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Medievalism as Fun and Games¹

Veronica Ortenberg West-Harling

Medievalism hides in many guises in contemporary culture, of which four will be examined here.² One is the popular literature of fantasy fiction and crime novels. Another two are the world of Heritage – covering medieval sites, theme parks, and a vast retail industry of artifacts – and, partly associated with it, the historical re-enactment scene. Last but not least is the development of war and strategy Internet games.

The origins of the fantasy fiction genre may go back to William Morris,³ but its real modern roots are in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Fantasy fiction invents myths, legends, and characters situated in a world before time, doing heroic deeds and achieving impossible tasks with the help of magical creatures (beasts, demons, magicians). These illustrate the importance of man's understanding of, and working with, the natural world, which ultimately brings about wholeness and happiness.⁴ At its best, the genre produced J. R. R. Tolkien and Philip Pullman; at worst, a plethora of run-of-the-mill fantasies meant for rapid consumption. Fantasy fiction's main writers, such as Anne Rice, Ursula Le Guin, Stephen Lawhead, and Robert Jordan, use titles such as *The Dragon Reborn*, *Lord of Chaos*, *A Crown of Swords*, *The Belgariad*, *The Malloreon*, the *Prydain* series, the *Song of Albion*, all featuring heroes, places, or gods' names with a Celtic resonance, from Sauron and Galadriel to Nynaeve, Aviendha, Amyrlin, Caemlyn, and Belgarath. These suggest to the readers' minds a world before time, inhabited by supernatural creatures, powers and heroes, fabulous myths and legends, where good triumphs over evil, and love and heroic deeds are rewarded. This has been increasingly associated with the idea of the "Celtic" world, equated with some kind of primitive

Eden, appealing to the myth of the roots of western civilization, and hence to a feeling of return to a national and ethnic past.⁵ Such roots can be variably chosen in the countries of the Celtic fringe in the UK, in England where they are felt to be a more ancient national past than the Saxons (almost in the manner of the “native” cultures of America), and in the US because it links immigrant groups to their European roots. Fantasy fiction appeals to an adult audience, giving it an escape from daily drudgery and a too-rational surrounding world, and an opening for thinking about major life issues not always addressed by mainstream fiction, enacted by colorful characters in exciting life-threatening situations. The genre is used for escapist purposes, perhaps especially in the English-speaking world, where the ethics of Puritanism and a strong work culture predominate, and is non-gender-specific, appealing to both men and women.

Medieval crime fiction shares some of these features.⁶ In the 1980s a revolutionary novel, Umberto Eco’s *Name of the Rose*, which brought worldwide success for its author, ensured respectability for the genre and opened it up to followers. A wide range of historical periods has been used since, from Ancient Greece and Egypt to the 1950s; none, however, as much, if with variable success, as the Middle Ages. The first really successful novels were Ellis Peters’ Brother Cadfael stories.⁷ They spawned a series of television films and a medieval theme park, the Shrewsbury Quest. Apart from the Cadfael books (set in Shrewsbury during the civil war between King Stephen and the Empress Matilda in the 1130s and 1140s), the number of series written between 1990 and this year has now gone into double figures. They are set, chronologically, from sixth-century Byzantium and seventh-century Ireland onwards, until they start clustering in every century of the later Middle Ages from the twelfth century onwards. First set in London, Oxford, and York, they moved on to, for example, Kent and the West Country in England, then further away geographically to France, Spain during the Reconquista, then, even more exotically, to Byzantium, Jerusalem during the Crusades, and even thirteenth-century China.

The exponential increase in the number of books set in the last three centuries of the Middle Ages may be related to the greater number of sources available then. Mostly, they are placed in periods associated with major events, the kinds of memories that one might be expected to recall from one’s school days: war, political crises, or other

forms of civil or religious turmoil such as the Norman Conquest, the Crusades, the Hundred Years War and the Black Death. In the same way, most novels are situated in suggestive places such as London (the court at Westminster, the City), Oxford (the university), York (the Minster), Cambridge, Moorish Spain, Venice, Byzantium, and Jerusalem. They often center on well-remembered names of kings or writers like Chaucer. The purpose is that of appealing to the reader by drawing them into the plot through a surface familiarity with the events and places, particularly if these places have both historical and aesthetic connotations and can be visited today. The reader is hooked by being made to recognize elements vaguely familiar but still sufficiently alien to be seen as colorful and slightly mysterious.

The clergy in all its forms is predominant, to add specific color to a period regarded as dominated by the Church, and to contribute to the *otherness* in relation to our time, while still remaining in not totally unfamiliar ground. Even detectives who do not apparently belong directly to the clergy display such *otherness*, which is made up of social position or profession: they hold positions, such as royal officials (bailiff, sheriff) or doctors and rich merchants, that give them access to knowledge, writing and law, and hence reasoning and deductive powers commensurate with their role as detectives, and are thus associated, through work or personal friendships, with the clerical group.

Other elements contribute to the known-yet-exotic factor, for example the English-foreign issue, inherited mostly from Walter Scott, which translates into hostility between the “native” Saxons and the Norman “conquerors.”⁸ This issue has renewed appeal in the late twentieth century, in a multiethnic and multicultural society preoccupied with immigration and integration problems, just as the growing role of the Crusades in historical fiction is linked with the post-2001 crisis in the West’s relations with Islam. The importance of emancipated women doing the same jobs as men, for example as lawyers and doctors, and being their equal socially and intellectually, is an interpretation partly commensurate with the writers’ own wishes to perceive medieval society as more egalitarian than later periods, and hence a clear precursor of our own. At the very least, presenting it in such a way is a good ploy to ensure popular success for the book, by tuning into contemporary feeling and prompting the readers’ surprise and pleasure as they are led to experience the medieval as being so “modern.” Similarly, the choice of the Middle Ages for eco-friendly

attitudes is part of the attraction for both readers and writers. Here, as with the “Celtic spirit,” what appeals is the perceived common ground between the medieval and the contemporary, such as natural medicine, organic food, animal welfare, while nostalgia for values perceived as good but now gone forever, such as social solidarity or a sense of the sacred to be found in nature, are evoked as models for our own time.

Some writers may make mistakes on factual matters, and many are taken in by clichés, or deliberately cultivate those because they make a better story, or rather one with which the audience is already slightly familiar. The “Celtic Church” and the English, the Saxon and Norman divide, the Crusades, the Inquisition, are themes that reappear regularly, precisely because they tap into already familiar areas, a key factor for ensuring popularity by reinforcing already existent preconceptions among the readers. So-called historical accuracy is not only unachievable, but misplaced because the writers’ perception, even when real, has to be overruled to make the book palatable and interesting. This inevitably means projecting twentieth-century attitudes and moral issues onto medieval characters. While modern perception is that of a medieval world of cruelty, injustice, violence, intolerance, poverty, and filth, its characters are made to hold values seen now as lost, such as solidarity and a way of life attuned to nature. The reader can feel at the same time superior, nostalgic, and plunged into a world both strange but not totally unfamiliar through collective memory, and places still visible and enhanced by the Heritage world.

The Heritage industry itself includes both tangible and intangible elements. The tangible are historic sites, many belonging to English Heritage, and artifacts sold by commercial retailers or museums. The intangible comes in the form of the “experience” of the Middle Ages, in either specific reconstituted spaces like theme parks, or as living-history experiences through re-enactment and living history groups.

English Heritage’s advertising literature is illuminating: whenever possible, England is divided, not into modern administrative units, but into historic regions with evocative names, such as Wessex and Northumbria.⁹ The Castles of Devon leaflets, *Mighty Fortresses and Romantic Ruins*, offers the area as one of “Ghostly legends and medieval chivalry.” Wessex’s offers “Great castles and abbeys,” Northumbria’s “battles for survival, saints preserved,” and Cornwall’s *Castles, Celts and Kings* “mystery, myth and magic.” Descriptions

follow of, for example, the site of the battle of Hastings, the “most famous date in English history,” where the whole family is invited to “let King Harold’s mistress tell you what really happened – and stand on the very spot where Harold fell.” Lindisfarne Priory is the “cradle of Christianity, one of the holiest Anglo-Saxon sites in England.”

Heritage providers offer interactive audio-visual displays and exhibitions. A whole range of events is set up every year: medieval entertainment with jousting, displays of falconry, archery, the arming of a knight, the dressing of a court lady, a “strolling medieval minstrel,” a medieval Christmas (or rather Yule Fayre), “life in a medieval castle,” and re-enactments of battles such as Maldon, Hastings, or Bosworth. English Heritage in particular also regards its brief as educational in terms of the daily life of the past: “Come and see medieval knights fighting for their honour at the castle,” and “William versus Harold, who was the hero? Find out about the battle which changed England’s history forever,” and “Brother Oswald and Sister Septima share with us their spooky tales.” Also available were a portrayal of “life during the reign of King Edwin of Northumberland, 627 AD,” “the lavish social life of a royal court on tour as Richard III returns to his childhood home [with] entertainment staged for the monarch,” “meet Ragnor Svensson the Viking and learn about Viking life,”¹⁰ and an invitation to “recreate the Arthurian legends on this magical day out. Become a knight of the round table and embark on the quest for the Holy Grail. Hear mythical tales of old about the great King Arthur and maybe learn a bit of magic!” The combination of Arthur, knights, Grail, quest, tales of old, magic and myth, perfectly demonstrates what it is that maintains the prominence of the Middle Ages in the popular imagination.

In history-book-club catalogues, the Medieval World and Celtic History together usually take up the greatest amount of space, often placed into categories introduced by an overarching sentence: “Medieval Images of Faith and Piety” (the Church and pilgrimages) and “Champions and Chatelaines of the Middle Ages” (the Crusades and knights). Heritage theme parks like Shrewsbury Quest offer workshops in manuscript illumination or the cultivation of medicinal herbs, both associated with monks. The Jorvik Centre in York enables visitors to experience the “sounds, sights and smells” of Viking York. Medieval feasts and banquets are so popular that they have become part of corporate entertainment.

The Heritage industry's retail arm is a big earner.¹¹ Reproductions of medieval-style furniture are matched by reproductions of medieval artifacts from museums and art collections across Europe and the US: Virgin-and-Child statuettes, jewelry, tapestries like the Lady with the Unicorn, ivories, stained glass, and other objects sold especially at Christmas. In addition to appearing on illuminated-manuscript Christmas cards and wrapping paper, medieval motifs and designs such as fleur-de-lys, mille-fleurs, and tassels are reproduced on table mats, ties, scarves, candles, umbrellas, bags, cushions, paper goods, jewelry, and clothing. The main UK retailer *Past Times* usually heads its medieval sections "a realm of fair maidens, troubadours and courtly love" or "the age of cathedrals" or the "medieval lady: the graceful maiden of Arthurian myth and legend," each highlighting apparently relevant objects, for example gothic-shaped mirrors, caskets, or illuminated-manuscript cushions. Even objects associated with Christianity are more acceptable under a medieval cover. Compilations of prayers, psalms, icons, and monastic offices are rendered palatable by being disguised as history, and are especially successful when sold under the umbrella of "Celtic spirituality." Every retail catalogue has had a section entitled "Celtic Treasures" or "Celtic Art," including brooches, rings, or crosses, sold as reflections of "interwoven Celtic motifs [...] thought to symbolise the eternal thread of life," and "a joyous Celtic blessing." Thus a throw "decorated with a traditional knotwork design [...] the warm blues evok[ing] the colour of early Celtic fabrics produced using natural dyes such as woad," since "in Celtic symbolism the fine knotwork designs [...] represent unity and eternity" – through buying this product rather than something made of modern materialistic non-ecological materials, you [the buyer] too can benefit, through the association with natural fabrics, colors, stones, which have the magical properties of nature and age-recognized value, and by implication, share in the blessings they would bring to you, as your ancestors did in their time – the message is everywhere. Special pages are consecrated to the "Celtic Christmas: a mystical midwinter celebration of fire and light," a "traditional" festival of a pre-Christian period (meaning in opposition to the modern-day commercialized festival.)

The association between the Middle Ages and "Celticism" today is paramount. From the reclaiming of Arthurian myths of chivalry and the Holy Grail for a pre-Christian pagan world,¹² to the link of

anything Celtic with the world of New Age paganism, wicca, druidism, and magic, all relate to the message of worship of nature and the feminine principle.¹³ This in turn has led to the association of this imagined past with an “anti-Establishment” attitude, the religious Establishment being described as oppressive and repressive,¹⁴ to the extent of concealing major metaphysical and historical truths from seekers who try to bring them to light.¹⁵ Such are the roots of the fascination with the myths of secret or allegedly secret societies, Knights Templars, Freemasons, Rosicrucians, and the numerous others taken on by the authors of conspiracy-theory thrillers that have exploded in the wake of Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*.

Re-enactment societies represent the more intangible aspect of Heritage. On a major website serving the international community of re-enactors, the medieval period, by far the most popular in number of active societies, is divided into Dark Ages (400–1066), Vikings (800–1150), and Medieval (1066–1599).¹⁶ The first includes fifty societies and the second sixty, though quite a few recoup each other, and in each case the respective number of UK-based ones is much higher than in any other country. The Medieval category includes 178 names, of which only a few are the same as previously. Among them, the UK-based number is nearly 115, while the US moves up to twenty-one; Australia, Canada and New Zealand are represented for the English-speaking world, but other countries also appear, France in the lead with seven groups, followed in much smaller numbers by Italy, Germany, the Czech Republic, Portugal, Scandinavia, Poland, Switzerland, Spain, Belgium, and Mexico. Re-enactment has become a worldwide activity, regardless of nationality, but English-speaking countries, and the UK in particular, have the lion’s share of the activity. The names and activities of these societies go some way towards explaining this popularity. Leaving out the purely descriptive,¹⁷ and the humorous ones,¹⁸ most groups’ names fall into these categories:

1. those reminiscent of the romantic fantasy world of the Middle Ages (Sword of Pendragon, Kingdom of Gryphons, Paladins of Chivalry)
2. those using medieval words: Anglo-Saxon (Angelcyn, Cestrecire, Wryngwyrn), Welsh (Milwr Morganwg, Gwerin Y Gwyr), Irish (Mogh Raith and Na Degad), Scandinavian (Hrafnanir, Odir Hundar), Al-Andaluz

3. those that imitate medieval associations of aristocratic households, orders of knights, or merchants groups: Households (Boteler, Clarence, Neville), Retinues (Deveraux, Erpyngham), Companies (Compagnie des feu-vetus, Companions of the Crows), Orders of Knights (Knights of Jerusalem, Knights of Royal England, Ordem de Calavaria do Sagrado Portugal), guilds and town associations (Gylde Cinque Ports, York City Levy, The Yorkshire Yeomen).

Several key trends can be identified. First and foremost is the purely escapist, with its fantasy element, appealing to those who want a fun day out, especially if it involves fighting (“safe combat and fun are more important than hand-stitched authentic underwear”).¹⁹ Second comes the ethnically conscious, which takes pride in its roots (“We didn’t have a ‘Dark Age’, it was our ‘Golden Age’ ”),²⁰ have a pride in their ancestors (the Lithuanian group *Vilkatakai*) or in being “Italys [sic] sole Military order born in Italy the Order of Santo Stefano,”²¹ which is, however, an American and more specifically Californian-based group. A third, the perfect-accuracy-seeking trend, can itself be divided into two strands. The first focuses on battle re-enactment, with either jousting, sieges, or whole battles, as in the Wars of the Roses. The group names evoke the romance of chivalry, such as the Knights of the Order of the Lion Rampant, or the Order of the Black Pryns. They put on sponsored shows and local events, visit other countries, and have regular training sessions. The second strand, concerned with “living history,” regarded as primarily educational, is less concerned with major events and warfare than with displays of everyday life at court, in the households of aristocrats, merchants or peasants. Some go as far as to acquire, not just costumes, tools, and weapons, but a whole physical area (“we have our own 7-acre site with a re-created ring fort that is now fully pallisaded”).²²

The success of medieval re-enactment seems to go against contemporary political, social, and spiritual norms of behavior. Re-enactment gives official permission to have a good fight, with the only allowed use of real weapons in public, and many re-enactors cite this as the real reason for their involvement.²³ It gives expression to the desire to belong to a nation and to express pride in it and in one’s roots, on the Celtic fringes in the British Isles or in countries newly emerged from communism like Poland and Lithuania, but also in countries where such manifestations, unless they take place within the

limits of the Last Night of the Proms or a football match, are regarded as politically sensitive and only carried out by the likes of the British National Party (BNP) or the Front National. In the US, Australia, and Canada, it allows a feeling of return to the distant roots of one's family. It recreates a sense of present community too, through Living History Fairs, websites, and international exchanges. It leads to the fulfillment of more or less acceptable social dreams, such as being a member of the aristocracy, or of returning to a traditionally-gendered role, of women doing women's things and men fighting (less rigorous groups, notably those affiliated with the Society for Creative Anachronism [SCA], may allow their members to choose their persona and gender in costume, but groups that lay claim to strict historical accuracy often do not).²⁴ The western world's freedom from war, disease, and lack of food for several decades may enable a vicarious enjoyment of periods when life was much harsher in practical terms, but it also leads to an idealization of a lifestyle perceived to be closer to nature, when one had direct control over food and clothing production, reconstructed today for fun or educational purposes. Another sought-for purpose is a desire to retrieve social cohesion, belonging to a community that helps its members, and to exercise some greater degree of control over one's immediate life and environment, which appears lost within the less stable modern world.²⁵ Some of these themes, already discussed in crime fiction, also explain the success of Internet games.

The fastest developing area in twenty-first-century historical recreation is the Internet, with its new generation of war and strategy games. The first kind is the fantasy game, creating a new virtual world (e.g., Azeroth), with its own peoples and geography, in the manner of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, which serves as its universal model; its main themes are battling against enemies and an overall quest (*World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade* or *Rune: Viking Warlord*). The second focuses on recreating a "real" medieval world centered on familiar themes: castles, lords, peasants, sieges, popes, Crusades (*Total War: Medieval II*; *Stronghold: Crusades*; *Lords of the Realm*; *Crusader Kings*).²⁶

The best introduction to the success of these games is provided by the promotional text on their cover, and the direct comments made by players.²⁷ Key themes are:

1. The pleasure of fighting (being in the middle of the action on the battlefield), with war as a great adventure in its immediacy and the feeling of power as the player belongs to the elite in charge, dominating events:

“NOW WE GET TO USE OUR BIG BAD WEAPONS HOW COOL!!!”

“Total War series is returning to the most turbulent era in Western history as **you take control** of the country of **your** choice in the golden age of chivalry and really big battles.”

“You will be thrilled at the sound of **your men** marching, their cheers as they hack their opponents to bits.”

“You can hang **your citizens** or dunk them in boiling hot water.”

“The sound of an arrow puncturing the flesh is perfect in every aspect.”

2. The feeling of community with other players, both as virtual friends and sometimes as a family-building time:

“It’s not all about fighting, there are plenty of things to do. Its excellent for socializing, I have made lots of friends around Europe via this game. Its also a great game for couples [...] you are both too busy to make the tea.”

“Both me and my husband play it, along with friends, nephews and nieces [...] if you live alone then even more reason to buy this game, there’s loads of people out there to make friends with.”

3. The ability to immerse oneself in a period that is vaguely familiar, especially as one can pick and choose only the nice bits of it and leave out the nasty ones:

“For those of you who want the splendour of the Dark Ages with none of the side effects – scurvy, the Black Death, being burnt at the stake.”

“Anyone with an interest in the middle ages will *adore* this game for its ability to immerse you in the sights and sounds (but thankfully not smells) of the time.”

“The brutish reality of medieval England proves to be a great gaming experience (You definitely wouldn’t want to live there.)”

4. The acceptance of traditional gendering of roles in a way that might seem unacceptable in real life:

“Women have the role they would mostly have had at the time, as princesses producing heirs, or being married off to cement an alliance.”

5. The ability to control the world and use one’s skills and intelligence to make it work:

“I love the sieges in this version, they do mean that you have to really use your head and not just brute force in order to win with a minimum of casualties.”

6. The nostalgia for a time when one could be closer to the land and able to manage the basic needs of life, especially food, and know how they were brought into existence:

“If you want to make bread you need to grow wheat, get it milled into flour and then build some bakeries to make the bread.”

7. In addition, people have the thrill of exchanging news about the addiction level of the game, in which some pride is being taken: the higher that level, the better the game is supposed to be:

“This will change your life (going out somehow doesn’t seem the same anymore) [...] once you have begun you will find yourself wanting to do little else with your spare time, meaning huge savings in other areas.”

and the rejection of a political-correctness culture that precludes robust discussion about weapons, the pleasure taken in the thrashing of one’s enemies, and religion:

“The developers have approached the subject of religion somewhat sensitively [...] there are disclaimers in the manual that they are making no claims or comments about the effects or desire of religion blah blah blah. It’s a game, people, it’s a real pity they took such a sensitive approach to what could have been a really interesting 3rd element.”

To a society that, on the whole, has lived in a safe world with no recent wars, food shortages, or major epidemics, in which much is done to create a safe environment (whether people want it or not, Health and Safety rules enforce it), when people live longer and, unless they belong to high-risk professions like the army, rarely see

death, the excitement of danger, risk-taking, and fighting, as long as it is virtual, is most attractive. In an increasingly dispersed, specialized, internationalized society, the ability to control a small world and make it work, when so much of the large world seems out of control; to mete out immediate and visible punishment, when in real life government and law seem increasingly remote; to reaffirm gender roles now blurred, are all prized for re-establishing apparent certainties now gone. Nostalgia for a return to the land, which appears to allow players to control their environment, the familiarity with the clichés of medieval history (knights and castles, crusades, princesses, priests), which allows for a sense of vaguely known territory, and national pride, which can find an outlet not always openly available to western Europeans today, also contribute to the success. Last but certainly not least is the sense of community and belonging, both virtual and real, for which the game is a means of bonding around similar needs and pleasures.

However different in other respects, some patterns other than escapism are common to game players and to re-enactors: belonging to a community, the need for the apparent reality of fighting and brutality of living, the acceptance of conventional gender roles, and the enthusiasm at being able to wield real (or virtual real) big bad weapons. While the constituencies of the two are by no means equivalent (games are for individual pleasure, while re-enactment can be for educational purposes; one is clean, while the other implies exposure to dirt, mud, scratchy clothing, heavy armor, and perhaps physical injury), some features work for both, as they do for popular fiction and Heritage. In one respect, medievalism has not changed in its main function since the sixteenth century: it remains one of the key forms of escapism from modern life, with outlets that are not always so much about “loving the [whatever historical] Age as about escaping from the Plastic Age.”²⁸

NOTES

1. This essay will be further expanded into two longer ones, currently in progress. In view of the relatively short bibliography on most of the topics discussed here, I have used several times material presented in Veronica Ortenberg, *In Search of the Holy Grail: The Quest for the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon-Continuum, 2006).

2. One major form of popular culture not discussed here at all is film and television, partly because it is a vast topic, and partly because a lot of work has already been done on medievalism and film.

3. *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1891) and *The Well at the World's End* (1894) are the two best examples.

4. Philip Pullman, *His Dark Materials*, now renamed *The Northern Lights* trilogy; on the genre, see Edmund Little, *The Fantasts: Studies in J. R. R. Tolkien, Lewis Carroll, Mervyn Peake, Nikolay Gogol and Kenneth Grahame* (Amersham: Avebury, 1984), 1–12, 31–38; Mark R. Hillegas, ed., *Shadows of Imagination* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 68–69, 100–6; Jane Chance, *Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 42–43, 77–79 and 162–83; Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982; rev. ed. London: HarperCollins, 2005), 189; Jane Chance, ed., *Tolkien the Medievalist* (London: Routledge, 2003); Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), 77, 101–2, 136–40; Ortenberg, *In Search*, chap. 7.

5. Ortenberg, *In Search*, chaps. 4 and 5.

6. Ortenberg, *In Search*, chap. 7.

7. Eric E. Christian and Bernard Lindsay, “The Habit of Detection: The Medieval Monk as Detective in the Novels of Ellis Peters,” *Studies in Medievalism* 4 (1992): 276–89.

8. On the Norman Yoke theory in political thought, see Christopher Hill, “The Norman Yoke,” in his *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1958), 50–122; David Underdown, *A Freeborn People: Politics and the Nation in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Michael Wood, “The Norman Yoke,” in his *In Search of England: Journeys into the English Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 3–22; John G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 124–47; Clare A. Simmons, “Absent Presence: The Romantic Era Magna Charta and the English Constitution,” in Richard Utz and Tom Shippey, ed., (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1998), 72–75; on Walter Scott's role in popularizing the

notion, see Nicholas Rance, *The Historical Novel and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Vision Press, 1975); Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 12–51, and “Sir Walter Scott and the Medieval Revival,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 19 (1964): 315–32; Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 30–38; Jerome Mitchell, *Scott, Chaucer and Medieval Romance: A Study of Sir Walter Scott’s Indebtedness to the Literature of the Middle Ages* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987); and summaries for these, as well as for the continuation of the theme in Hollywood filmography, in Ortenberg, *In Search*, chaps. 1, 3, 4, and 8.

9. Most of my examples are extracted from the English Heritage activities brochures from 2003 onwards, on-site English Heritage and other museums leaflets, and some relevant websites, e.g., <www.battle-of-hastings-1066.org.uk>; <www.suttonhoo.org>; <www.kingarthurslabyrinth.com>; <www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages>. Significantly, there are very few such non-personal websites of this kind outside the UK.

10. Several of the above names are themselves references to other medievalist material that visitors may already know from other sources such as crime fiction and film, for example Ragnor who recalls Ragnar in the film *The Vikings*, or Sister Septima who recalls Sister Fidelma – another way of making the visitor both comfortable and pleased with their own recognition of the material.

11. Examples come from *Past Times*, individual museum bookshops, e.g., British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Louvre in Paris, museums in Italy, Spain, and northern Europe; and from Christmas mail-order catalogues from outlets like *Museum Selection*; see Ortenberg, *In Search*, chaps. 5, 6, and 9.

12. Girouard, *Return to Camelot*; Debra N. Mancoff, *The Return to Camelot of King Arthur: The Legend through Victorian Eyes* (London: Pavilion, 1995); Juliette Wood, *Eternal Chalice: The Enduring Legend of the Holy Grail* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2007); Ronald Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London: Hambledon, 2003).

13. The literature on this subject is so vast that it would be impossible to cover here. The most one can do is name a few among the most relevant titles on each subject, such as Neville Drury, *Magic and Witchcraft: From Shamanism to the Techno-Pagans* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004); Philip Carr-Gomm, ed., *Druidcraft: The Magic of Wicca and Druidry* (London: Thorsons, 2006); Daphne Brooke, *Saints and Goddesses: The Interface with Celtic Paganism* (Whithorn: Friends of the Whithorn Trust, 1999); Vivienne

Crowley, *Wicca* (London: Thorsons, 2000); Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); see Ortenberg, *In Search*, chap. 5.

14. The identification of the Catholic and/or Anglican Church with the Establishment and therefore repression and oppression versus the “native Celtic Church” representing individual religious freedom is a very old one, going back to at least the sixteenth century and the Reformation, and taken up again from the eighteenth century onwards by nonconformists; see, for example, Oliver Davies, “Celtic Christianity: Texts and Representations,” in Mark Atherton, et al., ed., *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 23–38; and, in the first instance, Kathleen Hughes, “The Celtic Church: Is This a Valid Concept?,” *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 1 (1981): 1–20; Wendy Davies, “The Myth of the Celtic Church,” in Nancy Edwards and Alan Lane, ed., *The Early Church in Wales and the West* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1992), 12–21; Peter Morgan, “From a Death to a View: The Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period,” in Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 43–100; Ortenberg, *In Search*, chap. 5. Scholarly debate has not had any impact on popular perception, however, as the success of many books such as Donald E. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 2000); Michael Mitton, *Restoring the Woven Cord: Strands of Celtic Christianity for the Church Today* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995); J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1997) proves.

15. Wood, *Eternal Chalice*, 167–80.

16. <www.histrenact.co.uk>.

17. The Anglo-Saxons, Colchester Historical Enactment Society.

18. Rent-a-Peasant, Scabius Corpus who “by popular demand, will infect villages etc with Black Death, Leprosy and anything else we can catch.”

19. The Company of St. Jude.

20. Mogh Roith, <www.moghroith.org>.

21. Cavalieri della [sic] Ordine dei [sic] Santo Stefano.

22. Dark Ages Charitable Trust, <www.darkagestrust.org.uk>.

23. This has generally been ascribed primarily to Viking groups, but seems to be fairly general: see for example Tim Moore, *I Believe in Yesterday: My Adventures in Living History* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), 92, 104.

24. <www.sca.org>.

25. Moore, *I Believe in Yesterday*, 138–44, 149.

26. I have left out the *Age of Empires* game, which involves some of the same issues discussed here but is slightly different in using the Middle Ages

as a staging post rather than a self-contained unit; it is looked at in detail by Daniel T. Kline, "Virtually Medieval: The *Age of Kings* Interprets the Middle Ages," in David W. Marshall, ed., *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 154–70.

27. I have used extensively the comments made by players on the relevant Amazon websites – it has rarely been possible to have such direct access to the makers and consumers of popular culture, since these comments are unprompted and freely offered, in everyday language, without restraint or censorship. The **em**bolding is mine, and I have tacitly corrected the spelling in most cases, but not the grammar.

28. Moore, *I Believe in Yesterday*, 22.