes in Narnia are altering her physically. Her dresses shift from a bright blue-white to a dirty grey as the winter melts into spring. Her ice crown is perhaps the most pointed symbol as it melts in accordance with the waning of her power and uncertain status as absolute monarch [Fig. 1.5]. In this way, her melting crown becomes a countdown leading up to the final battle.

⁷⁸ Narniaweb, "The Wardrobe Door Interviews Isis Mussenden."



Figure 1.5: Two, cropped screenshots, “The White Witch’s ‘evolving’ costume,” *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), Walt Disney Pictures.

The dress she wears for the final battle sequence is trimmed with Aslan’s mane, functioning as a trophy of sorts after she kills him. When Aslan is resurrected—mane intact—the symbolism of her dress changes from victory to a reminder of the superficiality of the physical body in the wake of a triumph of the spirit. Although her costumes are clearly meant to reflect standard characteristics of a witch (cruel, female, otherworldly), Tankard observes that she looks less like a fairy-tale archetype and more like a contemporary human character.⁷⁹ The greatest danger the children face looks very much like the adult humans from their own world. This coupled with all of their mentors existing as anthropomorphic animals, supports ongoing themes of human antagonism introduced by the WWII opening shots. In both worlds, adults carry out acts that inevitably harm children but at least in Narnia, the children are able to take action against the wrongdoings. The idea that the evil in the world comes from humanity instead of magical beings re-emerges below in Chapter 3’s discussion of *Game of Thrones*.

This chapter has examined the practice of cinematic medievalism and its relation to history, nation and narrative. *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* demonstrates how a historically-based fantasy world can be situated in parallel with the real world and how the real world can also be defined as “historical.” While 1940s history is framed

⁷⁹ Tankard, “The Lion, the Witch and the Multiplex,” 88.

as realistic and medieval history is framed as fantastic, both worlds speak to contemporary ideas about family, coming-of-age and fulfilling one's destiny. Costuming plays a key role in delineating the two worlds. Its stereotypical approach associates the medieval with moral goodness, agency, identity construction and child-friendly adventure. Because of this, the medieval demonstrates the morality and humanitarianism that is lacking in the real world. Costume communicates the children's transition from one world to the other and back again. The next two case studies will examine how costume functions within worlds that do not have a direct passage between the real and the medieval. In these case studies, the medieval exists as the one true reality for its characters. Additionally, the following case studies are geared towards an older audience. Adamson's approach reveals how the medieval can be marketed as family entertainment. The film carries many of the overt signifiers of standard medieval-inspired fantasy fiction, providing an introduction to these generic conventions to young audiences. This childhood film functions alongside other Disney, Pixar and Dreamworks representations of a "friendly" medieval that exists as a site of adventure, fun and learning and normalizes the practice of projecting modern ideologies onto the past.

Chapter 2

2 Homespun Away from Home: Dressing Myth in *The Fellowship of the Ring*

The opening sequence of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), directed by Peter Jackson, skillfully establishes the history of the fantastic world its audience is about to enter. In less than ten minutes, this sequence effectively conveys a consolidated version of the complicated history of Middle-Earth as outlined in J.R.R. Tolkien's original writings. This sets the historical foundation that will drive the action of three feature-length films. *Fellowship* tells the story of Frodo Baggins (Elijah Wood) who comes into possession of an evil ring of power. Joined by eight companions, Frodo sets out on a quest to destroy the ring for the good of the land.

Like Narnia, Middle-Earth is constructed through a recognizably medieval Western-European framework. The historically-rooted aspects are used as an authenticating counter-balance to the fantastical components of Tolkien's worldbuilding. Throughout the films, the fantasy is strategically constructed through the real. David Salo describes this process as a balance between intentionally alienating the audience and establishing a familiar baseline rooted in a knowable reality.⁸⁰ Tolkien himself insisted that the best fantasy was founded upon reason, fact and logic, and did not stand in opposition to these things.⁸¹ The fictional facts that make up Middle-Earth follow a logic that is both understandable and acceptable to the reader/viewer. This logic of cause and effect, of evolution and progression, of character motivation and growth is based in a familiar, real-world logic. An immersive fantastic world must be foreign, exotic and strange. But for an audience to understand this world, especially given the constraints of what is considered an appropriate movie run time (which Jackson's films arguably push) the world must draw upon some preestablished socio-cultural structures and conventions.

Middle-Earth is framed as a prehistory of the real world. It is not constructed as a parallel universe existing simultaneously like Narnia, nor is it meant to exist separately and

⁸⁰ David Salo, "Heroism and Alienation through Language in *The Lord of the Rings*," in *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, ed. Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2004), 25.

⁸¹ Salo, "Heroism and Alienation," 162-3.

independently from our own. It is temporally removed from audiences whose modern world is theoretically derived from the legacy of Middle-Earth (as opposed to the other way around). This approach creates an opportunity for, or perhaps demands, a type of temporal play. Although *The Lord of the Rings* was written as a myth or prehistory for England,⁸² the cultures of Middle-Earth use books, paper, dyed fabric, metal weaponry and possess numerous other cultural indicators that do not align with a world that existed pre-antiquity.⁸³ Instead of creating a pseudo hunter-gatherer, Neolithic or Stone Age society, Middle-Earth resembles a mixture of post-Roman Britain eras whose overall aesthetic and culture favours the mid to late-medieval period. It disrupts a perceived linear history of societal evolution and technological progression in order to balance the alien with the familiar for 20th and 21st-century audiences as well as create a more nuanced portrayal of characters and cultures which results in greater realism.

This realism is carried over into Jackson's films through its costuming and mise-en-scène. The films do not solely rely on what Elliott refers to as Hollywood's "generic, 'oven ready' Middle Ages," by which he means the standard set of conventions and icons established in mainstream medieval depictions on film.⁸⁴ While this type of medievalism is not necessarily "bad"—*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* employs it to great effect—the complicated mixing of history found in *The Fellowship of the Ring* provides viewers with a dimensional world of association, suggestion, nuance and depth. As a cultural product directly influenced by time, geography and society, clothing becomes a primary site of this historical mixing.

2.1 Mythopoesis

It is well known that Tolkien drew inspiration for his world from Norse, English and Finnish mythology. His intention was to create a complex mythology for England that drew upon the patterns of ancient stories but ultimately created something new.⁸⁵ Mythology provides a narrative medium for the mixing of fact and fiction. In his lecture "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien

⁸² Edmund Wainwright, *Tolkien's Mythology for Middle Earth* (Norfolk, England: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2004), 15.

⁸³ Salo, "Heroism and Alienation," 24.

⁸⁴ Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages*, 194.

⁸⁵ Wainwright, *Tolkien's Mythology for Middle Earth*, 15.

himself acknowledges the complex relationship between mythology, folklore, history and fairy-stories. He illustrates this relationship through the treatment of the Norse god Thórr: “Which came first, nature-allegories about personalised thunder in the mountains, splitting rocks and trees; or stories about an irascible, not very clever, red-beard farmer, of a strength beyond common measure, a person (in all but mere stature) very like the Northern farmers, the *bændr* by whom Thórr was chiefly beloved?”⁸⁶ He goes on to say, “[T]here would always be a ‘fairy-tale’ as long as there was any Thórr. When the fairy-tale ceased, there would be just thunder.”⁸⁷ These types of history challenge modern conceptions of clear-cut truth or fact and draw attention to the mediation of reality and historical understanding. Tolkien’s work capitalizes on this blurring of fact and fiction. *The Lord of the Rings* operates within a zone of myth, fantasy and feigned history.

Jackson’s films not only acknowledge this relationship but use it to frame the entire story. The opening scenes in the first film of the trilogy are narrated by Galadriel (Cate Blanchett): “History became legend, legend became myth and for two and a half thousand years, the ring passed out of all knowledge.”⁸⁸ This filmic strategy works on several levels. Firstly, it provides the audience with the necessary information dump needed to appreciate the historical context of the story. Secondly, as Elliott points out, extra-diegetic prologue uses historical narrative, a familiar historical format, to explain a foreign history and thus eases the audience into the fantasy world by conveying foreign information through a familiar method.⁸⁹ Additionally, this type of introductory narration (which can also take the form of text, perhaps most famously used in *Star Wars*) is a particularly common convention of history and medieval films. It is a framing statement functioning as a truth claim that the audience is willing to accept (or, at least, does not yet have any reason to disbelieve).⁹⁰ From the beginning, the audience is made aware that they

⁸⁶J.R.R. Tolkien, *Poems and Stories* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 135.

⁸⁷ Tolkien, *Poems and Stories*, 136.

⁸⁸ *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, DVD, dir. Peter Jackson (New Line Cinemas, 2001).

⁸⁹ Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages*, 201.

⁹⁰ William F. Woods, “Authenticating Realism in Medieval Film,” in *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, ed. Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2004), 42.

are entering an historically-complex world where history, legend and myth are interwoven forms of knowledge.

Interviews with cast and crew members demonstrate the vital role history played in the making of these films and the great effort put forth to cultivate a feeling of history within the films. Brian Sibley articulates these sentiments:

“This is a fantasy film. It’s got creatures, it’s got monsters, it’s got strange beings...but that, for Peter [Jackson], was not the overriding important thing about this story. The important thing was that this was a story which seemed to have within it, a sense of reality. He underscored to me again and again [that] there is, in the book, a sense that you’re reading something which isn’t fantasy, which is history. And that’s what Peter wanted to put on film.”⁹¹

It is telling that the director’s primary focus was not on the fantastic elements, but the realism rooted in Tolkien’s fictional history. While Tolkien’s books laboriously establish the history of Middle-Earth through extensive genealogies, evolutionary patterns, languages and descriptions of cultures, this information needed to be adapted to the filmic medium. Language and musical score made significant contributions to establishing historicity; however, the history of Middle-Earth is predominantly conveyed visually. Gandalf (Ian McKellen) pours over stacks of written accounts in a stereotypically dusty archival room. Narsil is presented in a thinly-veiled museum setup. Frodo and Bilbo (Ian Holm) record accounts of their adventures in large volumes. The history of Middle-Earth is often presented in the same manner modern audiences interact with history today. This functions similarly to Galadriel’s narration where foreign information is presented through familiar methods.

Choosing to film the trilogy in New Zealand is another example of this strategy. Ian McKellan touches on the irony of filming an English pre-history in another country, “It would be tempting to think you could make the film in England, but you know, there’s nothing left in England that hasn’t been touched by subsequent civilization.”⁹² This “subsequent civilization,” plays a key role in establishing the authenticity of Middle-Earth but its effectiveness comes from

⁹¹ “Welcome to Middle-Earth: Houghton Mifflin In-Store Special,” in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, DVD, dir. Peter Jackson (New Zealand: New Line Cinemas, 2001).

⁹² “A Passage to Middle-Earth: the making of lord of the rings,” in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, DVD, dir. Peter Jackson (New Zealand: New Line Cinemas, 2001).

its establishment in accordance with the logic of the story. The England that Tolkien writes about no longer exists in England, but it could conceivably exist in New Zealand. Remembering the role these films play in national identity and popular imaginings of England, New Zealand has, ironically, become a primary site of English heritage. New Zealand's rugged mountains and broad natural landscapes serve as an historical setting only because they are void of overt markers of modernity. A more accurate description of this landscape might be ahistorical. It provides a clean background upon which any sort of pre-industrial history, real or imagined, could be inscribed and it is upon this landscape that the character of Middle-Earth (which is also the character of past England) is constructed.

2.2 Architecture

The history of culture and civilization comes from patterns of creation, evolution and extinction. European audiences are particularly familiar with building their cities and living their lives around the remains of long-gone societies. This language of architectural ruin or as Salo calls it, "the historic and prehistoric memories of the landscape,"⁹³ is appropriated to legitimize the fictional history of Middle-Earth. Just as English cities are built around the remnants of the Roman Empire, the fellowship traverses lands marked by the ruins of Arnor and Gondor. This is the language of public history and it demonstrates a physical relationship between past and present. It is evidence of human activity through the intentional transformation of space as well as nature's subsequent reclamation. The protagonists rarely acknowledge or meaningfully engage with these ruins, yet they are essential to the character of Middle-Earth.

This casual attitude towards the ruins plays upon an impression of depth strategy present in Tolkien's text. Michael Drout, Namiko Hitotsubashi and Rachel Scavera outline that Tolkien's use of broken references (references that draw upon a presupposed cultural knowledge that the audience no longer or perhaps never possesses) call attention to a gap in knowledge and emphasises "the impression that the characters are operating within a sophisticated historical culture that happens to be distinct from that of the readers."⁹⁴ Instead of drawing upon shared

⁹³ Salo, "Heroism and Alientation," 27.

⁹⁴ Namiko Hitotsubashi and Rachel Scavera, "Tolkien's Creation of the Impression of Depth," in *Tolkien Studies* vol. 11 (2014): 170.

cultural knowledge—or historical capital—as a means of communicative economy that references extra-textual information, broken references are conspicuous to audiences because they do not fully understand what is being referenced.⁹⁵ While Tolkien’s broken references are constructed, some of his known inspirations such as *Beowulf* or Chaucer’s works, have instances of broken references because the knowledge base of their intended audiences is so far removed from that of audiences today.⁹⁶ Thus, gaps in understanding are already associated with medieval texts and historical primary source material. This further reinforces the impression that this story is not fiction but history.

While Tolkien’s texts incorporate broken references through mention of characters, locations or events that do not directly pertain to the story of the Ring, the films translate this strategy into their mises-en-scène. The crumbling architecture is a material broken reference. It is a fragment of something that was once whole, immediately recognizable, and easily understood by its intended audience (the in-world characters). At the time of Frodo’s quest, these ruins present as fragmentary knowledge for the movie audience who, for the most part, do not know the details of their origins. The fact that characters rarely comment on their surroundings implies that this cultural knowledge is so common it is not remarkable. Therefore, this strategy functions on three levels. First of all, it visually translates the impression of depth present in Tolkien’s writing to film. Secondly, it distances the audience from the characters and heightens their awareness that although they may look human, we are not so closely related. The characters are different from us and draw upon a drastically different set of cultural knowledge. Finally, the ruins bear witness to the protagonists’ struggles and situate these struggles within a broader history, imbuing their actions with greater significance.

The Hobbits’ first confrontation with the Ringwraiths takes place in the decaying architecture of the abandoned watchtower Weathertop. Suspense builds as they await the attack. The camera pans to the impassive statues, figures standing in the shadows, bearing witness to their apparently imminent demise. The Wraiths pass effortlessly through the crumbling Romanesque arches. Their unnatural immortality, a result of their corruption, contrasts with the

⁹⁵ These references stand out more because of the casualness with which they are mentioned. Hitotsubashi and Scavera, “Tolkien’s Creation of the Impression of Depth,” 170.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

surrounding architecture that adheres to natural laws of decay. Here, the architecture not only contributes to the historicity of the land, but also serves as foil to the antagonists' unnerving timelessness.

The Gates of Argonath, featured later in the film, are made of two formidable stone statues of past kings. These statues reference the tradition of the colossus favoured by ancient Greek and Roman societies. Just as the Colossus of Rhodes celebrated Rhodes victory over Cyprus, the Argonath marked Gondor's victory against the Easterlings. The Argonath are imbued with a sadness associated with faded grandeur. They once marked the northernmost border of Gondor but at the time of *Fellowship*, the kingdom's borders have noticeably receded. Now they stand as reminders of a once-glorious kingdom. Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen) and Boromir's (Sean Bean) reverence for the gates echoes a familiar nostalgia evidenced by the West's repeated returns to classicism and patterns of revival. Interestingly, there are no contemporary examples of Middle-Earth societies using the architectural language of the colossus which further demonstrates this practice is aged and fallen out of favour. The mise-en-scène tells a history of the evolution of architectural and monumental aesthetic taste within Middle-Earth.

Boromir's betrayal is witnessed only by the oversized stone head of a past king of Gondor, presumably fallen from a colossus [Fig. 2.1]. As he tries to take the ring from Frodo, his failure echoes the catastrophic actions of his ancestors who also coveted the ring. The severed head serves as witness to the failings of humankind and its ruinous state testifies to the fallen kingdom, warning against the cost of such failures.



Figure 2.1: Screenshot, “The betrayal,” *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), New Line Cinema.

These emotionally heightened and narratively significant scenes were very deliberately framed within architectural ruins. They stand as reminders that the present struggle is the result of a culmination of past actions. They are a *memento mori* for the protagonists whose lives are constantly in danger. Framed within this narrative of grand history, large monuments and great power, Frodo's smallness and youthful naiveté stands in poetic contrast. Frodo's journey is history in the making. His character underscores reoccurring narrative themes that place the fate of the world in the smallest, most unassuming entities.

The architecture that is contemporaneous with the action of the film supports Middle-Earth's current medieval identity. Instances of Gothic and Romanesque architecture occur liberally throughout the film. The fellowship walks through a gothic cloister spiraling up a tree in Lóthlorian. The delicate tracery in Rivendell ceilings and domes reads like a complicated version of the (very English) fan vault. The Mines of Moria possess a great hall lined with square columns reminiscent of the nave of a cathedral. The camera pans to the ceiling to reveal orcs crawling out of a rib vault like insects. The mines feel especially Romanesque with their thick stone walls and few, small windows. Meanwhile Isengard's evil tower sharpens the points of gothic architecture to a sinister extreme. Each of these locations represents a different version of medieval England, each with its own place in the tradition of medievalism and medieval film. Several different interpretations of the Middle Ages are present in Middle-Earth and each is affiliated with a different culture and geography. The Middle Ages in Middle-Earth are intricate and aesthetic, dark and solid, sharp and imposing depending on who has built them.

Moreover, the characters' interaction with medieval architecture mirrors something modern audiences can relate to. As Eco remarks, "We no longer dwell in the Parthenon, but we still walk or pray in the naves of the cathedral."⁹⁷ *Fellowship* primarily showcases architectural features associated with churches and cathedrals. The foreign world of these foreign characters becomes more familiar to audiences through their physical relationship to architecture. While its broken references distance audience and character intellectually, how they physically live and move around the architecture reveals similarities. They dwell in medieval cathedrals and they contemplate past empires. The characters live in a time that is marked as a distant past, but it is not so distant that audiences cannot see themselves in their environment.

⁹⁷ Eco, "Dreaming of the Middle Ages," 68.

The Shire stands as architectural anachronism. Its circular doors and rounded interiors show a society that did not adopt (or, more likely, was not exposed to) rectilinear methods of building. The Hobbit holes are not dissimilar to Celtic roundhouses whose relatively low profiles and conical roofs might resemble rolling hillocks. Roundhouses were common home dwellings particularly prevalent in Britain throughout the Bronze and Iron ages. Visually, they mark a strong contrast with Roman building just as the Hobbit holes set the Hobbits apart from the rest of Middle-Earth's medievalisms.

2.3 Costume

For the most part, Tolkien's writings do not privilege descriptions of costumes. Clothing is rarely described in detail unless its material is particularly remarkable (for example, mithril). Conversely, the films heavily rely on costumes to play a vital authenticating role in the world of Middle-Earth. Whereas *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* uses stereotypical medieval costume primarily to mark the difference between the real world and the fantasy world, *Fellowship of the Ring* uses it to differentiate between several cultures simultaneously existing in Middle-Earth. Costume designer Ngila Dickson lead the creation of costumes that demonstrate broader cultural attributes (values, craftsmanship, natural resources, politics) but also account for individual variability [Fig. 2.1]. Because each culture is clearly defined in great detail, anomalies within that culture and contrasts between different cultures are highlighted.⁹⁸ Costume in *Fellowship* is fairly static in that the characters rarely change their full outfit. Generally, the base costume stays the same and serves as a reminder of home and cultural identity. Any alteration or addition (such as the Elven pins from Lothlórian) mark the journey's progress and character development. However, these alterations are much subtler than the Pevensies' highly visual transformation when they were thrust into adventure.

⁹⁸ This is a particularly effective strategy the emphasize that the fellowship is made up of a diverse selection of beings at odds with one another.



Figure 2.2: Screenshot, “The Fellowship,” *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), New Line Cinema.

Costume is also used to activate the plot. At times, it directly influences character motivations, actions and decisions. The clearest, most narratively influential costume piece is the One Ring whose existence drives the action of the series.⁹⁹ The ring’s significance is such that it is often treated as a fully-fledged character with its own motives and actions: “The ring has awoken. It’s heard its master’s call.”¹⁰⁰ It is shown rolling down a mountain as Galadriel narrates: “The ring abandoned Gollum.”¹⁰¹ The ring is not merely an inanimate object, but an active agent of its own fate. Because of this, it cannot be worn as a normal ring. Frodo wears it on a chain around his neck instead of on his finger. This unusual treatment underscores the ring’s abnormality while also giving it a stronger physical presence. Viewers catch glimpses of the ring or the chain and are reminded of the purpose of the quest.

⁹⁹ The distinction between prop and costume can be difficult to definitively delineate. I include the ring in the discussion of costume because it is intrinsically wearable. It is specifically designed to be worn on the body and its primary function is to be worn. Some props are wearable but primarily used for other functions (such as a weapon). However, in order to access the full power of the ring, it must be worn on the finger. For the majority of the film, Frodo wears the ring on a chain around his neck. While this may defy the specific intention of the design, it continues to function as a wearable accessory, an essential component of Frodo’s outfit and visual evidence of his identity as ring-bearer.

¹⁰⁰ *Fellowship of the Ring*, DVD.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Throughout the film, the ring elicits dramatic and adverse responses from several characters. It supports Jenss and Hofmann's assertion that "fashion is not a mere epiphenomenon but constantly and very directly intervenes with our human feelings and social affairs."¹⁰² Boromir and Galadriel are tempted by its power. Gandalf and Aragorn distance themselves from it. But the most significant response to the ring is Frodo's. During the Council of Elrond, the council argues about what to do with the ring. Frodo watches the discord in the reflection of the ring's surface and visualizes the flames that would engulf them if they could not find a solution. The ring becomes a mirror reflecting the gravity of the situation and the danger that awaits should they fail. It is because of this realization reflected in the ring that Frodo volunteers to destroy it himself. It is in this moment that Frodo changes from an accidental (and somewhat unwilling) participant to an active agent of his future. He takes on this journey as his own responsibility and personal obligation. This is the pivotal moment of growth where the hero chooses to willingly risk his life for the good of all. The stimulus for this moment of realization is framed completely within the mirrored surface of the ring.

2.4 Hobbits

The Hobbits serve as what Salo refers to as a "baseline culture" that provides a familiar platform for audiences to cling to as they enter the otherwise alien world of Middle Earth.¹⁰³ Frodo, the main protagonist in *Fellowship*, plays the role of naïve newcomer. When he exits The Shire, he functions as audience surrogate, the proxy through which the audience's questions about Middle Earth can be addressed. Frodo's costumes, as well as the costumes of the other Hobbits, emphasise that these are the characters the audience is meant to identify with. Their clothes are not overtly medieval but read as late 18th-century and even as recent as early 20th-century rural English fashions [Fig. 2.2].¹⁰⁴ They wear loose, ankle-length trousers (situating them in a post-breeches era), collarless shirts, waistcoats buttoned up the front and overcoats with strikingly

¹⁰² Jenss and Hofmann, *Fashion and Materiality*, 8.

¹⁰³ Salo, "Heroism and Alienation," 35.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

modern lapels, tailoring and fit.¹⁰⁵ The use of corduroy is especially notable for its 19th-century English origins. Their clothing is temporally closer to the audience making them appear familiar despite their foreign customs (although the foundation of these customs is still situated within a familiar agricultural society). Ironically, the coding of the Hobbits' costumes suggests that the modern audience is meant to identify more closely with them than the human characters whose costumes situate them in a much more distant past.¹⁰⁶ Salo argues that the Hobbits themselves are anachronisms in the world of Middle Earth.¹⁰⁷ The quaintness of their dress also conveys an ongoing infantilization of the Hobbits throughout the films.¹⁰⁸

Within this grouping of Hobbits, there exists individual variation based on class, Shire region and personality. Frodo's mithril corslet, a gift from his uncle, represents his family's anomalous legacy of adventure. This particular piece of mithril carries Frodo's familial history but the material itself holds much greater historical connotations as its mining ultimately lead to the demise of the kingdom of Khazad-dûm.¹⁰⁹ The mithril saves Frodo's life in the Mines of Moria after which Gandalf remarks, "I think there's more to this hobbit than meets the eye."¹¹⁰ However, the audience already knew about the mithril and its purpose. Everything that the audience needs to know about Frodo is visually accessible through his costume.

¹⁰⁵ Pippin (Billy Boyd)'s green overcoat looks especially like a loose-fitting version of a standard men's sport coat today. Although buttons can be traced back to antiquity, the Hobbits are the only characters who wear them.

¹⁰⁶ This is especially true in *Fellowship* when Aragorn and Boromir are much more comfortable and knowledgeable about the world of Middle-Earth than either the Hobbits or the audience. As the series continues, Aragorn becomes the audience's frontman and sympathetic hero.

¹⁰⁷ Salo, "Heroism and Alienation," 25.

¹⁰⁸ Jane Chance provides a detailed account of the Hobbits' infantilization in Jackson's films in her essay "Is there a Text in this Hobbit? Peter Jackson's *Fellowship of the Ring*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2002): 79-85.

¹⁰⁹ This history is brought to the forefront of the narrative when the fellowship is confronted with the Balrog (the creature the Dwarves awoke when their greed compelled them to mine too deeply) in the Mines of Moria.

¹¹⁰ *Fellowship of the Ring*, DVD.



Figure 2.3: Publicity Still, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), New Line Cinema.

2.5 Men

Aragorn and Boromir represent the race of Men and their costumes align with fairly standard representations of male medieval warriors (full suits of armour aside). Layers of chainmail are just visible under sturdily constructed tunics fastened with ties or brooches. The length of their tunics situates them before the reign Edward III (1327-77).¹¹¹ Aragorn's knee-length tunic most closely resembles 11th-century Saxon or Norman style, however this length was also worn by the Saxons earlier and went in and out of style until Edward III's reign (which marks a change to much shorter tunics). Boromir's ankle-length tunic and embroidery on the sleeve resembles the length and style of the Normans and Flemings whose styles were adopted in the English court under William II (1087-1100), often marking more formal occasions or functioning as a sign of the upper class.¹¹² Boromir's clothing is more fashionable, detailed and better maintained than Aragorn's which speaks to their character differences (the son of the Steward of Gondor vs. a ranger hiding from his royal birthright). Their long bob hairstyles went in and out of favour throughout the Middle Ages but also conveniently align with popular 1990s grunge aesthetic lending them greater modern appeal.

¹¹¹ Nancy Bradfield, *Historical Costumes of England 2nd Ed.* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd, 1958), 39.

¹¹² Bradfield, *Historical Costumes of England*, 15.

Boromir plays into a more traditional knightly standard as noble fighter and protector of his people. Even when he tries to take the ring from Frodo he states he is doing so for the wellbeing of his people. He is the only member of the fellowship to carry a shield which stands as a visual representation of this abstract quality that is essential to the identity of the knight.¹¹³

Meanwhile, Aragorn represents a more modern take on the medieval warrior. His sensitivity, introspection and characterization as a mysterious brooding outsider reflects a more recent male trope in popular culture.¹¹⁴ William Woods argues that medieval films are “fables of identity,” a journey of discovering and authenticating one’s notion of self.¹¹⁵ Although this thematic element also plays out through Frodo’s character arc, *Fellowship* uses Aragorn’s self-acceptance as the film’s emotional climax. Despite his previous doubts, when Boromir dies, Aragorn acknowledges their brotherhood and begins to accept his role as leader and protector of Men. Sharon McCoy describes this scene as the moment “Aragorn finally finds a concept of kingliness that he can embrace.”¹¹⁶ This moment of immense character growth is marked by a costume alteration. He puts on Boromir’s vambraces which are decorated with the white tree of Gondor and wears them for the remainder of the trilogy. The vambraces, which were not a part of Tolkien’s books, thus become an object imbued with several layers of personal history (Boromir’s and Aragorn’s) as well as symbols of a significant shift in the broader history of the race of Men (a new era of leadership).

This moment also signifies Aragorn’s embodiment of the modern “king as knight” trope outlined by Elliott which allows Aragorn to freely interact with other characters (instead of residing on a throne, removed from the action) and prove his worth through combat and

¹¹³ Elliott argues that writers and artists as far back as the medieval period imbued the model of the knight with the values of the period making it a metonym for abstract qualities that would otherwise have to be explicitly detailed. *Remaking the Middle Ages*, 58.

¹¹⁴ 2000s popular culture embraced this trend of fictive brooding, sensitive males from Ryan Atwood of *The O.C.* (2003-7), Edward Cullen from the *Twilight* series (2008-12) and Jon Snow from *Game of Thrones* (2011-19).

¹¹⁵ Woods, “Authenticating Realism in Medieval Film,” 49.

¹¹⁶ Sharon D. McCoy, “‘My brothers, I see in your eyes the same fear’: The Transformation of Class Relations in Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy” in *Fantasy Fiction into Film*, ed. Leslie Stratyner and James R. Keller (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc, 2007), 68.

otherwise honourable behaviour.¹¹⁷ His initial reluctance to accept his inherited privilege combined with a demonstrated competence as honourable leader and fighter speaks to a modern storytelling trend dubbed the “democratization of the Middle Ages.”¹¹⁸ To better appeal to North American audiences who are less nostalgic for monarchical regimes and, especially for Americans, whose national identity is built upon a supposed rejection of privilege based on bloodlines, Aragorn must somehow earn or prove his worthiness as ruler. When Aragorn puts on Boromir’s vambraces, it signals that he has properly demonstrated his worthiness to the audience (at least for the first installment of the story). Both Aragorn and the audience are now ready for him to accept his title.



Figure 2.4: Screenshot, “Putting on the vambraces,” *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), New Line Cinema.

2.6 Elves

The Elven costumes are characterized by elegantly tailored tunics, long dresses and robes decorated with delicate embroidery and exaggerated sleeves. Their costumes often have floral motifs and organic flourishes that serve as visual reminders of their harmonious relationship with nature.¹¹⁹ Even their armour, a type of clothing with a vital life-or-death seriousness, has been

¹¹⁷ Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages*, 65.

¹¹⁸ Susan Aronstein and Nancy Coiner, “Twice Knightly: Democratizing the Middle Ages for Middle-Class America,” *Studies in Medievalism* 6 (1994), 212.

¹¹⁹ The delicate, interlacing patterns are also reflected in their architecture creating an identifiable Elven aesthetic that visually connects all Elven-produced cultural products.

carefully crafted to reflect the organic curvatures of nature and uphold a high standard of aesthetic craftsmanship that becomes an identifiable Elven trademark.

The “otherness” of their character derives primarily from their immortality and the subsequent shift in inner logic. Interestingly, this timelessness is conveyed through a romanticized, minimalist take on medieval aristocratic fashion and what Salo describes as “an apparently magical inability to get dirty.”¹²⁰ The pointed ears are perhaps subtler than the overall effect of the uniformity of casting exclusively fair, slender actors with fine, straight features. Viewers are confronted with a community of graceful, slow-moving supermodels living in the forest. The elves in Rivendell are dressed in deep autumnal colours (matching the weather) in reference to their time on Middle-Earth ending with the War of the Ring.¹²¹ While the Men mourn their fallen empire, Elven melancholia stems from the imminent end of their own age. Edmund Wainwright describes it as, “the sense of a great loss and sadness as cherished and beautiful things pass beyond reach.”¹²² The Elven costume embodies this sadness and beauty as they prepare to leave Middle-Earth.

Arwen’s (Liv Tyler) character expansion from the source material demonstrates Jackson’s apparent effort to incorporate a stronger female presence into the story. Her character assumes the actions of a male Elf (Glorfindel) in Tolkien’s books and she becomes a knightly figure. Arwen is given a suspenseful and narratively significant chase sequence transporting Frodo to Rivendell while neatly dodging the Ringwraiths. Part of the success of this character alteration is that she is not styled to look like her male counterparts. She is slight, beautiful and generally looks the part of what would traditionally constitute a damsel in distress. However, she outrides the Ringwraiths in a feminine, impeccably tailored dress with billowing sleeves. Her long hair flies loosely (but never in her way). It is in this subversion of expectation, a female character enacting traditional femininity while performing heroic and athletic feats, that Susan Butvin Sainato argues lies the power of the female knight archetype, “she should be the victim

¹²⁰ Salo, “Heroism and Alienation,” 32.

¹²¹ “A Passage to Middle-Earth,” DVD.

¹²² Wainwright, *Tolkien’s Mythology for Middle Earth*, 102.

but instead becomes the hero.”¹²³ An errant tree branch scratches Arwen’s cheek serving as her only battle wound. It is a superficial injury (one she does not even seem notice) especially compared to the physical trials the all-male fellowship will endure. However, it is notable because it is Arwen who receives it. This moment provides a rare instance of a female character experiencing physical rather than emotional pain. Arwen joins the ranks of other female knightly figures produced in the 1990s and early 2000s including Princess Fiona of *Shrek* (2001) or Buffy from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) who reflect a broadening of the modern definition of chivalric defender.¹²⁴

2.7 Wizards

The wizards in *Fellowship* uphold a long literary (and subsequently filmic) tradition of depictions of Merlin. Gandalf directly fits into the old, bearded, robe-wearing, pointy-hatted wizard archetype that can be directly traced back to popular portrayals of Merlin emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (which has now become the general standard for all wizards onscreen).¹²⁵ This is true both in his iconography as well as his role as mentor, scholar (recalling his scene of archival research), insurer of the betterment of the nation and assistant to the king’s destined journey of self-discovery as per traditional Arthurian legend.¹²⁶ The iconography of Gandalf’s costume is representative of the standard of depicting wizards throughout the broader tradition of medieval tales and medieval film.

However, costume plays a more active role for Saruman (Christopher Lee) as his robes become a visible manifestation of his corruption. Previously known as Saruman the White, when he reveals himself to Gandalf in the book, he calls himself “Saruman of Many Colours.”¹²⁷

¹²³ Susan Butvin Sainato, “Not Your Typical Knight: The Emerging On-Screen Defender,” in *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, ed. Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2004), 141.

¹²⁴ Butvin Sainato, “Not Your Typical Knight,” 138.

¹²⁵ Michael A. Torregrossa, “The Way of the Wizard: Reflections of Merlin on Film,” in *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, ed. Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2004), 170

¹²⁶ Torregrossa, “The Way of the Wizard,” 174-5.

¹²⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: Harper Collins, 2007), 337.

Gandalf describes this moment: “I looked then and saw that his robes, which had seemed white, were not so, but were woven of all colours. And if he moved they shimmered and changed hue so that the eye was bewildered.”¹²⁸ Their ensuing discussion about morality is articulated through sartorial metaphor. “‘White!’ [Saruman] sneered. ‘It serves as a beginning. White cloth may be dyed.’”¹²⁹ The film does not include this dialogue but maintains the metaphor visually. When Gandalf meets with Saruman, his robes are dirty and appear grey, foreshadowing his corruption.

2.8 Orcs

The Orcs and Uruk-hai make up the general mass of evil characters in *Fellowship*. They do not receive individual treatment but present as a large, anonymous Other. This is emphasised through their identical dress and namelessness. Even Lurtz (Lawrence Makaore), the Uruk captain and the only individualized Uruk-hai or Orc character, was not actually addressed by name in the film and did not have any speaking lines. Unlike the other races, these characters are only ever dressed in armour, underscoring their penchant for violence and extreme aggression (even towards each other). The Orcs, who the audience learns are a corrupt derivation of Elves, stand in direct contrast to Elven culture and aesthetics. In Tolkien’s world, they represent his dislike for industrialization, a theme intentionally carried through to the films. Richard Taylor, president of WETA Workshops stated: “We have tried to pick up on these very strong industrial analogies through the brutal crudeness of the forms that make up the Uruk-hai and Orc armour, the repetitive mass-produced nature.”¹³⁰ Built in opposition to Elven armour, Orc armour is crude, unaesthetic, made in a factory-like production style and valued only for its necessary functionality.

Given the age of the source material, certain adaptive changes were necessary to create a product suited to the 2000s social climate. Recognizing that fantasy is intrinsically linked to the reality of the author, personal bias and worldview are inserted into the fictional world. Tolkien’s characterization of Orcs is clearly racialized and his books create direct connections between the

¹²⁸ Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 337.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ “A Passage to Middle-Earth,” DVD.

forces of evil and non-Western cultures. There are strong themes of genetic superiority (and subsequent inferiority) throughout.¹³¹ While the age and cultural climate from when *The Lord of the Rings* was created does not excuse its racism, it is also not wholly productive to villainize an individual for a world view that was informed by much larger and deeply imbedded systems of colonialism and Empire.¹³² Even more problematic is when later adaptations carry this legacy of racism forward.¹³³ Jackson's films do not adapt their approach to Orc representation in light of developments in the field of critical race theory or changing social attitudes concerning the construction and representation of race in media.

Tolkien's books have a marked absence of female characters and those that do exist have only rare moments of significant narrative utility. Jackson's answer to this issue, as it pertains to *Fellowship*, was to expand Arwen's character. Arwen as knight demonstrates an awareness of the issue and shows an effort to remedy (or, at least, somewhat assuage) the problem. However, instead of addressing racism similarly, all three of the *Lord of the Rings* films appear to lean into stereotypical racial/cultural coding, particularly in the casting and costuming.¹³⁴ This is especially surprising considering changing attitudes towards the "monster," a character type that has come to represent social fears. Monsters, beginning in the latter part of the 20th century increasingly reframe the Other as misunderstood, sympathetic, emotionally complex or even

¹³¹ These exist between races as well as within racial categories as evidenced by Aragorn's superior bloodlines to Boromir's which, it is implied, make him a better king. Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 23.

¹³² Film, in particular, tends to portray racism as a failing of the individual rather than the collective. It is easier to sell an individual evil character to an audience than to explore the complex global and national systems that reward certain groups of people and their racist behaviour. This is not to say that individuals do not have the autonomy to determine their own actions and question the systems in which they live, but to place the blame solely on the individual simplifies the situation and fails to address larger systemic issues.

¹³³ Young notes that the Whiteness and bigotry present in Tolkien's work is especially problematic for its influence on later writing and the fantasy genre as a whole. *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 32.

¹³⁴ This reflects a broader trend in 2000s media where modern notions of feminism and sexuality have been more readily adopted into canonical works and mainstream culture in general. This is especially apparent in Disney's rebranding their princesses as independent, feisty heroines. While companies seem to have found a type of easily-marketable feminism and increasingly include non-heterosexual characters in family-geared content, the same does not appear to be true for addressing histories of racial inequality.

relatable.¹³⁵ Allen Weiss asserts that “Monsters are indicators of epistemic shifts.”¹³⁶ As fears of the Other and ideas of what constitutes Other shift, so too does our understanding of the monster whose defining trait is the embodiment of difference and the unknown.

It has not escaped the attention of general audiences nor academics that, for the most part, all morally good characters are White and practice forms of Western-European culture while evil characters have darker skin and cultural aesthetics that can be linked to Asian, Black or Indigenous (particularly groups from the Antipodes) cultures. Just as the Hobbits’ costumes code them as relatable, identifiable, familiar, and British, the Orcs’ costumes code them as crude, violent, Other and non-Western.¹³⁷ Within the context of *Fellowship*, the Orcs and Uruk-hai are the only races that practice any overt body modification. Their piercings and body paint exemplify broader criticism concerning the racial coding in the films.¹³⁸ Kim Sue notes that their white face paint, coarse black hair and darker skin tone gives the Uruk-hai a strong resemblance to Māori warriors.¹³⁹ She also notes that three of the most evil individualized characters (Lurtz, the Witch-King and Sauron) are some of the rare instances of casting actors who were not White (in this case Māori and Sāmoan).¹⁴⁰ The film asserts that the Orcs are non-human but they are dressed in identifiably human aesthetics.¹⁴¹ Racial coding works similarly to historical capital or clothing semiotics where the audience draws conclusions based on extratextual information. As

¹³⁵ Jackson’s *King Kong* was released two years after *Return of the King* and fully leaned into the notion that the monster was more lovable and sympathetic than many of the human characters. This film is built upon the idea that the audience must realize that the Other is not so different from them and not necessarily something to be feared.

¹³⁶ Allen Weiss, “Ten Theses on Monsters and Monstrosity,” *TDR: The Drama Review* vol. 48, no. 1 (2004): 125.

¹³⁷ It is equally problematic that the familiar, audience proxy is White or that the race of Men is exclusively Anglo-Saxon. Making the reader identify with a White protagonist as default is not unique to Tolkien and is pervasive enough within the genre to be considered a “convention of High Fantasy.” Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 89.

¹³⁸ This coding becomes even stronger in the later films with the appearance of the Easterlings and Southrons.

¹³⁹ Sue Kim, “Beyond Black and White: Race and Postmodernism in *The Lord of the Rings* Films,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 50, no. 4 (2004): 877.

¹⁴⁰ Lawrence Makoare played the Witch King in *Return of the King* and Sauron was played by Sala Baker for the entire trilogy. Kim, “Beyond Black and White,” 881.

¹⁴¹ This is the Tolkienian equivalent to James Cameron’s equally weak effort of painting *Avatar*’s Na’vi people blue to assert that they do not represent any specific Indigenous populations.

much as the film dialogue may state that the Orcs are non-human, audiences' interpretations of the visual cues based on their own foundational knowledge may draw different conclusions.

Even more troubling is the apparent intention to lean into racial coding through makeup and costume more than what was presented in the books. One of the few physical descriptions in Tolkien's *Fellowship* states: "a huge orc-chieftain, almost man-high, clad in black mail from head to foot, leaped into the chamber...his broad face was swart, his eyes were like coals, and his tongue was red."¹⁴² While this is clearly a racialized description, it appears that the Orcs' facial piercings, dangling earrings, and the Uruk-hai's dreadlocks and red and black facial makeup (which could be interpreted as tattoos) were filmic additions [Fig. 2.4]. The filmmakers made the conscious decision not only to disregard this opportunity to adapt an outdated worldview in their new interpretation of the work, but also used costuming to exaggerate it.

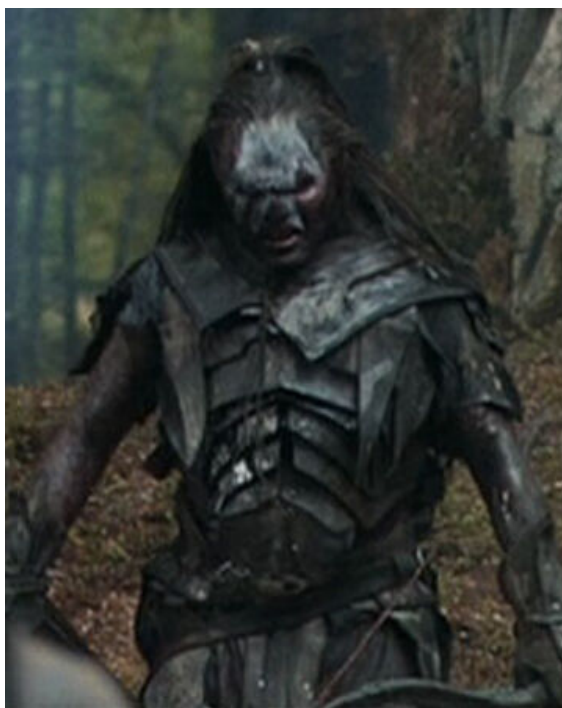


Figure 2.5: Screenshot, “Lurtz,” *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), New Line Cinema.

Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* establishes a complex and nuanced realism through its use of real-world history. This history is predominantly conveyed

¹⁴² Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 423.

visually through markers of past human intervention in the landscape, architecture, and costume. Costume itself functions in several ways. It authenticates the worldbuilding, marks history and lineage, signifies culture and emphasises cultural difference. It is used to establish in-universe norms and then to subvert them. Costume visually codes characters temporally and culturally to signal to audiences how they should feel and relate to each character. This strategy is used to great narrative effect in the case of the Hobbits' costume but also upholds problematic and outdated representations of race in regard to the Orcs and Uruk-hai. Tolkien's writing and Jackson's filmmaking were very generically influential and many of these conventions—both good and bad—are carried through in the final case study.

Chapter 3

3 Another Knockoff? Grimdark “Realism” in *Game of Thrones*

Game of Thrones (2011-2019) created by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss is a television series adaptation of George R.R. Martin’s fantasy novels *A Song of Ice and Fire*. It immerses audiences into the world of Westeros, a land largely inspired by medieval Europe with particular emphasis on Scotland and England, and its Mediterranean-inspired counterpart Essos. Season 1 introduces viewers to the world’s present state of affairs and their historical foundations. The past is largely remembered for its politics (mainly the influence of the Mad King Aerys) and the present is defined by its current political crisis as Houses Lannister, Stark and Targaryen (among others) vie to sit on the Iron Throne and rule the Seven Kingdoms. The overall tone is bleak and presents a world where children are murdered, little girls are threatened with rape, familial relations range from open hostility to incest and no character is safe from horrific mutilation or deep psychological trauma. *Game of Thrones* falls into a type of medievalism described by Finke and Shichtman as one that “associate[s] the medieval with the barbarity, superstition, and violence from which civilization (modernity) is supposed to have rescued us.”¹⁴³ Finke and Shichtman argue that filth has become a marker of “realistic” depictions of the Middle Ages as a way to counter “false” romantic or nostalgic depictions.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, filth functions as an ideological symbol of a backward “Dark Ages” society which also underscores the audience’s temporal and ideological distance from this time as it contrasts with the clean present.¹⁴⁵

Martin intentionally constructed his world in opposition to what he calls “Disneyland Middle Ages.”¹⁴⁶ Because of this, Martin’s work exists in a medieval fantasy subgenre known as

¹⁴³ Finke and Shichtman, *Cinematic Illuminations*, 18.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁴⁶ Dave Itzkoff, “For ‘Game of Thrones,’ Rising Unease Over Rape’s Recurring Role,” in *The New York Times*, May 2, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/03/arts/television/for-game-of-thrones-rising-unease-over-ropes-recurring-role.html>

Grimdark or Gritty Fantasy.¹⁴⁷ Audiences are not presented with a romanticised, escapist dream meant to assuage real-world anxieties. Nor does the story call for a return to values seemingly abandoned in the wake of modernity. On the contrary, there is a strong disillusionment with traditional ideas of faith, love, honour and the value of self-sacrifice in war. A conversation between Theon (Alfie Allen) and Robb (Richard Madden) exemplifies this pessimism:

Robb: “I sent 2000 men to their graves today.”

Theon: “The bards will sing songs of their sacrifice.”

Robb: “Aye, but the dead won’t hear them.”¹⁴⁸

The dialogue exposes an absurdity in finding comfort in notions of honour, legacy and public memory, themes which are underscored repeatedly throughout the series. Loving, gentle relationships are kept to a minimum (and often established only to raise the emotional stakes when they are inevitably destroyed) while justice often comes through violent means. The world of Westeros glorifies violence, manipulation and psychopathic tendencies. Good deeds are punished and the worst aspects of human nature are often rewarded. Martin’s world heavily relies on pain as a primary authenticating feature, a common strategy of medieval film.¹⁴⁹

Early episodes introduce the rules of the world and establish a pattern of character subversion. A number of common fantasy character tropes are turned on their heads. King Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy), is not a noble and just leader but a crude, lazy, abusive glutton. Eddard “Ned” Stark (Sean Bean), the honourable leader and loving family man who, in any other story would be the hero of the tale, is killed off not in spite of but *because* of his notions of loyalty, mercy and honour. Jaime Lannister (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau), the young, attractive knight is revealed to be an incestuous “king slayer.” Young Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner) dreams

¹⁴⁷ The notion that Gritty Fantasy somehow portrays “the real Middle Ages” is, as Helen Young asserts, central to the identity of the genre. This raises issues that are especially apparent in Martin’s work, although he did not invent this genre or its association with realism. As will be discussed later, claims of historical accuracy which are seemingly supported by clear in-text historical references and allusions, can be wrongfully used to defend toxic or at the very least questionable representations of race, gender and sexual violence as “historically accurate.” Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 63, 83.

¹⁴⁸ “Baelor,” *Game of Thrones: Season 1*, written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, directed by Alan Taylor, HBO, 2011.

¹⁴⁹ Woods, “Authenticating Realism in Medieval Film,” 44.

of marriage and children only to learn that her Prince Charming is a malevolent sadist. These and other characters set up a subversion of expectation that quickly became a trademark of the series.

These atypical characters are coupled with high mortality rates. Ned Stark's execution is one of the most iconic events of the entire series because it is the first truly disruptive instance that forces audiences to realize that this fantasy world does not follow traditional storytelling conventions. Favourite characters and actors (at least for the earlier seasons) are not safe from sudden death and, even more shockingly, their deaths are not always reserved for season finales. Vu articulates this strategy: "The audience is led to access their knowledge of fantasy conventions (the certainty of moral resolution, the immortality of characters whose point of view we share, etc.) only to be forced to doubt them at every step."¹⁵⁰ The appeal of the story, especially for viewers who have not read the books, is its unsettling of expectation. This strategy cultivates suspense and tension. When beloved characters are unexpectedly killed in cold blood, viewers experience similar shock and distress as the remaining characters onscreen. This creates an emotional experience that mirrors that of the characters' and ultimately gives viewers a taste of the harsh world of Westeros.¹⁵¹

3.1 Historical Equivalencies vs. Themes of the Present

Despite its overt historical references, the concept for *Game of Thrones* was intentionally written as distinct from historical fiction. Martin argued that "the problem with straight historical fiction is you know what's going to happen."¹⁵² Martin consciously built his story to avoid what he saw

¹⁵⁰ Ryan Vu, "Fantasy After Representation: D&D, Game of Thrones, and Postmodern World-Building," *Extrapolation* 58, no. 2-3 (2017), 291.

¹⁵¹ This became a source of further entertainment online as "Red Wedding Reaction" videos trended on YouTube. These videos consisted of viewers who had read the books and knew what was about to happen recording the reactions of friends who had not read the books as they watched the Red Wedding for the first time.

¹⁵² Mikal Gilmore, "George R.R. Martin: The Rolling Stone Interview," in *Rolling Stone*, April 23, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/george-r-r-martin-the-rolling-stone-interview-242487/>.

as the limitations of historical fact.¹⁵³ Westeros is filled with overt markers of fantastic invention (dragons, un-dead beings, magic) and this forthrightness allows for the creative freedom to include, exclude or alter any historical inspiration so long as it works according to the logic of the fictional world.

Martin's approach reflects Marcus Bull's observation that "we play with the past, treating it like a giant shopping mall full of images, motifs and ideas which we can consume in whatever combinations we choose."¹⁵⁴ *Game of Thrones* faced intense critique over which historically-based elements were employed particularly in relation to the ever-present threat (or reality) of rape for all female characters and its use as a plot device. KellyAnn Fitzpatrick traces a pattern of shirking responsibility for the prevalence of rape in the story. Benioff and Weiss defend its presence in the show because it is found in the source material, while Martin justifies his source material as "historically accurate."¹⁵⁵ Barring the absurdity of defending a story containing dragons and ice zombies as historically accurate, their dedication to the "historical" treatment of the female body was markedly undermined by an apparently equal dedication to Brazilian waxes for the nude women. Furthermore, as Fitzpatrick argues "If even medievalists question the possibility of accessing the Middle Ages, we should perhaps hesitate before taking Martin at his word that he himself can not only access them, but also translate them cleanly into fantasy fiction."¹⁵⁶ *Game of Thrones* contributes to pre-existing conventions of Grimdark Fantasy where violence and grit translates to realism and authors are relieved of any social responsibility

¹⁵³ Starz' *Outlander* (2014-present) provides an interesting point of comparison as a contemporaneous literary-based fantasy TV series that also addresses significant moments of political crisis in Scotland's national history. *Outlander* very purposefully leans into the inevitability of historical fact and its entertainment derives from rooting for characters working within the constraints of a predetermined fate. Because of its approach to storytelling, history, gender and sexuality, *Outlander* has (so far) avoided many of the controversies and criticisms that *Game of Thrones* has accumulated. See Jorie Lagerwey, "The Feminist Game of Thrones: Outlander and Gendered Discourses of TV Genre," in *Women do Genre in Film and Television* eds. M. Harrod and K. Paszkiewicz (New York: Routledge, 2018): 198-212.

¹⁵⁴ Bull, *Thinking Medieval*, 9.

¹⁵⁵ KellyAnn Fitzpatrick, *Neomedievalism, Popular Culture, and the Academy: From Tolkien to Game of Thrones* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., 2019), 125. Contributing to this problem is a growing trend identified by Hilary Jane Locke who recognized that history books were being marketed to the public through *Game of Thrones* which further conflates the series with academically-sanctioned history. See Hilary Jane Locke, "Beyond 'tits and dragons': Medievalisms, Medieval history and Perceptions in *Game of Thrones*," in *From Medievalism to Early-Modernism: Adapting the English Past*, ed. Marina Gerziz and Aidan Norrie (New York: Routledge, 2018), 178-9.

¹⁵⁶ Fitzpatrick, *Neomedievalism, Popular Culture, and the Academy*, 126.

because their creative decisions can be masked by a dedication to a mythical historical accuracy.¹⁵⁷ Although medieval Britain was undeniably patriarchal in structure, North, Alvestad and Woodacre argue that consistently depicting the past as a “man’s world” demonstrates either a lack of historical understanding of power or, considering these stories are tools to speak about the present, a reflection of less-than-progressive modern understandings of gendered power dynamics.¹⁵⁸

Westeros is framed as a stand-alone world. It is not a prehistory for our world nor is it situated as a parallel universe although the worldbuilding and narrative action closely relate to Scottish and English history. David Weinczok identifies two main types of historical association present in *Game of Thrones*: direct equivalencies and thematic comparisons.¹⁵⁹ One of the most famous direct equivalencies occurs in “The Rains of Castamere” also known as the “Red Wedding.”¹⁶⁰ This notorious episode, famous for its shocking gore and mass slaughter of favourite characters, was inspired by two equally notorious moments of Scottish history: The Black Dinner in 1440 and the Glencoe Massacre of 1692.¹⁶¹ Both the episode and historic events mark such egregious social transgression (breaking Scotland’s ancient and valued guest-right law) that they stand out even amongst the violence of their broader narrative contexts.¹⁶²

Meanwhile, Weinczok describes thematic comparisons as “glimpses of the workings of the great wheel of Westerosi history, politics, beliefs and conventions [which] reflect, and allow

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 127. For additional insights into this discussion see also Alyssa Rosenberg, “Men and Monsters: Rape, Myth-Making, and the Rise and Fall of Nations in *A Song of Ice and Fire*,” in *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R. R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire from A Game of Thrones to A Dance with Dragons* 15-27, ed. James Lowder (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2012). Shiloh Carroll, *Medievalism in a Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., 2018). And the aforementioned Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*.

¹⁵⁸ Janice North, Alvestad Karl and Elena Woodacre, eds., *Premodern Rulers and Postmodern Viewers*, 12.

¹⁵⁹ David C. Weinczok, *The History Behind Game of Thrones: The North Remembers* (Havertown: Pen & Sword Ltd., 2019), x-xi.

¹⁶⁰ “The Rains of Castamere,” *Game of Thrones: Season 3*, written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, directed by David Nutter, HBO, 2013.

¹⁶¹ James Hibberd, “‘Game of Thrones’ author George R.R. Martin: Why he wrote The Red Wedding,” *CNN*, June 7, 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/07/showbiz/tv/game-martin-red-wedding-ew/index.html>.

¹⁶² Other equivalencies have been drawn between Tywin Lannister and Edward I of England as well as the Wall and its similarities to Hadrian’s wall and the Antonine wall. See Weinczok’s *The History Behind Game of Thrones* for detailed descriptions of these relationships.

us to better comprehend, our own time.”¹⁶³ These historically-situated themes provide an opportunity for modern audiences to examine the present through the lens of the (fantastic) past. *Game of Thrones* is built upon the idea that there is no clear boundary between good and evil. Each kingdom is a villain to another and morally ambiguous characters take turns moving in and out of the realm of public sympathy.

Considering the historical inspiration and the cultural climate in which the show aired, it is not surprising that such a murky portrayal of good and evil was so well received. Martin’s writings were largely inspired by the Wars of the Roses (1455-85), a civil war between Houses Lancaster and York (uncoincidentally similar to Lannister and Stark) fighting for the English throne. Civil war in general and the War of the Roses in particular, signals a failing of social and political organization (in this case the feudal system) and demonstrates a marked disconnection between the needs of the people and the systems that structure their lives. *Game of Thrones* examines a moment of political crisis and social disorder that Catelyn Stark (Michelle Fairley) sums up as, “There’s a king in every corner.”¹⁶⁴ Vidal argues that examining moments of political crises are a particular strength of monarchy films which perform an important myth-making and myth-breaking function for the British nation.¹⁶⁵ She also asserts that the portrayal of history and ideas of the nation are directly influenced by current media narratives and cultural climate.¹⁶⁶ While *Game of Thrones* certainly speaks to ideas of British national identity, it also has great international appeal.

Game of Thrones was immensely popular during a decade that began in the wake of a global economic crisis and went on to experience mass refugee and humanitarian crises. Political controversies included a particularly divisive American election (and subsequent presidential impeachment trials) and Brexit. Meanwhile social movements including Black Lives Matter and Me Too shed light on pervasive systemic inequalities existing particularly in developed countries. Coupled with a rise in internet culture, online fan forums and millennial nihilistic

¹⁶³ Ibid., xi.

¹⁶⁴ “The North Remembers,” *Game of Thrones: Season 2*, written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, directed by Alan Taylor, HBO, 2012.

¹⁶⁵ Vidal, *Heritage Film*, 36.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 37-8.

humour, the time was right for a narrative that explored a moment of political and national uncertainty (safely removed from the present) that lent itself to online community discussion. Additionally, the recent success of *The Lord of the Rings* proved the profitability of such a series to producers and demonstrated a public interest in these types of fantasy stories.¹⁶⁷

Given this climate, it is also not surprising that a distinct Tolkienian division of good and evil no longer seems to apply. Superpower nations that were once painted as heroes of progress, culture and freedom are increasingly confronted with their pasts of colonialism, war and genocide. Suddenly, the “good guys” become harder to spot. This is especially true considering Martin’s historical inspiration engages with the relationship between Scotland and England, the ramifications of which remain a continued source of national controversy.¹⁶⁸ *Game of Thrones* reinforces a shift in popular media that acknowledges this moral complexity. It continues a trend that already began in the mid-2000s when television dramas, superhero movies and fairy tales began to produce Walter White anti-heroes, gritty Christopher Nolan Batmans, Harry Potter identity struggles.¹⁶⁹ Canonical villains such as Maleficent and Harley Quinn became multi-dimensional protagonists with feature-length backstories.¹⁷⁰ Meanwhile, portrayals of increasingly flawed James Bonds and Disney Princesses seem to suggest not only that wholly good characters are not realistic but that this type of perfection is not desirable.¹⁷¹ With its gratuitous violence and swinging character arcs, *Game of Thrones* not only capitalizes off this trend but, in many ways exists as its apotheosis.

Audience-character identification and thus emotional connection with the story, are impeded when characters no longer resonate with viewers’ relations to self and the world.

¹⁶⁷ It was in the wake of Jackson’s success that Martin was approached by producers to turn his books first into a film and later a television series. Daniel D’Addario, “Game of Thrones: How they make the World’s Most Popular Show,” in *TIME*, July 2017, https://time.com/game-of-thrones-2017/?utm_source=time.com&utm_medium=vanity-url&utm_campaign=time.com_gameofthrones.

¹⁶⁸ Two particularly notable occurrences while *Game of Thrones* was airing include the divisive referendum on Scottish independence in 2014 and the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum in 2016.

¹⁶⁹ *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), The Dark Knight Trilogy (2005, 2008, 2012), and the *Harry Potter* Franchise (2001-2011).

¹⁷⁰ *Maleficent* (2014), *Birds of Prey* (2020).

¹⁷¹ These increasingly flawed character tropes are especially noteworthy because of their cultural status as models of idealised masculinity and femininity.

Although Vu asserts that *Game of Thrones* audiences are punished for their character identification, there is something to be said for an audience's desire to connect with flawed, conflicted characters despite knowing they may be killed off at any moment.¹⁷² Martin stated that “the true horrors of human history derive not from orcs and Dark Lords, but from ourselves.”¹⁷³ This theme is carried through season after season as seemingly unscrupulous characters plot, betray, assault and kill each other. In Westeros, the monsters exist in the characters viewers come to know and often identify with.

3.2 Costumes

The varied representations of history found in the narrative are also present in the costumes. Michele Clapton, costume designer for all eight seasons, found clothing inspiration from a vast array of cultures and time periods including Japan, Persia, Native America and Siberia and sought armour design from ancient Rome and Greece as well as Byzantine and samurai warriors.¹⁷⁴ Despite this, the overall appearance of costumes aligns with popular conventions of dress found in cinematic medievalism. Generally speaking, the women wear long skirts, exaggerated sleeves and fitted bodices. The men sport long tunics, chainmail, metal armour, and long pants (although the fit is quite varied). Zippers and buttons are absent (or at least concealed) in favour of ties, buckles, and brooches. Every piece has a handmade quality to oppose ideas of mass-production. Fabrics include silk, paper silk, leather, rough homespun and cotton and are never overtly synthetic or too unnaturally coloured (although some of the brighter and deeper shades would have been difficult to achieve through organic dying processes). Clapton's style inspiration from disparate and often non-European sources often appears in the details of the clothing. Cersei's (Lena Headey) gowns, especially in earlier seasons, have a kimono wrap-front [Fig. 3.1]. Ned Stark's armour has a long split-skirt whose inspiration Clapton attributed to

¹⁷² Vu, “Fantasy After Representation,” 291.

¹⁷³ Itzkoff, “For ‘Game of Thrones,’ Rising Unease Over Rape’s Recurring Role.” It should be acknowledged that this theme is somewhat undercut by the presence of the White Walkers who are, in fact, magical monsters that wreak havoc on humanity.

¹⁷⁴ Michele Clapton and Gina McIntyre, *Game of Thrones: The Costumes* (San Rafael: Insight Editions, 2019), 9.

Japanese and Persian armour [Fig. 3.2].¹⁷⁵ These details add visual interest and depart from standard depictions of medieval Europe but are not so distracting as to make the costumes appear “non-European” or “non-medieval.” Instead, the unusual combinations add an element of foreignness and speak to a world whose cultural distinctions of East and West differ from those of the audience.



Figure 3.1: Screenshot, “The Old Gods and the New,” *Game of Thrones* (2012), HBO.



Figure 3.2: Screenshot, “Winter is Coming,” *Game of Thrones* (2011), HBO.

As in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, one of the primary functions of the costumes in *Game of Thrones* is to establish identifiable looks for each society based on social, cultural and geographical factors. Thus, the Northerners wear dark furs, King’s Landing aristocracy wear lightweight, richly-coloured silks and the Dothraki wear woven fibres and animal skins. A cultural logic is established, with varying degrees of complexity, for each society that is introduced throughout the 8 seasons. These distinct aesthetics provide visual cues to remind viewers of each character’s cultural and geographic origins which usually determines their politics and informs their worldview. This is especially useful for *Game of Thrones* which

¹⁷⁵ Clapton and McIntyre, *The Costumes*, 14.

employs a larger than usual number of characters. Distinct cultural styles help viewers remember where characters are from and how they function within the narrative.

Female costumes are particularly nuanced because of the medieval framework *Game of Thrones* employs. High-born women are strategically married off to form alliances between kingdoms or kidnapped and ransomed as political maneuvers. Although this may not bode well for the characters themselves, it significantly enhances the complexity and visual interest of their costumes. Female characters, especially the central figures, wear clothing that tells the story of their cross-cultural journeys and shifting identities of maiden, wife, captive, sexual object, and/or leader. Their male counterparts, who are more likely to remain within the society they were born, do not have such nuanced changes to their wardrobe.¹⁷⁶ Changes in male costume are more likely to reflect fluctuations in wealth and social status but not the dramatic change in personal identity or reinvention of the self that female characters are forced to perform (usually by male relatives).¹⁷⁷

There are many instances where the costumes of one character reference the costumes of another. These visual cues not only link characters to their broader cultural group but to specific friends and family members. Although affection and positive interpersonal connections are often downplayed in dialogue or overshadowed by violence, the costumes serve as a medium to communicate these otherwise absent or under-expressed feelings. At times, costume can be a means to mock or antagonize; however, it more often expresses emotional attachment. Whether it is Cersei proudly wearing the Lannister colours of red and gold or the fish claps on Sansa's second wedding dress that reference the sigil of her mother's house, these sartorial reminders of pride, loyalty, lineage, and family are expressions of care and affection. The costumes communicate a sense of love and warmth that otherwise feels largely absent in the harsh world of Westeros.

¹⁷⁶ This is also evidenced in the distribution of Clapton's book. Her analysis of the costumes of 31 male characters spans 176 pages which averages to 5.6 pages per character. Meanwhile her analysis of the costumes of 17 female characters spans 215 pages averaging 12.6 pages per female character, more than double that of the male characters. The attention given to each character varies significantly (Cersei receives 42 pages while a minor character like Tyene Sand only has 2); however, these numbers support the broader notion that, in terms of costume design, a larger quantity of material exists per female character. This, in turn, suggests that costumes played a much larger role in both the development and lives of the female characters.

¹⁷⁷ Tyrion is an exemplary male character in this regard as his fortunes change dramatically across the seasons based on his relationship with his wealthy Lannister relatives.

The characters demonstrate an awareness of clothing as marker of gender and an associated value judgement. Cersei, frustrated with what she perceives as her husband's inaction and unwillingness to defend their children remarks, "I should wear the armour and you the gown."¹⁷⁸ For this, Robert publicly slaps her across her face. This simplified viewpoint that posits female clothing as a sign of inaction and weakness and male clothing as action and power is complicated as the series progresses. Many key female figures including Daenerys (Emilia Clarke), Cersei, Sansa, and Margaery (Natalie Dormer) have moments where they demonstrate strength, leadership, power and authority while wearing beautiful gowns. Broad sartorial trends show that as female characters grow in power, their clothing loses its feminine embroidery, delicate fabrics and its sexual suggestiveness. These elements are replaced with dark colours and metallic/armoured details, conservative necklines and structured shoulders. Although their femininity is downplayed, they generally continue to wear dresses and do not abandon all signifiers of femaleness (sartorially-speaking). Because of the length of the show, there is ample time for characters to evolve and grow. Style transformations usually occur over multiple episodes and the transitional period often begins quite subtly.

3.3 Sansa's Sartorial Biography

Sansa's style transformation tells a detailed coming of age story. To borrow Emma Tarlo's term, a "sartorial biography" acknowledges "the complexity and transformative potential of personal experience in the creative and symbiotic relationship between people and their clothes."¹⁷⁹ If, as Sophie Woodward states, "clothing is able to hold former aspects of the self," and that wardrobe purging can be seen as a form of editing memory, then effective costuming exists not only as a record of a character's changing identity but costume changes become an essential tool for refashioning their self-image.¹⁸⁰ The subject plays a very active role in determining their wardrobe and curating their own sartorial biography. This biographical approach accounts for very personal, conscious decisions made by the subject. This is especially true for Sansa who, in

¹⁷⁸ "A Golden Crown," *Game of Thrones: Season 1*, written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, directed by Daniel Minahan, HBO, 2011.

¹⁷⁹ Emma Tarlo, "Islamic Cosmopolitanism: The Sartorial Biographies of Three Muslim Women in London," *Fashion Theory* 11, no. 2/3 (2007), 3.

¹⁸⁰ Woodward, *Why Women Wear What They Wear*, 57.

the very first episode, states that she makes her own clothing.¹⁸¹ This means that each piece she wears exists as a skillful and creative act and the result of a series of thoughtful, conscious stylistic decisions.

Dress speaks to a tension between individuality and social expectation. Sansa's clothes demonstrate how she navigates this tension by incorporating personal sartorial touches into garments that also adhere to the prevailing fashions dictated by the tastemaker. Her clothes reveal how she herself interprets the styles she sees others wearing. Woodward identifies the act of getting dressed as an important moment of self-construction.¹⁸² She argues that it is a selective process, one where rejected items are just as significant as the selected items.¹⁸³ It is an exercise in creating a publicly presented self within the private domain.¹⁸⁴ When Sansa is thrust into perilous court politics, it becomes crucial that she meticulously and selectively constructs a public self that armours her against persecution. Sansa's dresses show her understanding of self and the world around her. Furthermore, the personal touches she applies to her clothing subtly shift her temporal position between historical and modern. Her early use of natural embroidery motifs gives way to modern minimalist statement jewelry. As Sansa gains power she shifts from miserable medieval princess to hardened modern power dresser.

Sansa is first introduced as a 13-year-old living with her family in Winterfell. She wears simple dresses with recognizably Northern necklines adorned with intricate knots [Fig. 3.3 and 3.4]. Clapton decided that the knots would be indicators of prepubescence in the North and that each knot would be embroidered to represent a task that the girl had mastered.¹⁸⁵ Her heavily-knotted collars can be understood as a medievalist take on Girl Guide badges that visually communicate important achievements. Sansa becomes infatuated with Prince Joffrey, moves to King's Landing and aspires to become his queen. Her style shifts slowly as the knots around her

¹⁸¹ "Winter is Coming," *Game of Thrones: Season 1*, written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, directed by Tim Van Patten, HBO, 2011.

¹⁸² Woodward, *Why Women Wear What They Wear*, 5.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸⁵ Clapton and McIntyre, *The Costumes*, 17.

neckline become flowers demonstrating her desire to join this new culture [Fig. 3.5]. Later she fully adopts Cersei’s paper silk, front-wrap gowns and changes her hairstyle to mimic other courtiers [Fig. 3.6]. On one of these occasions Joffrey remarks “You look nice today.”¹⁸⁶ This highlights his approval that Sansa has shed the visual markers of her home culture and assimilated into King’s Landing court life.¹⁸⁷



Figure 3.3: Screenshot, “Winter is Coming,” *Game of Thrones* (2011), HBO.



Figure 3.4: Screenshot, “The Kingsroad,” *Game of Thrones* (2011), HBO.



Figure 3.5: Screenshot, “The Wolf and the Lion,” *Game of Thrones* (2011), HBO.



Figure 3.6: Screenshot, “Baelor,” *Game of Thrones* (2011), HBO.

¹⁸⁶ “Fire and Blood,” *Game of Thrones: Season 1*, written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, directed by Alan Taylor, HBO, 2011.

¹⁸⁷ For Joffrey, this was a sign that he now had greater control over Sansa.

The more Sansa integrates into court society, the more she comes to realize she is trapped in a dangerous political position. Sansa begins to wear mauves which Clapton describes as “a color that hovers between the red of the Lannisters and the blue of the Starks,” and an expression of her own uncertainty and precarious position between the two families.¹⁸⁸ Dragonflies become a reoccurring motif in her costumes symbolizing her feelings of entrapment.¹⁸⁹ However, clothing is not just representative of emotional states or changing ideas of identity, as previously mentioned, it also enacts internal and behavioural changes in the wearer.¹⁹⁰ By embroidering trapped dragonflies on her gown, Sansa demonstrates an ability to identify, express and productively work through her emotions. Unable to confide in anyone, embroidery becomes a safe means of private, solitary contemplation and a meditative process of creation. Sansa’s embroidery can also be read in relation to *opus anglicanum*, England’s famed medieval embroidery work. Medieval textiles were often instructive, painted or embroidered with symbols meant to convey ideas or stories to viewers.¹⁹¹ Although a dragonfly pattern may not be historically accurate, the use of symbolic embroidery in Sansa’s clothing conveys an authentic historical practice to modern audiences who are already attuned to reading symbolism in clothing.¹⁹²

Her most dramatic style change comes in season 4 when Sansa escapes from King’s Landing. Her wardrobe turns dark and takes on Northern attributes such as fur collars that connect her to the family she has largely lost. It is here that she forgoes colour and transitions into an all-black wardrobe. Before the 14th century, wearing black was reserved for mourners and monks.¹⁹³ It has since accrued varied and often contradictory meanings but modern viewers are likely to associate black with darkness (literal and symbolic), seriousness, and sophisticated

¹⁸⁸ Clapton and McIntyre, *The Costumes*, 21.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Woodward, *Why Women Wear What They Wear*, 24.

¹⁹¹ Elizabeth Coatsworth and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, “Textiles,” in *A Cultural History of Dress and Fashion in the Middle Ages* ed. Sarah-Grace Heller (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 11.

¹⁹² This serves as an example of Elliott’s assertion that historically inaccurate icons have the ability to signify authentic referents introduced in chapter 1.

¹⁹³ Craik, *Fashion*, 44.

fashion. This absence of colour plays into 2000s fashion trends and counterculture movements that appeal to viewers' stylistic sensibilities and ideas of powerful women.

A notable addition to Sansa's wardrobe is a statement necklace made to resemble a sewing needle attached to a chain. This needle references her sister Arya's sword (also named Needle) and represents Sansa's newly discovered inner-strength and battle-readiness.¹⁹⁴ For a show that largely devalues traditionally feminine attributes (compassion, mercy, gentleness, patience), the symbolism of a sewing needle as weapon recognizes a concrete power in a domestic practice. In naming her sword Needle, Arya identified a version of femininity she could accept while remaining true to herself. Meanwhile, Sansa found strength in sewing and embroidery which saved her life just as Arya's sword saved hers.¹⁹⁵ Although Sansa and Arya's relationship is often tempestuous, they are connected through a shared strength found in their needles.

Sansa's final gown, her coronation gown when she becomes Queen of the North, reads as a story of her formative relationships (Figures 7 and 8). It is made from the same fabric as Margaery Tyrell's wedding dress to reference their friendship.¹⁹⁶ The multi-paneled skirt, narrow sleeves and fish-scale embroidery references her mother's style tastes and Tully house sigil.¹⁹⁷ She wears her needle necklace for Arya (although it is attached in the same manner Littlefinger wore his chained dagger) and pays tribute to her brother Robb in the design of her crown.¹⁹⁸ The feathers (which she first wore upon escaping the Lannisters) and the direwolf embroidery serve as reminders of her past style choices and past self. Fitting for a series finale, this gown is built as a culmination of her journey and pays tribute to those that shaped her character.

¹⁹⁴ Clapton and McIntyre, *The Costumes*, 26.

¹⁹⁵ Sansa's sewing skills allowed her to blend in when it was politically necessary, gave her an outlet to express her emotions safely and the tools to reinvent herself when needed.

¹⁹⁶ Clapton and McIntyre, *The Costumes*, 40.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 42-43.



Figure 3.7: “Coronation Costume.” Reprinted from Michelle Clapton and Gina McIntyre, *Game of Thrones: The Costumes* (San Rafael: Insight Editions, 2019), 43.



Figure 3.8: “Queen of the North.” Reprinted from Michelle Clapton and Gina McIntyre, *Game of Thrones: The Costumes* (San Rafael: Insight Editions, 2019), 43.

This gown also demonstrates an increased maturity. Sansa is no longer dressing to emulate the older women in her life who once served as her role models. She is not copying their styles as a means of playing dress up or “trying on” an identity. Instead of mimicking someone else, Sansa has constructed her own identity. Even more significantly, she has constructed it based on an awareness of the formative relationships in her life. The details of her outfit pay homage to the people who have loved and supported her. In the case of Littlefinger whose relationship was ultimately destructive, she acknowledges painful experiences which she has overcome. Her coronation marks the end of a period of her life that began with a jarring departure from her childhood notions of love, marriage and womanhood. She experienced a tremendous disillusionment with the ways of the world and struggled with major questions of identity, often doing so without the guidance of a trustworthy parental figure. Sansa’s mature wardrobe plays into the series’ themes that equate “gritty” and “dark” with authenticity (in this case, the expression of a developed, “true” self). A brightly-coloured, almost whimsical medieval

aesthetic is exchanged for a subdued and fierce sartorial medievalism. Clothed in heavy furs, dark textiles and metallic accents, Sansa enters a new, adult chapter of her life with a matured sense of self, knowing who she is, what she wants, and how she got there.

Sansa's coming of age was not always a simple linear trajectory of continuous forward-thinking growth. In season 2, Sansa stopped dressing like Cersei and adopted a style closer to her mother's in an attempt to revert back to a past she dearly missed.¹⁹⁹ Aforementioned details in her coronation gown recall previously worn outfits.²⁰⁰ Clothing is particularly conducive to this play between past and present as the medium itself disrupts traditional notions of linear time. Wearing past (or vintage) clothing brings the past—and past versions of the self—into the present and actively contributes to the construction of the wearer's contemporary identity.²⁰¹ This expression of nonlinear time and dis-ordered methods of identity construction mirrors that of cinematic medievalism at large. "Its nonlinearity, partiality and revisionary capacity of remembering means fashion, which shares these similarities, can be understood as constitutive components of personal and cultural memory or remembering."²⁰² Clothing and cinematic medievalism are both mediums that not only inform individual, cultural and national identity but also how these identities are remembered and relocated in the present.

3.4 Cersei and Margaery's Style Battle

One of the major successes of the costume in *Game of Thrones* is that it does not just show clothing, but it shows fashion as a dynamic system. While fashion theorists often locate the emergence of the Eurocentric fashion system in later periods that mark the rise of consumer culture or in relation to 18th-century French court fashion trends, research shows that medieval Europe undeniably experienced fashion changes and style revolutions.²⁰³ Fashion is intrinsically linked to politics in King's Landing, as it is the woman with the most social and political power

¹⁹⁹ Bryan Cogman, *Inside HBO's Game of Thrones* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2012), 44.

²⁰⁰ Clapton and McIntyre, *The Costumes*, 42.

²⁰¹ Woodward, *Why Women Wear What They Wear*, 6.

²⁰² Jense and Hofmann, *Fashion and Materiality*, 7.

²⁰³ Sarah-Grace Heller, "Introduction," 1.

who determines the prevailing style of dress. The vertical flow of style (from the queen downwards) visualizes the trickle-down theory of fashion.²⁰⁴ Situated within a stratified class society, fashion “became a mechanism to display class difference through the adoption of new styles of dress that differentiated the elite from the mass.”²⁰⁵ In seasons 1 and 2, Cersei’s stylistic influence can be seen in other courtiers as well as peasants and even the prostitutes who wear similar styles (albeit altered accordingly for function).²⁰⁶

In season 3, Margaery Tyrell enters King’s Landing determined to become queen and eventually marries King Joffrey and then his brother Tommen. Clapton designed Cersei and Margaery’s styles in opposition to one another stating that “All of Margaery’s dresses underline her growing rivalry with Cersei. The less Margaery wears, the more armored Cersei becomes.”²⁰⁷ Margaery’s low necklines and open-backed dresses revealed her youth and beauty, playing off of Cersei’s own insecurities which were reinforced when the younger women of the court transitioned to Margaery’s style while older women continued to mimic Cersei’s.²⁰⁸ Costume is effectively used as a language of power to communicate Cersei and Margaery’s battle for control over Joffrey and influence at court.

The women’s opposing styles can also be read as a tension between two different temporal aesthetics. Cersei’s dresses play into more traditional cinematic or fairy-tale ideas of aristocratic medieval women. The rich colours, dramatic sleeves and voluminous skirts support a dignified, romantic, albeit somewhat conservative notion of femininity found in numerous medieval films. While they are not precisely “accurate,” her dresses convey medieval notions of propriety, a stylistic preoccupation with exaggerated sleeves and skirts that flow away from the body. Margaery’s dresses are often backless with plunging necklines, cutouts and fitted, bias-cut skirts that mold to her body. They convey a very 2010s idea of female sexuality that emphasises

²⁰⁴ This theory is associated most prominently with the works of Thorstein Veblen (1899), Georg Simmel (1904) and Grand McCracken (1985).

²⁰⁵ Craik, *Fashion*, 106.

²⁰⁶ Cogman, *Inside HBO’s Game of Thrones*, 70.

²⁰⁷ Clapton and McIntyre, *The Costumes*, 245.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

physical attributes either through showing skin or utilizing design features to contour or otherwise draw attention to the shape of the body. Her arms are always bare, a stark contrast with medieval dresses that often had inner and outer sleeves to ensure coverage down to the knuckle.²⁰⁹ The dress she wears to her and Joffrey's wedding is described as "haute couture" and her "funnel dress" was directly inspired by a 2004 Alexander McQueen design.²¹⁰ Margaery's clothes are the embodiment of a new, revolutionary regime coming into King's Landing while Cersei's maintain a more traditional idea of the medieval that ultimately outlasts Margaery's modern intrusion. While viewers may relate more to dressing in Margaery's style, it is made very clear that this type of anachronism does not have a permanent place in King's Landing and it is eventually annihilated.

On several occasions the women trade passive-aggressive remarks about each other's outfits but the outfits themselves are also a means of undermining one another. Margaery's "funnel dress" [Fig. 3.9] stands out for its unusual structure that feels incongruous with the rest of the aesthetics in Westeros. Clapton defends its design stating "I wanted the dress to express the ambitions of a young girl who is not yet sure of her strengths. It is extravagant and almost clumsy."²¹¹ Cersei mocks Margaery's fashion failure by wearing a similar but more refined neckline to Margaery and Joffrey's wedding [Fig. 3.10]. Cersei's design is much more successful in terms of fitting into the aesthetics of the world and suiting her personal, regal style. "Adopting that silhouette is Cersei's way of using costume to assert her dominance as she battles Margaery to retain her standing in King's Landing."²¹² Although in this moment it appears that Margaery has successfully replaced Cersei as matriarch, Cersei's dress stands as a snide reminder of her greater experience and expertise.

²⁰⁹ Bradfield, *Historical Costumes of England*, 49.

²¹⁰ Clapton and McIntyre, *The Costumes*, 243. See also "Natalie Dormer Talks Haute Couture Costumes of 'Game of Thrones,'" *Entertainment Tonight*, Video, Feb. 9, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3heF0HpBJA>

²¹¹ Clapton and McIntyre, *The Costumes*, 243.

²¹² *Ibid.*



Figure 3.9: Screenshot, “Garden of Bones,” *Game of Thrones* (2012), HBO.



Figure 3.10: Photograph by Keith Bernstein and Macall B. Polay for HBO, 2014.

A change in the trendsetter marks a shift in the allocation of power. When the courtiers adopt the style of a new queen, it signifies their acceptance of her position as trendsetter and demonstrates their newly assigned allegiance. When the arbiter of taste becomes a trend follower, her fashion choices reflect a personal acknowledgement of her changed position within a broader social context. This can be seen when Cersei changes her personal style to emulate Margaery’s as a reflection of how Cersei, as an individual, locates herself within the hierarchies of the court. Thus, the costumes lend themselves not only to an internal examination where clothing constitutes signs and symbols that may be read as a culturally-descriptive language, but also an external examination that investigates the fashion cycle and the rise and fall of particular styles.²¹³

A broader fashion system is also at work, one that locates King’s Landing as the fashion capitol of Westeros. Clapton acknowledged that because King’s landing is a port city, she designed their costumes with an understanding that they would have access to silk, vibrant colours and a much greater variety of materials than other locations.²¹⁴ This, combined with the warm climate, allowed for greater creative freedom in design which differentiated the styles in

²¹³ Craik, *Fashion*, 117.

²¹⁴ Cogman, *Inside HBO’s Game of Thrones*, 70.

King's Landing from the rest of the continent. If the establishment of a fashion capital relies on the alignment of economic, social and cultural capital supported by the government (factors attributed to the success in establishing Paris as a fashion capitol)²¹⁵, then the Lannisters' considerable wealth, political affiliations and powerful social ties can be attributed to the formation of King's Landing as such a hub.

This is particularly apparent when comparing King's Landing to Winterfell whose culture and climate is generally posited as their direct opposite. Northern styles are not as richly decorated nor do they employ jewelry. Exaggerated flourishes like the billowing sleeves characteristic of King's Landing gowns are reigned in. Additionally, styles in the North are not as changeable as those in King's Landing.²¹⁶ This is partly due to economic conditions and partly to a necessity for function and protection from the cold climate. The Starks are still an important noble family, evidenced in part by their own fashion influence over household staff and peasants in the region.²¹⁷ The warm blues of the Stark clothing sets them apart from other Northerners who mostly dress in brown and their clothing is often adorned with intricate embroidery.²¹⁸ That being said, they do not engage in conspicuous consumption to the same extent as the court in King's Landing.

3.5 Costume and Race

Intertwined with its construction of culture is costume's role in supporting and constructing race and racial difference. While *Game of Thrones* has built its prestige reputation on genre-subversion, it assuredly perpetuates what Dan Hassler-Forest refers to as "the most ideologically

²¹⁵ Craik, *Fashion*, 82. See also Yuniya Kawamura, *Fashion-ology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies* (Oxford: Berg Press, 2005), 52-5.

²¹⁶ Clapton and McIntyre, *The Costumes*, 17.

²¹⁷ Cogman, *Inside HBO's Game of Thrones*, 44.

²¹⁸ Clapton went as far as to theorize how blue dye could be created from the plants that would logically grow in Winterfell. She based these assumptions off of plants indigenous to Northern Europe. Clapton and McIntyre, *The Costumes*, 14.

problematic building blocks [of fantasy].”²¹⁹ In conjunction with its mistreatment of female characters, fans and critics were quick to point out its lack of diversity in casting, Eurocentrism, and racist, stereotypical or otherwise questionable portrayals of people of colour. These racial attitudes manifest in numerous capacities including language, geography, character behaviours/attitudes and cultural norms. These choices, similar to the pervasive use of gendered sexual violence, are often defended by a supposed dedication to “historical accuracy.”²²⁰ Costume functions alongside these other narrative components to encourage viewers to draw conclusions about each culture that reinforce stereotypes and privilege mainstream white cultures. The presence or conspicuous absence of certain materials used in costumes create very specific, material links between the peripheral non-Western fantasy cultures and living, real-world cultures.

One example of this is the use of an antique Indian sari in Ellaria Sand’s (Indira Varma) formal attire [Fig. 3.11].²²¹ Hailing from Dorne, the southernmost kingdom of Westeros, Ellaria’s culture is predominantly characterized by its promiscuity and rejection of traditional Westerosi values including monogamy and family lineage. As such, Dornish dresses often feature plunging necklines, bare arms and cutouts, relying on 1970s-style bras for coverage.²²² Margaery’s similarly revealing dresses are framed as a smart political manoeuvre, meanwhile the women of Dorne receive a more exoticized, one-dimensional treatment. This less-puritan view of female sexuality could have been framed as progressive or empowering—especially considering its 1970s stylistic associations—but instead translates to hypersexualization, additional scenes in the brothel and general scorn from other Westerosi characters. While the saffron-yellow colour

²¹⁹ Dan Hassler-Forest, “*Game of Thrones: The Politics of World-Building and the Cultural Logic of Gentrification*,” in *The Politics of Adaptation: Media Convergence and Ideology* ed. Dan Hassler-Forest and Pascal Nicklas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 197.

²²⁰ It should go without saying that modern understanding of race does not unequivocally translate to medieval conceptions of race. Ebony Thomas addresses this particular fantasy convention and reminds us that medieval concepts of racial identity were more fluid than fixed and that the word itself could refer to ethnicity, lineage, religion, geographic origin among other characteristics. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (New York, New York University Press, 2019), 76.

²²¹ Clapton and McIntyre, *The Costumes*, 281.

²²² Clapton cites India and American 1970s counterculture as primary sources of design inspiration for the Dornish costumes. *Ibid.*, 269.

of Ellaria's gown might imply a vague Orientalist style, the specific use of the Indian sari makes a tangible, material connection between Dorne and India.



Figure 3.11: “Ellaria Sand Wedding Guest Dress.” Reprinted from Michelle Clapton and Gina McIntyre, *Game of Thrones: The Costumes* (San Rafael: Insight Editions, 2019), 281.

Material connections can also be made through the conspicuous absence of a material. The Dothraki, a violent and nomadic tribe of horsemen from Essos, can be materially linked to African and Indigenous cultures through their wearing of animal skins, grass-woven fabrics and body painting.²²³ However, one of their greatest markers of difference from Westerosi cultures is the general lack of metal in their costume. While full suits of armour, chainmail and fire-forged weapons fill the shots of King's Landing, the Dothraki use metal sparingly, often in small details or accessories and make use of non-metallic weapons such as whips. This also informs the auditory cues. If cinematic medievalism could be summed up in a single cliché sound, it would

²²³ Clapton cites both of these regions/cultures as specific sources of design inspiration. *Ibid.*, 323.

be the ear-grating clang of swords unsheathing and colliding. The absence of this sound in Dothraki scenes further distances them from the medieval cultural canon. North American audiences are especially likely to associate this cultural dynamic with their own national histories where metal firearms played significant roles in European colonizing efforts against Indigenous peoples. As a result, costume presents material connections between the violent, frightening and sexually-aggressive Dothraki and real-world Indigenous cultures.

The fashion in these cultures remains mostly static, and in the case of the Dothraki reads more like an anthropological study of clothing than a sophisticated fashion system. It is clear that the main narrative focus is on medieval Britain; however, including peripheral non-Western cultures as flat, stereotypes contributes to their marginalization not only in the fantasy genre but popular culture and popular imagination at large. Ebony Thomas states, “When people of colour seek passageways into the fantastic, we have often discovered that the doors are barred.”²²⁴ This discrepancy in accessibility is perhaps best illustrated in the way that fair-skinned Daenerys is able to move in and out of Essos’s cities at will, adopting and discarding their style of dress as she goes. Clothing communicates the values of a culture which, if founded on racialized stereotypes, means that they become sartorial representations of these stereotypes.

3.6 Hair

Hair and hairstyling play an important role not only in *Game of Thrones* but in any historical or pseudo-historical visual representation. Just as certain clothing styles have become ubiquitous with certain time periods, the same can be said for hairstyles. Roland Barthes satirically described this trend as it applies to styling ancient Romans on film with front bangs:

“The frontal lock overwhelms one with evidence, no one can doubt that he is in Ancient Rome. And this certainty is permanent: the actors speak, act, torment themselves, debate ‘questions of universal import,’ without losing, thanks to this little flag displayed on their foreheads, any of their historical plausibility. Their general representativeness can even expand in complete safety, cross the ocean and the centuries, and merge into the Yankee mugs of Hollywood extras: no matter, everyone is reassured, installed in the quiet

²²⁴ Ebony Thomas, “The Dark Fantastic,” 2.

certainty of a universe without duplicity, where Romans are Romans thanks to the most legible of signs: hair on the forehead.”²²⁵

While the prevalence of certain “historical” hairstyles demonstrates an understanding that historical characters should not wear modern hairstyles, oftentimes minimal effort is put into developing new, creative, nuanced or even historically-informed takes on hairstyles. Outside of the costume drama, which often employs theatrical wigs or over-the-top styles that exist within equally lush surroundings, hair often appears as an afterthought in many genres. For many films, it seems as though successful hairstyling translates to any unassuming style that does not call attention to itself, scream anachronism or threaten the suspension of disbelief. The result is Barthes’ “insistent fringe” for the Greeks and Romans and “natural” extreme length for Medieval Europe.

Stereotypically “medieval hair” for women means long, flowing tresses, centre-parts and natural colours. Depending on the social status of the woman, her hair is either dirty and matted or clean and brushed but never balayaged or layered. Two small braids pulling the hair away from her face or a regal updo conducive to setting a crown atop (usually consisting of some sort of bun near the nape of the neck) have become the default hairstyles. While *Game of Thrones* does not altogether reject these conventions, the main characters and most prominently featured cultures have their own iconic hairstyles. *Game of Thrones* clearly invested time and creativity into this underutilized cultural marker and its thoughtful styling acknowledges the significant relationship between hair and culture.²²⁶ Hair designer Kevin Alexander played an essential role in extending the reach of their fictive cultural practices into oft-neglected yet significant details.

Hair, in many ways, can function similarly to costume as an epiphenomenon of culture, and visual symbol imbued with meaning and intertextual connotation. However, because of its physicality—a natural occurrence on the body, a product of genetic lineage, and a unique marker of the human species—hair also exists separately from clothing and has its own unique connotations. Hair colour is used throughout *Game of Thrones* to mark familial identity from the red-haired Tullys to the blonde Lannisters and white-blonde (or silver-haired) Targaryens. In

²²⁵ Roland Barthes, “The Romans in Film,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 26.

²²⁶ Iconic hairstyles also added to *Game of Thrones*’ cultural impact as hairstyling tutorials inspired by the looks in the show flourished on blogs, YouTube channels and fashion magazines.

fact, these standardized genetic traits play a key role in Ned discovering that fair-haired Joffrey was the bastard child of Cersei and Jaime instead of brunette Robert's heir.

According to Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang, hairstyling is "loaded with cultural meaning because it signifies a very human capacity for self-conscious manipulation, management and display."²²⁷ While dressing is an act of covering or adding something onto the body, hairstyling manipulates a pre-existing physical feature. Rachel Velody has already analysed how hair can actively function as a narrative framing device and contribute to filmic characterization.²²⁸ She asserts that hair can establish patterns of realism thus providing an authenticating component as well as strategically play into or subvert dominant ideologies of idealized femininity.²²⁹

As in the real world, elaborate or labour-intensive hairstyles are used in *Game of Thrones* to mark formal events or special occasions [Fig. 3.3, 3.10 and 3.12]. The formal hairstyles in King's Landing and Winterfell with their split braids, rolled updos and asymmetrical crown braids are read as unusual or somewhat alien to modern audiences. However, Margaery Tyrell's wedding hairstyle when she marries King Joffrey [Fig. 3.13] features excessive volume, dramatic height, styled curls and liberal use of hair extensions not unlike popular American wedding or prom hairstyles in the 2010s. Female hair is shorn as a means of rejecting traditional femininity either for disguise as Arya employed when she fled King's Landing or for humiliation as was done to Cersei before her walk of atonement. Smaller details are incorporated into everyday hairstyles. In Braavos, unmarried women wear their hair curled and pinned up while married women wear it down and incorporate small golden accessories that symbolize their husband's profession.²³⁰ Additionally, the series contains a number of scenes with female characters braiding or brushing each other's hair, thus demonstrating hairstyling as a communal or social practice and form of female bonding.

²²⁷ Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang, "Introduction: Thinking About Hair," in *Hair: Styling, Culture and Fashion*, eds. Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang (Oxford: Berg, 2008), 10.

²²⁸ Rachel Velody, "Hair-'Dressing' in *Desperate Housewives*: Narration, Characterization and the Pleasures of Reading Hair," in *Hair: Styling, Culture and Fashion*, eds. Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang (Oxford: Berg, 2008), 215.

²²⁹ Velody, "Hair-'Dressing,'" 225.

²³⁰ Clapton and McIntyre, *The Costumes*, 62.



Figure 3.12: Screenshot, “Baelor,” *Game of Thrones* (2011), HBO.



Figure 3.13: Screenshot, “The Lion and the Rose,” *Game of Thrones* (2014), HBO.

Hair is particularly culturally significant for the Dothraki. During Daenerys’ wedding and entrance into Dothraki culture, Viserys (Harry Lloyd) explains, “When Dothraki are defeated in combat, they cut off their hair so the whole world can see their shame.”²³¹ Khal Drogo’s (Jason Momoa) long braid exists as an embodiment of his victories, a tradition Daenerys continues throughout her journey. Although it is not necessarily a 1:1 equivalency, as she wins battles (both personal and political) and conquers cities, her braids multiply and become more intricate [Fig. 3.14-17]. This practice can also be read in relation to Western traditions of hairstyling where putting up one’s hair signified the transition from girl to woman.²³² As Daenerys discovers her power and identifies as the rightful ruler on the iron throne, her hair maps this journey of growth. Times when she loses power or struggles with her identity such as during her difficulties in Meereen, her hair is less braided or generally styled differently. While Daenerys’ platinum blonde colour identified her as a Targaryen, her hairstyling comes from the culture she married into. Her braids thus become an enduring symbol of her personal attachment

²³¹ “Winter is Coming.”

²³² Caroline Cox, *Good Hair Days: A History of British Hairstyling* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 18.

to the Dothraki and the significance their culture holds for her. Her hair exists as a site of cultural intersection and a rich storytelling component.²³³



Figure 3.14: Screenshot, “Winter is Coming,” *Game of Thrones* (2011), HBO.



Figure 3.15: Screenshot, “And Now His Watch is Ended,” *Game of Thrones* (2013) HBO.



Figure 3.16: Screenshot, “The Spoils of War,” *Game of Thrones* (2017), HBO.

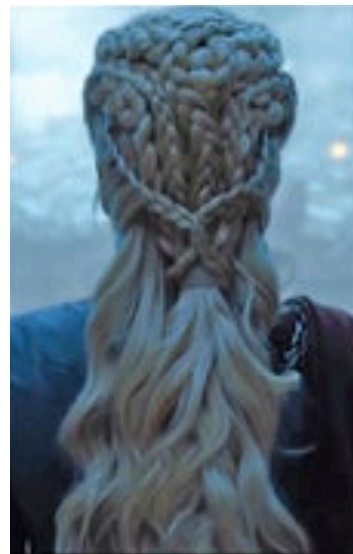


Figure 3.17: Screenshot, “The Iron Throne,” *Game of Thrones* (2019), HBO.

²³³ Daenerys’ hair was so integral to the character that putting on the wig became an important part of Clark’s character process. In a documentary about the filming of the final season, all of Clark’s interviews were held while she was in the hair trailer having her wig applied. Clark’s final day of shooting, a momentous occasion marking the end of the eight-year project, was framed as the last day she would wear Daenerys’ hair. *Game of Thrones: The Last Watch*, dir. Jeanie Finlay, HBO (2019).

The final season of *Game of Thrones* was heavily criticized by fans and critics alike.²³⁴ Although the overall production quality is extraordinary (a feat that can be largely attributed to the season's \$90 million budget)²³⁵, common points of critique were the seemingly rushed pacing, illogical character choices, a deep dissatisfaction with the treatment of female characters and general disappointment in the quality of the writing.²³⁶ Salo argues that an effective fantasist must, "create a credible simulacrum of a real history so consistent within itself that anomalous details can be detected and deemed inauthentic."²³⁷ Much of the disappointment of the final season stems from its incongruity with the complex, thoughtful world and characters that were carefully developed over the course of 7 previous seasons. Despite this arguable failing, the storytelling threads communicated through the costume and hair finished strong. From Sansa's coronation gown to Daenerys' braids, the styling not only continued its logical trajectory based on preestablished narrative patterns but did so beautifully. While controversy surrounds the writing, the costumes stand as a consistent strength of the show and deliver satisfying and nuanced characterization right up to the finale.

As Martin continues to write *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the cultural legacy of *Game of Thrones* remains undetermined. It is not yet cemented as a genre-defining work like Tolkien's series nor does it occupy a place of childhood nostalgia as the work of C.S. Lewis does for many. However, *Game of Thrones* undeniably created an international cultural event and will likely exist as a touchstone of 2010s popular culture. The viewership for each season increased consistently and its final season broke HBO's viewing records, surpassing those set by *The*

²³⁴ Seasons 1-6 received fan and critic Rotten Tomatoes Scores of 90% or higher (usually even above 95%) while season 7 received an 83% audience score and season 8 earned 58% from critics and 31% from audiences. See "Game of Thrones," *Rotten Tomatoes*, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/game_of_thrones/s08.

²³⁵ Nisha Stickles and Barbara Corbellini Duarte, "'Game of Thrones' season 8 has a \$90 million budget—here's what to expect from its 6 episodes," in *Business Insider*, March 6, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/game-of-thrones-season-8-90-million-budget-6-episodes-2019-1>.

²³⁶ Janaki Jitchotvisut provides an overview of the critical concerns with the final season. "The final season of 'Game of Thrones' divided critics and fans. Here's why so many of them were disappointed with each twist," in *Insider*, May 20, 2019, <https://www.insider.com/final-season-game-of-thrones-critics-and-fans-reactions-2019-5>.

²³⁷ Salo, "Heroism and Alienation," 24.

Sopranos, with a staggering 13.6 million initial views on the season 8 finale.²³⁸ In a television decade defined by on-demand streaming habits and series “binging,” *Game of Thrones* created a weekly event that viewers anticipated, discussed at length and faithfully tuned into.

Martin’s work and Weiss and Benioff’s adaptation has surely reconfirmed the power of a good story and the human impulse to deeply engage with narrative in its many manifestations. Weinczok asserts that “stories—and history is, after all, a collection of stories—are ultimately tools for understanding and forging connections to our own world. One of the greatest legacies of *Game of Thrones* is how it has got millions of people across the world thinking about and enjoying history.”²³⁹ The type of history that *Game of Thrones* is selling is one that is generally dark, cynical and unforgiving. While standards of health, physical comfort and personal security have undeniably progressed, a Grimdark depiction of the past is not somehow a more “real” or “truthful” than a Tolkienian myth or Narnian fairy-tale. When women and people of colour are relegated to roles of the abused or stereotyped Other and these creative decisions are defended as “historically accurate,” it downplays or erases their historical presence, accomplishments and power. In other words, “magical stories seem to be written for some people and not for others.”²⁴⁰ There are very serious implications to telling certain groups that their place in historical imaginings is to play the victim or the faceless villain. If one purpose of storytelling is to construct identity, this type of storytelling could be used to justify present-day social inequalities that derive from gendered and racialized identities. There is an ethical responsibility in interpreting history and if the writers of a narrative try to assume the authority of history, they must also take on this responsibility.

Historical accuracy, especially as it relates to entertainment, is a slippery thing. The overt markers of fantasy in *Game of Thrones* are important because they remind viewers of the liberal invention in this type of historical engagement. The success of the show speaks to a willingness to embrace this darkly-tinged medievalism and yet the controversies surrounding race and gender

²³⁸ Replays in the days after the episode’s debut raised this number to 19.3 million views. Rick Porter, “Game of Thrones’ Series Finale Sets All-Time HBO Ratings Record,” in *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 20, 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/game-thrones-series-finale-sets-all-time-hbo-ratings-record-1212269>.

²³⁹ Weinczok, *The History Behind Game of Thrones*, viii.

²⁴⁰ Ebony Thomas, “The Dark Fantastic,” 13.

representation reveal that perhaps general audiences have outgrown some of the more problematic generic conventions.

Conclusion: Historical Dress of the Present and Future

Storytelling is a human impulse. It is a method of meaning-making, of processing experience and of constructing individual, cultural and national identities. It informs and reinforces world views and as these understandings change, stories are modified accordingly. At the core of each case study, under the layers of myth and magic and paranormal, are modern stories about humans making difficult decisions in worlds they strive to understand. These tales exist within broader traditions of medieval—and more broadly historical—film that project modern anxieties and preoccupations onto retellings of the past; however, they do so through relatively new mediums. Moving from oral tradition to novels to film and television, the dominant format of narrative has become increasingly visual. Therefore, the type of historical engagement presented in the case studies is predominantly visual. The past is evoked or constructed through aesthetics, through things that “look historical.” Costume plays a significant and vital role in this process. It is not simply passively decorative, but a site of complex historical engagement. The works explored in these case studies inform popular ideas of the past and clothing, as an agent of memory, exists as a material manifestation of these ideas.²⁴¹ History is built into seams, patterns and textiles. Close inspection of costume, examining both its historical references and creative liberties, reveals the conscious manipulation of shapes and forms that are tied to recognizable moments and thus, demonstrates the strategies employed to materially construct a sense of time and place. Costume supports a film’s narrative, but it also tells its own.

The variety of medievalisms presented in these stories are strategically employed to evoke certain ideas about the past, be it the playfulness of Narnian dresses or the fearful crudeness of Orc weaponry. Despite this diversity of representation, each version of the medieval is closely tied to a culturally specific English past, claiming mighty stories of epic scale as part of its national foundation. Remembering Weiznioc’s comment, “enjoying history” in this capacity seems to translate to a visual consumption that may—but most often does not—have some resemblance to a “real” past. Woods asks, “Would we recognize real medieval life if we saw it?”²⁴² This question is difficult to answer with any degree of certainty and yet audiences very

²⁴¹ Jeness and Hofmann, *Fashion and Materiality*, 8.

²⁴² Woods, “Authenticating Realism,” 39.

clearly recognize and are willing to engage with cinematic medievalism and the imaginative trappings of a fantastic past. Both the history and the fantasy are essential components of these cultural works. The historical elements effectively contribute to crafting a credible realism, a narrative world that convinces audiences to suspend disbelief long enough to hear a message. The markers of fantasy are equally as valuable because they highlight the constructed, imaginary nature of past worlds and remind audiences that what they see is a fictional story, not history. Invention and anachronism are not hurdles to overcome in search of the scholarly value of these popular stories. Instead, they exist as rich textual components that function in nuanced and sophisticated ways that reveal just as much about the real world as they do the fantasy worlds they build.

The sheer number of views, reboots and box office earnings proves the desirability of this type of story. In other words, audiences are finding something that they seek, some sort of fulfillment, within these tales. Searle argues that “flights of fantasy are necessary to a full understanding of reality.”²⁴³ Therefore, these explorations of fiction are not only a productive means of navigating present and past dynamics but are *essential* to a comprehensive understanding of the world. As writers continue to explore the fanciful past, canonical fantasy novels are picked up for visual adaptation and audiences watch and rewatch fantastical medievalisms onscreen, the past continues to assert its place in present imaginings.

²⁴³ Searle, “Fantastical Fact, Home or Other,” 8.

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