

More than the Parts that Form Them:  
Medievalism and Comfortable Alienation in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and Patrick Rothfuss'  
Kingkiller Chronicle

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Medieval literature exists in a multitude of forms; however, the medieval romance grew particularly popular. Originating in France in the twelfth century, it spread to the rest of Europe and prevailed as a literary form throughout the Middle Ages. Although these romances originate from everything from classical mythology to earlier Arthurian legends, they share several elements. In her essay on medieval romance, Christine Chism states that most medieval romances contain a knightly hero, an endangered woman, elements of magic, challenges to the hero's prowess or moral character, and "the construction of careers and the fall of kingdoms."<sup>1</sup> Elements of the medieval romance—particularly the quest, hero, and magical elements—still exist within modern fantastic literature and are often central to the genre. Countless works of fantastic literature contain these elements, although they appear in many different ways. Two works of particular interest are J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and Patrick Rothfuss' *Kingkiller Chronicle*. Despite the wide gap in their publication,<sup>2</sup> they demonstrate a similar usage of elements of medieval literature in order to balance foreignness and familiarity. These elements appear in both *The Hobbit* and the *Kingkiller Chronicle* and, in general, follow the models set by medieval romance quite closely, although they manifest themselves in slightly different fashions in each of the novels in question. The greatest difference, however, lies in the presentation of two of the central characters: Thorin and Kvothe, both of whom deviate from the typical hero of medieval romance. Although Thorin seems to fit more neatly into this concept of the hero—as a battle-hardened warrior king in exile, he would fit perfectly into a medieval romance—his dying speech demonstrates a departure from the medieval ideas regarding such a hero, as it values

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Chism, "Romance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature, 1100-1500*, ed. Larry Scanlon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 57.

<sup>2</sup> *The Hobbit* was first published in 1937, whereas the first novel in the *Kingkiller Chronicle*, *The Name of the Wind*, was originally published in 2007.

humility over glory. Kvothe, the main character in the *Kingkiller Chronicle*, is treated in a similar fashion. He fits less neatly into the world of the medieval romance, but this is also because he demonstrates a departure from the traditional hero of medieval romance: he lacks the nobility of blood that drove these tales.

However, these departures from the medieval hero do not seem like mistakes made by amateurs with little knowledge of medieval literature. Since both Tolkien and Rothfuss were familiar with medieval literature and culture, they presumably could have given their heroes qualities more typical of the great heroes of medieval romance.<sup>3</sup> However, readers would likely have a much harder time connecting with such heroes, since the medieval world operated on a different ideological and cultural framework than the modern one. In including elements of the medieval romance blended with heroes who exemplify modern values, Tolkien and Rothfuss achieve a balance between the foreign and the familiar, allowing their readers to feel separated from reality without alienating the reader to the point that they feel uncomfortable. This phenomena—which I have named comfortable alienation—drives both of these novels as they blend the medieval with the modern in order to achieve the ideal balance of alterity and familiarity.

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<sup>3</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien was a well-known scholar of medieval literature at Oxford. Although Patrick Rothfuss does not have the same credentials, he does have both his bachelors and masters degrees in English literature and mentioned that, in his ten years as an undergraduate, he took several courses related to the Middle Ages.

### **Not Very Medieval: An Introduction to Medievalism in Fantastic Literature**

Medievalism has become a popular mode of alienating readers within the genre of speculative fiction—more specifically in relation to fantastic literature, described by C.W. Sullivan as a distinct departure from reality, often employing a secondary world.<sup>4</sup> When operating in this way, medievalism often brings about an idealization of the Middle Ages. Instead of attempting to accurately recreate medieval life, medievalism pulls out certain elements of medieval culture—such as the political or religious structure—and affixes them to a later time. This often results in a misrepresentation of the medieval period: either as an idyllic time in which the lack of technology made life simpler and more beautiful or a backwards world in which the people made nothing but mistakes. In addition to its presence in literature, medievalism can manifest itself in art, architecture, or video games. However, its role in fantastic literature provides a particularly fascinating intersection of the modern and the medieval.

Oftentimes, medievalism either romanticizes or demonizes the Middle Ages. Some scholars examine it as a time of idyllic peace and beauty in which chivalry reigned supreme and people treated one another kindly. For example, the art of the Pre-Raphaelites romanticizes the Middle Ages by portraying them as strictly beautiful without acknowledging the many struggles of the period. Others use “medieval” to mark something horrendous—such as mass killings or political oppression—by suggesting that it belongs to a past filled with other barbarities. The recent discourse about the Islamic State provides a strong example of this, as some journalists refer to the actions of the Islamic State as “medieval,” thus suggesting that the grim realities of

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<sup>4</sup> C.W. Sullivan III, “Folklore and Fantastic Literature,” *Western Folklore* 60:4(Fall 2001): 280.

death and brutality lie in the distant past.<sup>5</sup> Both of these views offer problematic interpretations of the Middle Ages, as the truth of the period lies somewhere between the romantic and grotesque. However, since fantastic literature cares little for historical accuracy, it often errs towards romanticism, as the chivalric love and honorable deeds of the idyllic Middle Ages lend themselves well to the realm of fantasy. Of course, pseudo-medieval fantastic literature sometimes embraces the grim realities of the Middle Ages,<sup>6</sup> but it focuses more on the allure of the medieval than on its pitfalls in order to create a captivating alternate universe.

Although medievalism has become a common feature of fantastic literature, its role in literature stretches much further back. It appeared in Shakespeare's history plays and the poetry of Lord Tennyson before it made its way into fantastic literature. The writings of J.R.R. Tolkien certainly have something to do with the prevalence of medievalism in fantastic literature: in addition to being the author of numerous works of fiction, Tolkien was a professor of Anglo-Saxon and English literature at Merton College, Oxford. Although medievalism remains a popular feature of fantastic literature, its influence springs from more than a string of authors blindly following a literary trend without understanding how it operates as a technique. The recurring presence of this particular technique addresses a certain need of fantastic literature: specifically, the need to make readers feel as if they are part of another world. Scholars have previously recognized the prevalence of this technique, particularly in relation to fantastic literature. In fact, C.W. Sullivan III describes this technique in his article "Folklore and Fantastic Literature," in which he describes how authors of fantastic fiction often use familiar

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<sup>5</sup> Claire Monagle and Louise D'Arcens, "'Medieval' makes a comeback in modern politics. What's going on?" in *The Conversation*, September 22, 2014. Accessed February 20, 2015. <https://theconversation.com/medieval-makes-a-comeback-in-modern-politics-whats-going-on-31780>

<sup>6</sup> This appears with particular clarity in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which often portrays kings and knights as treacherous and power-hungry rather than benevolent and chivalrous. The video games *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Dragon Age II* also embrace the grimmer side of medievalism by portraying religious fanaticism through the Templars rather than turning them into a hallmark of glorious crusading chivalry.

motifs in order to create the alternate realities in which their stories are set. Sullivan underscores the importance of utilizing already familiar motifs by stating that these motifs allow the readers “to connect with, be able to understand, and be able to decode any meaning inherent in the story set in the Secondary World and in the Secondary World itself.”<sup>7</sup> According to Sullivan, this explains the frequent usage of a pseudo-medieval setting: it is somewhat familiar to most readers, but not so much that the secondary world becomes too much like the readers’ present reality.<sup>8</sup> Although Sullivan’s article examines more than the influences of medieval literature, his central claim regarding the importance of comfortable alienation fits perfectly with the question at hand.

Sullivan does cite Tolkien as one of the key sources of the development of medievalism in fantastic literature, but medievalism presumably would not have become so prevalent if it did not effectively create the sense of otherworldliness desired by the author.<sup>9</sup> Tolkien’s works certainly initiated a strong tradition of pseudo-medieval fantasy, but several generations of authors would not have followed his lead if it demonstrated significant deficiency.

Initially, it might seem as if such literature contains an oversimplified version of the Middle Ages, including generic features such as monarchs, renowned warriors, and a lack of technology. However, upon closer examination, both the Middle Ages and the medievalism in speculative fiction appear with more complexity in these novels than simply adding in kings and castles for the sake of a medieval aesthetic. In fact, fantastic literature often shares some elements with medieval literary works. Clearly, the structural similarities have carried forward into contemporary fantastic literature, as both types of stories typically follow a hero on a quest

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<sup>7</sup> Sullivan 281.

<sup>8</sup> Sullivan 281-282.

<sup>9</sup> Sullivan 280.

of particular importance. Other than that basic similarity, the degree to which any given author draws from medieval literary influence is the decision of that author.

Although fantastic literature requires elements that deviate from the readers' daily experiences, these foreign elements should not overwhelm the story lest readers abandon it in favor of a tale that makes more sense. Although complete originality might seem tempting—especially in a genre in which it is dangerously easy to become formulaic—too much new information will presumably overwhelm the reader and produce an unnecessary amount of confusion.<sup>10</sup> Too much influence of medieval literature will lead most readers to feel utterly unfamiliar with the work at hand, whereas an overabundance of modernity will erase any illusion that the story takes place in an alternate world. An effective use of comfortable alienation insures that the readers of the literary work in question do not feel too distant from the setting that the author has created while insuring that the author maintains some suspension from reality in the work. The incorporation of medieval elements into fiction allows authors to achieve this balance, although the usage of too many medieval elements will presumably leave the reader feeling confused and alienated: a feeling that authors presumably wish to avoid.

As Douglas Anderson acknowledges in his introduction to *The Annotated Hobbit*, critics sometimes overlook *The Hobbit*, dismissing it because of its label as a children's book. However, Anderson recognizes the “deft scholarship and profound reflection” integral to *The Hobbit*.<sup>11</sup> Many other scholars have followed suit, recognizing the complexities in *The Hobbit*, whether they do so through biographical criticism, application of a particular literary theory, or

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<sup>10</sup> One such example occurs in Donita K. Paul's Dragonkeeper series. They follow a fairly traditional structure—following a hero's quest as the hero finds and raises dragons—but Paul includes a plethora of new creatures which she fails to describe in the text, opting instead for explanations in a glossary at the back of each novel in the series. Although her originality might be refreshing to some readers, others might find the multitude of unfamiliar names and species too difficult to follow over the course of several novels.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Anderson, *The Annotated Hobbit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 18.

an examination of potential medieval sources. Although scholarship on Rothfuss' works is currently nonexistent, a close examination of them demonstrates that they too contain a more intricate picture of the Middle Ages. This complex usage of medievalism allows both authors to create settings for their stories that feel almost completely alien to their readers by employing the general structure and aesthetic of medieval society in their novels. However, although both settings seems quite foreign to readers, the modern ideas represented through the main characters serve as anchors to modernity so that the reader does not feel completely lost in reading these novels.

The difference between the Middle Ages and the present makes them particularly helpful in creating a sense of alienation. In fact, they differ from the present so much that they can seem foreign to someone with little knowledge of the period. In fact, [scholar] describes them in terms of a foreign country in order to highlight the fact that they differ from the present so much.<sup>12</sup> This quality makes them an idea mode of drawing readers of fantastic literature into an alternate world by employing some of the unfamiliar elements and blending them with ideas more familiar to contemporary readers. Both Tolkien and Rothfuss employ this technique, blending the peculiarity of the Middle Ages with modern values and ideas so as to make readers comfortable in the otherwise unfamiliar setting.

*The Hobbit* and the *Kingkiller Chronicle* work well in demonstrating the role of comfortable alienation in fantastic literature for a number of reasons. The time in between the publication of these two novels allows them to represent the early days of the fantasy genre as well as the more recent ones. Additionally, the plots of the novels in question employ elements of the medieval romance in a similar fashion, but differ in structure enough to demonstrate the

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<sup>12</sup> Jacqueline Ann Stuhmiller, “ ‘The past is a foreign country’: Teaching the Middle Ages as a Study Abroad program” (presentation, International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, MI, May 8-11, 2014).



changes in comfortable alienation within the fantasy genre over time. Other well-known works of fantastic literature written within the last two decades, such as George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and lesser-known works such as Joe Abercrombie's *The First Law* series and Brent Weeks' *Night Angel* series differ from Tolkienian fantasy too much for a meaningful comparison of the works through this lens to function properly.

## PART I - THE HOBBIT

J.R.R. Tolkien left an indelible mark upon the fantasy genre. In fact, Tom Shippey even refers to Tolkien as the twentieth-century equivalent of Chretien de Troyes, pointing out that Chretien revitalized Arthurian literature, although he did not invent it: an action similar to Tolkien's.<sup>13</sup> Most modern fantastic literature contains some tinge of Tolkienian influence, whether consciously or unconsciously planned. However, one of the most notable features that dominates fantastic literature is the usage of plot elements drawn from medieval literature. Many elements of medieval literature—the social order, the emphasis on the hero's journey, the elves, and the presence of magic—appear at some point in Tolkien's narrative of Middle-earth. Of course, this borrowing of medieval elements was not done unconsciously. In fact, Tolkien once remarked that his initial reaction to reading a medieval text was to rewrite it as a modern one rather than performing traditional analysis on it. This alludes to the role of his scholarly pursuits in his creative process.<sup>14</sup> *The Hobbit* does not directly parallel one specific medieval literary work—although scholars have noted the obvious similarities with *Beowulf*—but it borrows from a variety of genres and works in order to produce the desired blend of foreignness and familiarity. However, an analysis of every borrowing of a medieval literary element in *The Hobbit* would be exhausting, so attention will be given to the function of comfortable alienation in the characters of Thorin and Bilbo, the presence of the elves of Rivendell and Mirkwood, and the underlying theme of the narrative.

## Pride and Greed

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<sup>13</sup> Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2002), xviii.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas Anderson, "Introduction," in *The Annotated Hobbit* 1.

Many medieval literary works focus primarily on the hero's journey through the narrative. As it progresses, the hero gradually develops, growing away from his original flawed state towards an improved one. Some of the most common flaws in medieval literature were pride and greed, presumably since these were two of the seven deadly sins that earned the worst reputations during this period. Of course, flaws are a necessary part of any well-written character—modern or medieval—but the theme of prideful or greedy characters was particularly common in medieval literature. Multiple critics have noted one of these two flaws as significant in characters such as Beowulf, King Arthur, and other figures of Arthurian legend, presumably in order to underscore the damage that these flaws could do. These emotions are still familiar to a modern audience, but their presentation in *The Hobbit* aligns to their appearance in medieval literary works, particularly *Beowulf*. As is the case in *Beowulf*, greed becomes a problem because of the presence of a dragon's hoard, which contains cursed gold that brings out the worst in those who come into contact with it. This type of greed also appears in *The Hobbit*, particularly in Thorin's fixation with his ancestral treasure. This only appears clearly towards the end of the *The Hobbit*. Although the treasure plays an important role in the tale itself, it does not become a significant problem until the Company arrives at Erebor. This is when the gold-sickness begins to affect Thorin, who spent "long hours in the past days...in the treasury, and the lust of [the gold] was heavy upon him."<sup>15</sup>

When he finally enters Erebor, Thorin faces a similar kind of greed from the treasure that lies in the heart of Erebor—especially the Arkenstone. Throughout most of the novel, the treasure is a secondary concern of Thorin's, as he shows more enthusiasm for reclaiming the lost kingdom of his forefathers. Thus, his desire to reclaim Erebor begins as a desire relatively

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<sup>15</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit* 323.

untainted by lust. This is clear at the beginning of the book when Thorin describes Smaug's attack of the Lonely Mountain. He mentions the gold, saying that they "still mean to get it back, and to bring our curses home to Smaug," which suggests that although the gold is important, Thorin views it as a means to an end rather than an end alone.<sup>16</sup> Although this does not foreshadow Thorin's eventual obsession with the treasure of Erebor, his emotions become much darker once the Company enters the Lonely Mountain and encounters the treasure. Within a few days, he becomes so consumed by lust for the gold that he refuses to give any to the men of Lake-Town or the elves of Mirkwood. This eventually leads to the Battle of the Five Armies: a clear demonstration of the destructiveness of Thorin's greed.

Although the levels of destruction differ, Beowulf acts similarly at the end of *Beowulf*. He does not bring a massive battle upon his people, but his greed and desire for power at the dragon's hoard bring him to an end that is not unlike Thorin's. Despite being advanced in age, Beowulf insists on fighting the dragon for glory's sake, although a younger warrior might have been more capable. His insistence on fighting the dragon brought about his own death via his flaws.

The presence of this particular flaw is presumably familiar to modern readers, as pride and greed still appear in modern works, but the particular usage of these elements hearkens back to the prevalence of the seven deadly sins in the Middle Ages. Although various literary works condemned these sins, pride and greed were hailed as the worst of the seven at different points in the medieval period.<sup>17</sup> Thus, their presence in a pseudo-medieval setting hearkens back to the medieval literary tradition. Pride and greed are familiar to modern readers, but the medieval-

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<sup>16</sup> Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 57.

<sup>17</sup> Lester K. Little's "Pride Goes before Avarice: Social Change and the Vices in Latin Christendom" (*The American Historical Review* 76, February 1971) explains that the changing structure of medieval society was responsible for greed replacing pride as the worst of sins.

ness of their presentation in *The Hobbit* aligns more closely with the medieval treatment of these sins.

### A Medieval Hero

Although it might seem odd to focus closely on a character other than Bilbo in a discussion of heroism in *The Hobbit*, Thorin gives the novel much of its medieval flavor. The focus of *The Hobbit* draws attention away from Thorin and towards Bilbo, but Thorin still plays an undeniably important role in the story. Without him, the quest on which he takes Bilbo would probably never occur. Still, it might seem erroneous to dub Thorin a hero, especially when he treats Bilbo so unkindly at some points in the novel and eventually succumbs to greed, which leads to the Battle of the Five Armies and the deaths of several of his loyal friends.

W.H. Auden further illuminates how a hero operates within a story in his essay “The Quest Hero.” Auden discusses the importance of journey and change in the development of these heroes. He asserts that the quest is more than “[looking] for a lost collar or button.”<sup>18</sup> Quests are journeys to attain something grand, such as a long-lost object, kingdom, or person. Generally, quests have a physical definition; however, deeper emotional developments often permeate quest stories. In the ends of such tales, characters often gain insight that would have been impossible without the literal journey that they undertook.<sup>19</sup> Quests play an important role in most types of medieval narrative, although they vary slightly in each form. In epic poetry, the quest is seen as something that has been divinely orchestrated, particularly for the hero. Its scope declines in the romance genre, which still depends on the quest for its narrative structure. However, in medieval romances, the quest is not seen as part of a divine scheme meant to

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<sup>18</sup> W.H. Auden, “The Quest Hero,” in *Understanding the Lord of the Rings: The Best of Tolkien Criticism*, ed. Rose A. Zimbardo and Neil D. Isaacs (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004) 31.

<sup>19</sup> Auden 33-36.

completely upturn the hero's life; rather, it is the undertaking of the hero in hopes of fixing an external problem rather than an internal one. Gawain does not use this sort of language. Instead, when he accepts the Green Knight's challenge, he does so to preserve the honour of Arthur's court rather than playing his part in what he believes to be a scheme designed to provide him with some sort of important lesson.<sup>20</sup> Thorin shares this trait, as he cannot understand the internal battles that he will eventually face upon arriving at Erebor. Early on in the novel, he indicates his plans to rule Erebor once more, which immediately draws attention to his pride: the thing that eventually becomes his largest flaw. At the beginning, Thorin's pride is not much of a problem, as he is more focused on the restoration of Erebor than on his personal glorification. However, as the narrative progresses, he strays further from this path and becomes prideful of his role as king rather than proud of restoring his homeland. The praise of the master of Lake-Town and the gold sickness only further this pride, turning Thorin away from his original noble purpose and allowing this flaw to consume him.

Such a theme is common in medieval literature, particularly in medieval romances. Although they often have their own weaknesses, romance heroes are generally superior to their fellow beings and carry out quests in order to learn some sort of lesson. Romance heroes also gain mastery over themselves and their environments and tend not to view quests as divinely ordained, thus leading them to view their quests as important but rather typical events, not earth-shattering tasks that must be completed. Since romances focus more on the hero himself than on the quest, they allow for a more complex hero whose flaws and virtues are made apparent in the

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<sup>20</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, trans., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*. (New York: Del Rey, 1990) sect. 16.

text.<sup>21</sup> Although many medieval romances focus on a hero that fits this model, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* applies well to this situation—particularly since Tolkien worked so closely with this particular romance. The fact that Gawain takes up the Green Knight’s challenge indicates that he is a particularly adept fighter, since the Green Knight requested the best fighter in the room, thus indicating his superiority to the rest of the knights in Camelot.<sup>22</sup> Gawain’s quest also has a deeper significance, as it reminds him of the importance of following the knightly virtues inscribed on his shield. Through this, he gains mastery over himself by understanding the importance of friendship, generosity, chastity, courtesy, and piety in addition to mastering his environment by fulfilling the quest assigned to him. This process allows readers to see Gawain’s struggle against himself and his environment in hopes of gaining mastery over them.

Thorin fits this description well. He begins as a determined yet selfish leader who briefly succumbs to his own pride and greed. However, he eventually overcomes his shortcomings and apologizes to Bilbo while on his deathbed. Despite this, his narrative seems to lack the complexity typical of a medieval hero, since *The Hobbit* focuses primarily on Bilbo’s involvement with the quest. An examination of Thorin’s full narrative, however, provides a clearer picture of how he fits into this role. *The Hobbit* briefly alludes to the fall of Erebor: an important event in Thorin’s life that eventually fueled his desire to fight for his homeland and provides the main focus for his quest. In the tradition of medieval romance, this quest focuses on much more than achieving a certain goal. Of course, Thorin does eventually reach Erebor, but the significance of his quest went beyond reclaiming Erebor for his people once more. Although

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Moorman, “The Use of Love: Chrétien’s Knights,” in *The Hero in Literature*, ed. Victor Brombert, (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1969) 112-113.

<sup>22</sup> *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* lines 285-293, 343-365.

he never became king of Erebor, Thorin did receive a moral lesson: namely, that pride and greed are worth little when one reaches the end of one's life.

Additionally, the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* explain Thorin's involvement in the Battle of Azanulbizar where he fought Azog the Defiler in hopes of driving the orcs out of the Misty Mountains.<sup>23</sup> Of course, *The Hobbit* ends in the Battle of the Five Armies, but this alone does not provide a full picture of Thorin's acumen as a warrior. The battles that occur outside of *The Hobbit* give Thorin skill comparable to that of medieval romance heroes. Many medieval romances tell stories of knights praised for their acumen as warriors; however, Arthurian romances are perhaps most renowned for this. The title of "best knight" rotates depending on the author of the romance, but often falls on either Lancelot or Gawain: the two knights who are consistently cited as being closest to Arthur. Although both of them earn considerable amounts of praise throughout the various medieval Arthurian romances, both of them have significant character flaws. Lancelot's is consistently his illicit relationship with Guinevere. Gawain does not have such a defining flaw; however, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, his defining flaw is his excessive love of his own life.

However, although the flaws shape these narratives, the willingness to change defines the characters. Despite their sometimes deceptive appearances, missteps, and inner motivations, Thorin and Gawain both realize the ways in which they have fallen from grace by the ends of their tales. Though Gawain's shield serves as a reminder of his various shortcomings, it is important to remember that he acknowledges his own flaws at the end of the poem, placing more emphasis on his own failings than the other characters do.<sup>24</sup> Gawain expresses a high level of

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<sup>23</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary One-Volume Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 1074-1075.

<sup>24</sup> Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, sect. 100-101.



frustration and distaste for the way he behaved for most of the story. He chooses to wear the girdle around his arm as a reminder of his flaws and, perhaps, to keep himself from making another drastic and dishonourable mistake.

Thorin is also condemned for his pride. Initially, he did not want to bring Bilbo on the quest for Erebor, nor did he want the mission to be a secret. Thorin wanted to march into Erebor with an army of dwarf warriors and fight until Smaug died, thus leaving the mountain and its treasure in the hands of the dwarves. Eventually, he agreed to Gandalf's plan to reclaim Erebor, which involved taking Bilbo along as a burglar and operating with greater stealth.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the novel, however, Thorin is prepared for Bilbo to demonstrate his incompetence: yet another example of Thorin's pride. Thorin does not hate Bilbo; rather, Thorin wishes to regain Erebor successfully and believes that Bilbo will harm this endeavor, which explains his ongoing contempt for the hobbit.

Although the similarities between *The Hobbit* and medieval literature prevail throughout the novel, its ending takes a much more modern turn. Matthew Dickerson addresses the difference between the ending of *The Hobbit* and that of medieval romances. He does not point to the traits of the romance hero directly, but he does acknowledge that Thorin's humble death is drastically different from the parting that one would normally associate with a hero of such magnitude. Thorin's death is a quiet one: after his conversation with Bilbo, he fades out of the narrative with no mention of grand festivities to commemorate his life and deeds. This goes against the medieval literary tradition, as heroes who die do so in a glorious fashion rather than passing quietly without ceremony in the aftermath of a large battle. Thorin's death aligns more with modern traditions than medieval ones, as medieval literary works often end with the hero's

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<sup>25</sup> Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales* 323-325.

glorious death. In having Thorin die like this, Tolkien both creates a scenario with which readers are more familiar in addition to suggesting something about heroism that does not align with the medieval hero. By humbling Thorin through his death, Tolkien inserts a more modern idea of heroism into the work, suggesting that it is achieved through purity of heart rather than accomplishing seemingly impossible deeds.

Information about Thorin and the dwarves is sprinkled throughout Tolkien's other works and offers helpful illumination to Thorin's character. The appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* are especially helpful in this matter. Both Thorin's father and his grandfather were murdered, leaving him to rule an exiled group of dwarves: a race that is, by nature, "secretive, laborious, [and] retentive of the memories of injuries."<sup>26</sup> This offers a logical explanation for Thorin's bitterness in the novel: he is not simply an irrationally irate dwarf; rather, as a dwarf, he is naturally inclined to remember when someone has done him harm. In governing an entire people who share the memory of the loss of Erebor—either from direct experience or being told tales—Thorin has lived with the bitterness with this wound more than any other dwarf. Though he sometimes acts rashly while on the quest, his decision to reclaim Erebor was certainly not one born in a moment of heated anger.

However, despite his nature as a dwarf, it is dangerous to ignore Thorin's lack of judgment in regards to reclaiming Erebor, as they become clear in "The Quest for Erebor:" an unfinished story explaining Gandalf's role in the quest for Erebor. Had Gandalf not advised against it, Thorin would have charged into Erebor with an army of dwarves rather than selecting a few choice warriors and a burglar to accompany him on his quest.<sup>27</sup> In this, the potency of Thorin's pride becomes clear; this flaw is the one that brings about his downfall. He does lead

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<sup>26</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: Appendix F*, 1132.

<sup>27</sup> Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales* 322-323.

several dwarves to their deaths at the Battle of Five Armies, including his nephews Fili and Kili. His lust for and protectiveness over the treasure of his forefathers are ultimately the qualities that cause him to fail in his chance at restoring Erebor to its former glory. Had he accepted the help that was offered—though it would mean relinquishing some of his hard-earned gold—he would have had a chance at becoming King under the Mountain.

In addition to his death, there are other moments at which Thorin is humbled, thus bringing him closer to the readers' experience. The arrival of Thorin and Company in Lake-town emerges as one such moment, as all of them are particularly bedraggled from their time spent in barrels. In fact, Bilbo only recognizes Thorin "by his golden chain, and by the colour of his now dirty and tattered sky-blue hood with its tarnished silver tassel."<sup>28</sup> Again, although emerging from the barrels in this fashion humbles Thorin and Company rather than exalting them, their emergence in Lake-Town still takes on a medieval feel. Their arrival takes on an Arthurian feel, particularly when the people of Lake-Town begin reciting a poem declaring that "all sorrow fail and sadness/at the Mountain-king's return," suggesting that Thorin's return will fix all of their problems and bring about an age characterized by light and beauty.<sup>29</sup> Many Arthurian romances end with similar ideas, suggesting that, when King Arthur does return, the world shall enter once more into a golden age. One particularly notable example occurs at the end of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, when Arthur's tombstone names him the once and future king.<sup>30</sup> The mundane nature of Thorin's return balances out the medievalism of the king's return. This anticlimactic emergence from a barrel brings Thorin's narrative closer to the reader, thus making

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<sup>28</sup> Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit* 246-247.

<sup>29</sup> Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit* 251.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Malory, *Malory Works*, ed. Eugene Vanaver (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971), 717.

it easier to understand the situation. Thorin may be in a position that is utterly unfamiliar to modern readers, but he is not so lofty that he remains outside of their reach.

The battle at the end of *The Hobbit*—the Battle of the Five Armies—functions in a similar fashion, although it has the opposite effect on the hero. It brings the action of the novel to a head, leading elves, dwarves, humans, goblins and Wargs, and eagles to clash against one another in a final battle for treasure. Thorin participates, of course, but the readers do not see exactly how he participates: a deviation from the medieval narratives, which usually describe the hero's role in battle in extreme detail. However, the lack of description of Thorin's military prowess is explained when Bilbo visits him on his deathbed. In this moment, Thorin is humbled. He realizes the wrongs that he has committed over the past several days, acknowledges them, and asks Bilbo for his forgiveness, saying that "if more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world."<sup>31</sup> The tragic ending of Thorin's quest to reclaim Erebor does not underscore his glory and prowess. Instead, the narrative focuses on the importance of humility and kindness that this noble hero learned from a lowly burglar. Unlike the heroes of medieval literature, Thorin did not complete his quest by aggregating titles, wealth, acts of military prowess, or an understanding of his own virtue; he did so by understanding and acknowledging his own need for humility. He learned his lesson through an individual whom he initially scorned and doubted, not through a warrior even mightier than he.

The idea of a humbled hero might seem familiar; after all, Gawain returns to Camelot in a state of humility after his second encounter with the Green Knight. However, Gawain's humility seems to come more from shame at his failure to uphold his moral code, not from a realization that he should not have acted with so much pride throughout his quest. This provides the

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<sup>31</sup> Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit* 348.

separation between the medieval view of humility and the view presented in *The Hobbit*: whereas humility was viewed as a point of shame for a medieval hero, it is portrayed as a virtue in *The Hobbit*. While on his deathbed, Thorin tells Bilbo that he wishes to forget his conflict with Bilbo and die peacefully, suggesting that he has abandoned his pride and is prepared to die in humility.<sup>32</sup>

This makes Tolkien's ideas about heroism clear. The lack of glory in Thorin's last moments suggests that the lesson of humility is more important than any of his military victories: an idea that contradicts the medieval emphasis on military victory. Although some medieval narratives acknowledge the correction of a hero's moral flaws, most of them expend more energy on the glory—or lack thereof—from the hero's military exploits. For example, although *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* addresses Gawain's virtues as presented on his shield, the author focuses more on military prowess, than any of the others, making this deficiency the one that brings Gawain the greatest shame. However, Thorin's humble death is not a point of shame; rather, it is presented as one of the most honorable moments of his life, thus separating this from the medieval literary tradition.

### **A Modern Hero**

Although *The Hobbit* shares many traits with medieval literature, one thing marks it as different from these works: Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo, a middle-aged bachelor with no desire to partake in a quest or seek personal glorification, does not align with any medieval literary or historical figures. Despite the fact that he learns to embrace the new world shown to him by Thorin and Company, he does not belong in their world. However, Bilbo's presence in *The Hobbit* marks an interesting shift away from medieval literature. Medieval authors would not

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<sup>32</sup> Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit* 348-349.

have written about someone such as Bilbo, since most medieval literature was written for and about elites who did not take a keen interest in what common people did.

By including Bilbo in *The Hobbit*, Tolkien makes his story more accessible to modern readers. In fact, in many ways, Bilbo takes the place that a modern reader might occupy in a story such as *The Hobbit*. In *Exploring The Hobbit*, Corey Olsen suggests that Bilbo, like the reader, is traveling through unfamiliar territory.<sup>33</sup> Much like readers of the novel, Bilbo is thrown into a completely foreign world and must adapt rapidly with little guidance from his companions. He does not understand the ways of the dwarves, nor does he have any particular desire to participate in their quest. In *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, Tom Shippey explores a similar idea, suggesting that Bilbo has more similarities with the nineteenth-century Englishmen of Tolkien's youth than with the heroes of fairy tales or medieval literature.<sup>34</sup> Although readers might not share Bilbo's lack of enthusiasm for a quest with a company of dwarves, it seems likely that many newcomers to the story would react with shock to the dwarves' sudden appearance in Bag End and request for Bilbo to join them. The medieval elements in Tolkien's writings are so radically different from modern times that readers unfamiliar with the Middle Ages would feel as though they were in an entirely different country with a culture radically unfamiliar from their own. Such is often the case with fantastic literature: authors create new worlds to house their stories in order to open up a plethora of possibilities. Imagining a completely new setting for a story allows authors to create things not present in their known reality. They often create worlds in which magic, interactions with humanoid races, and struggles with magical creatures are facts rather than fantasies. However, making a reader too unfamiliar may lead them to abandon the story in favor of something that

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<sup>33</sup> Corey Olsen, *Exploring J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2012), 35-38.

<sup>34</sup> Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* 24-27.

does not feel so foreign. This is why comfortable alienation—the balance of the foreign and the familiar—plays a particularly important role in fantasy literature. The readers should feel familiar enough to continue with the story, but not so familiar that they forget that it is fantasy and not reality. Maintaining such a balance can become a difficult task, but the presence of Bilbo makes it easier for Tolkien to achieve this feat. Bilbo’s feelings of discomfort throughout the quest seem to serve as an anchor for readers. Although they might not understand the dwarves’ quest to reclaim a lost homeland, they will almost certainly understand Bilbo’s longing for home when his situation becomes particularly difficult.

Although he clearly occupies an important place in the story, Bilbo is not one of the novel’s medieval elements; rather, he serves as a tool that allows readers to feel more comfortable with the medievalness inherent in the rest of the story. They experience the rest of the setting concurrently with him, which makes Bilbo’s journey easier to follow than that of any member of the company of Thorin Oakenshield.

### **Plot**

The plot of *The Hobbit* contains some clear medievalism as well. Even from a glance at the two plots, the similarities between the plots of *The Hobbit* and *Beowulf* are clear. In *From Homer to Harry Potter*, a book that chronicles the changes and continuities across popular myth and fantasy, Matthew Dickerson and David O’Hara note this, acknowledging that both stories contain a quest to restore a kingdom to its former glory by ridding it of a dragon and redistributing the dragon’s hoard.<sup>35</sup> However, while discussing *The Hobbit*, Dickerson and O’Hara choose to compare Bilbo to Beowulf rather than Thorin. This is a common direction for criticism of *The Hobbit* to take—particularly since the title immediately draws the mind towards

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<sup>35</sup> Dickerson and O’Hara 111.

Bilbo—and is only reinforced by the popular culture surrounding the film.<sup>36</sup> The comparison works when acknowledging that Beowulf and Bilbo are both heroes, but it crumbles upon a closer examination of their individual characteristics. Beowulf is a different sort of hero than Bilbo, as he takes violent rather than passive action. When monsters must be confronted, Beowulf emerged, ready to fight them on equal ground. He even chose to fight Grendel with his bare hands because the monster could not wield a weapon.<sup>37</sup> Beowulf's fame originates from his ability to kill both Grendel and Grendel's mother, thus proving himself as a strong and worthy warrior. In short, Beowulf is much more of a warrior than Bilbo, thus making a comparison of these two characters rather weak. Thorin, who shares many of Beowulf's warrior-like tendencies, offers a much more appropriate point of comparison. In addition to the similar characteristics that they possess, Thorin and Beowulf have similar experiences and positions in their societies. In many respects, *Beowulf* is similar to the full Thorin narrative—that is, the stories and details of Thorin's personal history presented in the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Unfinished Tales*. Both of them fight monsters, receive praise for doing so, continue with their lives for decades, decide to attack a dragon in hopes of attaining gold and glory, and die before they can receive the desired praise for their final actions. The two heroes are similar in both their deeds and, perhaps most importantly for the present purpose, their flaws.

Although Beowulf proved himself greatly helpful for Hrothgar and the rest of the Danes, he possesses several flaws. Towards the end of the poem, Beowulf's actions begin to be driven by pride and greed rather than a desire for honour. Though he is advanced in years, he still goes

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<sup>36</sup> The 2013 MTV Movie Awards contained a "Best Hero" category, which included Bilbo Baggins. Though this is a testament to the success and influence of the films, Tolkien's long-standing impact, and the devotion of fans of the film and novel, it seems rather unfair to focus on only one hero in a film in which many are present.

<sup>37</sup> Beowulf 636-681.



to fight the dragon with only Wiglaf for assistance.<sup>38</sup> In addition to bringing more glory to Beowulf's name, slaying this dragon carried the promise of obtaining the creature's treasure: a certain reward that his encounters with Grendel and Grendel's mother did not hold. It is certainly plausible that, in striking against the dragon, Beowulf was motivated by lust for gold as well as for glory. In *Beowulf*, the author briefly mentions that when a dozen men tried to take the "antique riches in that earth-hall...death had seized them all," but does not elaborate on this.<sup>39</sup> Though some scholars speculate that this section of *Beowulf* is misplaced, the description of the cursed gold that has lain untouched for hundreds of years suggests that the promise of the hoard's wealth motivates Beowulf's action against the dragon rather than helping the people plagued by the beast.

Although Thorin and Beowulf have left their youths behind by the time they battle their dragons, their prowess in battle makes up an important part of their development as heroes, though neither Tolkien nor the Beowulf-poet offers a detailed explanation of how either man fights. Regardless, the idea of the hero as a warrior plays an important role in the idea of an epic hero, since the quests featured in this body of literature often involve some sort of battle. Both stories are focused around the battles that these two individuals fight—the battles against Grendel and Azog as well as their sparring with dragons. Additionally, Thorin and Beowulf both live and die by the sword: they are accepted as leaders because of their battle skills, lead members of generally war-like societies, and meet their ends in battle.

Along with their warlike constitutions and societies, their encounters with dragons draw the most attention to the similarities between Beowulf and Thorin. As was mentioned earlier, the author of *Beowulf* alludes to the curse placed on the dragon's hoard, but little extraneous

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<sup>38</sup> *Beowulf* 2513-2630.

<sup>39</sup> *Beowulf* 2232, 2237

information is offered in this, though its presence is certainly suggestive. The poet offers little detail in regards to the influence this curse might hold over Beowulf, but the fact that the curse is mentioned suggests that Beowulf's intentions in fighting the dragon are more selfish than they first seem to be. Thorin is also consumed by greed at the end of *The Hobbit*, though the idea of reclaiming the gold of Erebor persists throughout the story. He mentions his family's lost treasure sporadically throughout the book, but greed does not play an integral role in the story until the last few chapters of *The Hobbit*. Upon returning to Erebor, Thorin seeks the Arkenstone, a gem that became an important family heirloom while his forefathers ruled Erebor. His desire for it leads his company to ruin; it may even be argued that his stubbornness and greed led to his own death as well.<sup>40</sup> This aligns with Beowulf's behavior towards the end of the poem. Although he did have some desire to save the Geats from the dragon, his lust for gold and glory took over and let him to die at the hands of the dragon.

In regards to Thorin, however, one must remember that he has a personal claim to the treasure he seeks. Unlike Beowulf, who lusts after wealth for its own sake, Thorin wants the gold of Erebor because it once belonged to his forefathers. Of course, this does not mean that Thorin's behaviour towards the end of the novel should be excused, but it signifies a different sort of relationship between him and the treasure he seeks. With the gold comes the kingdom of Erebor, which adds to Thorin's desire.<sup>41</sup> Like Beowulf, a love for glory motivates his actions, but Thorin feels the need to attain a concrete representation of his family's glory—which takes the form of Erebor and its treasure—whereas Beowulf already has physical representations of his military fortitude. This gives Thorin's behaviour a romantic edge. To him, fighting Smaug is

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<sup>40</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980) 231-232.

<sup>41</sup> "In Defense of Thorin Oakenshield," Heirs of Durin, accessed February 29, 2013, <http://thorinoakenshield.net/in-defense-of-thorin-oakenshield/>

not meant to prove his prowess as a warrior: it will restore the position of his forefathers rather than adding to his skills. Although the action alludes to those taken by heroes in various medieval literary works, Thorin's motivation comes from a less medieval place, thus bringing readers into closer contact with his character.

### **Faerie**

The encounter with fairies or other fantastical creatures occurred quite often in medieval literature and is one of the more notable features of the literary works of this period, as it allowed authors to play with reality in a way that was impossible outside of Faerie. It has also carried forward into fantastic literature. In fact, one of the defining qualities of the fantasy genre is the presence of mythical or magical creatures such as those found in Faerie. However, journeys into a specific fairy land are more common in epic fantasy than other types, as setting a novel in an entirely new world makes it much easier for characters to travel to such a place.

One of the most notable relationships between *The Hobbit* and medieval romance is the sojourns in fairyland. Such instances appear twice in *The Hobbit*: once when Thorin and Company visit Rivendell and again when they are kidnapped and taken to Mirkwood. The two interactions reflect both the positive and negative interactions with fairies that often occur in medieval romance. The Company's stay in Rivendell aligns with the positive sojourns in fairy land, as the time spent here allows Gandalf, Bilbo, and the dwarves to rest and gain a clearer direction for the rest of their journey. Such interactions occur in romances such as *Sir Launfal*. In this text, Launfal has a particularly pleasant stay in Faerie, despite the fact that he is initially brought there against his will. He eventually comes to enjoy his stay in Faerie, as he becomes

the lover of the Faerie queen and earns unlimited magical wealth.<sup>42</sup> Although the Company does not have this exact experience, the rest that they receive in Rivendell closely parallels this type of sojourn in Faerie, as their time in Rivendell allowed the members of the Company to relax for a time before they returned to their quest at a time of their choosing. They never fully understand the elves, but the Company is able to relax in their time at Rivendell, as they grow “refreshed and strong [and] their clothes [are] mended as well as their bruises, their tempers, and their hopes.”<sup>43</sup> Moments in which mortal characters stay in the land of Faerie provide another point of comfortable alienation. Both Launfal and Thorin’s Company serve as the connection to reality, thus keeping medieval audiences from feeling too lost in the strangeness of Faerie. They might find repose in this strange land, but, like the readers, they never truly belong.

Other elements of Faerie do not follow the medieval tradition as closely as [other things] do. Initially, the elves in Rivendell do not seem to have this otherworldly quality; in fact, they appear as comical figures as they convey fairly obvious observations to Thorin and Company in song. This contrasts sharply with their medieval counterparts, who often appear in a more serious fashion, as is the case in *Sir Launfal*. However, Corey Olsen suggests that, in spite of their seemingly nonsensical song, they reflect otherworldliness in a different fashion: namely, that they are too intricate for mortals to comprehend. He suggests that this song was Tolkien’s way of making this rather complex idea accessible to a younger audience: by giving the elves a seemingly incomprehensible song, he conveyed their otherworldliness in a mode that was relatively unpretentious.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Sir Launfal*, in *Middle English Romances*, ed. Stephen A. Shepherd (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 280-504.

<sup>43</sup> Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 94.

<sup>44</sup> Olsen 60-63.

However, although the elves of Rivendell convey a positive image of Faerie, the Company also has a negative experience in Faerie. Their time in Mirkwood takes on a darker tone, as they are abducted and imprisoned against their will. This tone fits more with the fairy land of *Sir Orfeo*: a place of darkness, foreboding, and fear. The entanglement of the mortal world and the fairy world in this particular romance originates from Orfeo's wife's dreams of the fairy king and his determination to bring her to Faerie with him.<sup>45</sup> Although Orfeo builds a massive wall around his castle and orders his knights to surround his wife in hopes of protecting her, the fairies override all of his precautions and steal away his wife.

Thorin and Company do not go to the same lengths as Orfeo, but they still try to avoid capture by those who inhabit the realm of Faerie. Before they enter Mirkwood, Gandalf reminds the Company that they must stay on the path and avoid the water of the forest. Although these instructions seem easy to follow, one member of the Company ends up falling into the enchanted river and all of them eventually lose the path. Much like Orfeo's best efforts to protect his wife from abduction, the Company's attempts to distance themselves from the dangers of Mirkwood fail and lead them into the hands of a slightly sinister group of immortal beings. This leaves the more alienated than they were in Rivendell, especially since this is a hostile environment rather than a benevolent one. In addition to the expected unfamiliarity, this situation also adds a sense of uneasiness to the text.

The beings in Faerie also add to the element of discomfort and unfamiliarity brought on by the queen's abduction. Orfeo only enters Faerie in hopes of regaining his wife; while there, he sees many eerie beings that linger between life and death:

“Sum stode withouten hade

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<sup>45</sup> *Sir Orfeo* 165-174.

And sum non armes nade,  
 And sum thurth the bodi hadde wounde,  
 And sum lay wod y-bounde,  
 And sum armed on hors sete,  
 And sume a-strangled as thai etc...<sup>46</sup>

Although the elves of Mirkwood do not linger in this state in between life and death, they project an air of intimidation similar to that provided by these sinister beings in *Orfeo's Faerie*. They inhabit a forest filled with many dangers—including massive spiders and enchanted water—that threaten the Company.<sup>47</sup> This immediately suggests that these elves are more sinister than the elves of Rivendell—and they are, presenting both readers and the Company with a more alienating experience than the one to which they were accustomed.

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<sup>46</sup> *Sir Orfeo* 391-396

<sup>47</sup> Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit* 183.

## PART II

Many of the structural elements of *The Hobbit* appeared in later works of fantastic literature, particularly the structure of the romance and the idea of underprivileged heroes rather than hyper-privileged ones. Such elements appear in Frodo from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy as well as other well-known works of fantastic literature, such as Pug from Raymond Feist's Riftwar Saga, Ged from Ursula LeGuin's Earthsea novels, and Jon Snow from George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Although all of these novels contain elements associated with medieval literary works, such elements appear with particular clarity in Patrick Rothfuss' *Kingkiller Chronicle*, composed of *The Name of the Wind* and *The Wise Man's Fear*.<sup>48</sup> The *Kingkiller Chronicle* recounts the story of Kvothe, an exceptionally talented and fiery-haired young man who seeks education as an arcanist—a practitioner of magic—in hopes of learning how to track and defeat the group of evil mythic beings called the Chandrian that killed his parents. An older Kvothe—now called Kote and masquerading as a small-town innkeeper—tells these stories of his youth to a chronicler in order to create a more reliable account of his life untainted by the exaggeration of rumors.

Like *The Hobbit*, the *Kingkiller Chronicle* uses medieval literary elements to create a sense of foreignness in the readers' experience, although these traits manifest themselves differently in the two works. For example, both follow a hero's quest, include a sojourn in a fairy land, and contain central characters who are clearly flawed—although these elements appear in slightly different fashions in the novels. Part of the reason for this difference is the fact that *The Hobbit* and *The Name of the Wind*—the first book of the *Kingkiller Chronicle*—were

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<sup>48</sup> The third book in the series, tentatively titled *The Doors of Stone*, is still awaiting a release date.

published seventy years apart and thus address different audiences. This accounts for much of the difference in plot structure and character traits among the two novels. Where *The Hobbit* tends to veer more towards traditional medieval literary norms, the *Kingkiller Chronicle* uses them more loosely, particularly in relation to the central character, Kvothe. Unlike Thorin, Kvothe is more familiar than foreign, as he lacks the noble heritage common among medieval literary heroes. Although Kvothe is exceptional in many ways, his heritage immediately makes the work less alienating, since readers can relate to him with greater ease. His common heritage coupled with his exceptional abilities makes Kvothe a blend between the unfamiliar medieval qualities of Thorin and the familiarity of Bilbo. These two sides of his character balance out throughout the novel: although Kvothe rises to great heights, the fact that he is the son of two troupers keeps a sense of familiarity about him, thus allowing him to maintain the stasis between alterity and familiarity throughout the novel.

### **Nobility and Heroism**

Kvothe demonstrates a clear departure from the medieval idea of the hero. Although his capabilities as an arcanist place him in a category roughly equivalent to that of a knight—in Temerant, arcanists often achieve positions of honor—Kvothe’s social status clearly sets him apart from the nobles who dominated medieval literature. His roots as one of the Edema Ruh, a wandering gypsy tribe, play an important role in Kvothe’s story in spite of his role as its hero. The Ruh receive scorn from most other peoples, as several negative stereotypes have become associated with them due to their role as travelling performers. This is where he differs from Thorin: whereas a Thorin-like figure would have earned attention in the Middle Ages, a Kvothe-like figure would not. Given the nature of the novels and Kvothe’s upbringing as one of the Ruh, he assumes a role similar to that associated with the stereotypical image of the troubadour: a



travelling performer who makes music and tells stories for a living.<sup>49</sup> Although the parallels to the Middle Ages appear clearly, they address a class of society generally not associated with medieval literature. This creates an intriguing balance of foreignness and familiarity: Kvothe's common status makes him more relatable for readers, but the similarities to medieval troubadours create a distance, as they no longer exist in contemporary culture.

Despite the setbacks of his seemingly humble birth, Kvothe's position would be acceptable if he inherited nobility; in fact, some heroes from medieval literature do not initially know that they are of noble birth when they begin a quest. This particular trope appears often in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, most notably in the story of Sir Gareth.<sup>50</sup> However, since they all eventually learn of their noble heritages, these young men fit into the medieval idea of the hero. Although this appears in some fantasy novels predating the *Kingkiller Chronicle*—such as Robin Hobb's *Farseer* trilogy—Kvothe's lack of this type of nobility sets him apart from the heroes of medieval romance. Although Kvothe's exceptional intelligence and capacity for magic suggest that he might not be the biological offspring of his parents,<sup>51</sup> the ordinariness of his heritage is quite clear. Even with his musical, intellectual, and magical capabilities, Kvothe remains an illegitimately born Edema Ruh. Unlike some of his predecessors, however, Kvothe does not demonstrate any desire to obtain this type of nobility. In fact, he embraces his Ruh heritage despite being mocked for it, even when hiding it might have assisted him.

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<sup>49</sup> The actual troubadour, however, differed from this slightly, as they often remained at court for a time in hopes of earning the patronage of a lord rather than travelling every day, as is the case with Kvothe and his troupe. However, music was not exclusively associated with lower classes. In the romance *Sir Orfeo*, the title character is hailed for his incredible skill with the harp, but his position as king of England places him in a category different from that of those who used music to make their living.

<sup>50</sup> Malory 177-226.

<sup>51</sup> In *The Name of the Wind*, Abenthy, Kvothe's mentor, addresses Kvothe's parents with this concern, pointing to Kvothe's exceptional intellect (97-98).

Regardless of the circumstances of his birth, his character sets Kvothe apart from the heroes of medieval literature. Throughout the novels, Kvothe's assistant Bast implies that Kvothe caused some great calamity, which led him to take up a quiet life in a small town as an innkeeper named Kote who has no association with magic.<sup>52</sup> This certainly undermines the traits that he shares with medieval heroes, since they are often the ones attempting to end problems rather than creating them. However, one particularly famous knight became well-known for his role in decimating a kingdom: Lancelot. In most medieval versions of Arthurian legend, the illicit relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere marks the decline of Camelot, since the court begins to collapse on itself, allowing Mordred to betray Arthur with greater ease. Medieval authors vary in their treatment of Lancelot, but Malory's treatment of him proves particularly interesting here, as he presents Lancelot quite sympathetically without erasing the less favorable aspects of his character. His treatment of Lancelot creates a picture similar to that of Rothfuss' treatment of Kvothe: both narratives acknowledge the importance of the characters' deeds without dismissing their missteps. Both break the traditional model of the medieval hero, as they make significant mistakes that affect the lives of all those around them.

Although he lacks noble blood, one might argue that Kvothe possesses a noble character. Despite the moments at which he behaves and speaks harshly towards those who have treated him or his friends poorly, he often risks his own life and reputation in order to help others. The earliest example occurs during Kvothe's time in Tarbean when he assists a man named Trapi instead of ignoring the medical assistance that Trapi provides for the homeless children in the city.<sup>53</sup> Later in the novel, he saves Fela, a fellow student, from a burning building instead of

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<sup>52</sup> *The Wise Man's Fear* 16-17, etc.

<sup>53</sup> *The Name of the Wind* 156-158.

leaving her to fend for herself.<sup>54</sup> Such behavior—especially in connection with women—is often associated with the knights of medieval romance. Many of the stories in *Le Morte d'Arthur* include knights rescuing ladies, one of the most prevalent of these relationships being the one between Lancelot and Guinevere.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, in *Sir Orfeo*, Orfeo travels to Faerie in order to rescue his wife from the fairies since none of the precautions he took to prevent her captivity protected her from the Faerie King's promise to kidnap her and take her to his realm. Of course, such behavior is not unfamiliar to a modern audience, but the manner in which Kvothe demonstrates his noble character aligns more with the medieval norm than the modern one. Although much modern fiction still contains situations in which men rescue women, the idea of a damsel in distress certainly has a medieval feel about it, particularly since so many medieval narratives—particularly medieval romances—focus on a man rescuing a woman. However, the other points of nobility in Kvothe's character align more closely with the modern notion of nobility than the medieval one. The protagonist of a medieval narrative would never help someone of Trapi's status, largely because it was unseemly for a noble to behave in such a fashion, regardless of how heroic he wishes to be. Thus, Kvothe's kindness towards Trapi belongs more to modern sensibilities than medieval ones, thus adding a touch of [modernness] to his character.

In this way, Kvothe strays significantly from the medieval norm. Although members of the nobility were almost the exclusive focus of medieval literature, not all of them behaved as well as one might expect. Some medieval heroes did demonstrate behavior deemed unfitting of their noble status. A prime examples is Lancelot in Chretien de Troyes' *The Knight of the Cart*. In his attempts to save Guinevere from malicious knights, evil creatures, and various other evils,

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<sup>54</sup> *The Name of the Wind* 488-490.

<sup>55</sup> Malory *passim*.

he engages in activities inappropriate for a man of his status—the most famous being riding in a cart, which was associated with the punishment of criminals and was viewed as a mark of shame.<sup>56</sup> However, the scorn towards this behavior is made clear; many people ridicule Lancelot for his foolish devotion to Guinevere and his willingness to degrade himself for her sake.

Kvothe acts similarly when he helps Trapi, but the tone in this section is positive, suggesting that his act of humility is admirable rather than despicable. This further suggests the increased focus on nobility of character in contemporary speculative fiction. Kvothe certainly does not conform to a code of courtly standards, but the intent behind his actions is often selfless. For example, when describing how he rescued Fela from the fire in the Artificery, Kvothe does not attempt to glamorize the incident. He even makes a point of stating that he picked Fela up “not in front of [him] like Prince Gallant...but over one shoulder, the way you carry a sack of potatoes.”<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, he does not hide his constant worries about what he should say to Denna; his narration regarding her often involves him wondering how much of his feelings he can reveal without driving her off. From the beginning, he contemplates whether he should make his romantic attentions clear and risk her rejection or continue to hide his feelings.<sup>58</sup> Initially, this might appear to be another difference between medieval heroes and Kvothe; however, it reveals more about the difference in style between these two works. Since medieval romances are written in third person, they generally remain removed from the thoughts and feelings of the main characters. If Gawain or Arthur ever worried about their actions before rescuing or wooing women, their stories do not reveal such thoughts. Thus, although Kvothe’s hesitation might make him seem weak or unheroic when compared with the antics of Beowulf or King Arthur,

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<sup>56</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, “The Knight of the Cart,” in *Arthurian Romances*, translated by William W. Kibler (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 210-200.

<sup>57</sup> *The Name of the Wind* 489.

<sup>58</sup> *The Name of the Wind* 238.

this only occurs because Kvothe's thoughts are a part of the novel. They reveal doubts that remain hidden in the works of medieval literature. Insights such as these make Kvothe seem more approachable than some medieval heroes. True, many tales have turned Kvothe into a figure who could exist only in legend, but his version of the story discredits much of the grandeur of these myths. By acknowledging that he is less godlike than the rumors make him seem, Kvothe humbles himself, making it easier for readers to understand and relate to his situation.

The lack of hereditary nobility in Rothfuss' works becomes another clear dividing line between them and medieval literature. Only a few of the central characters in the *Kingkiller Chronicle* have noble blood, whereas most of the characters in medieval works would have been noble. However, nobility of character takes prevalence over hereditary nobility in the *Kingkiller Chronicle*. Ambrose, Kvothe's rival at the University, is the clearest example of this: although he is the son of a prominent Vintic nobleman, his general contempt for anyone he deems lesser than himself suggests that noble blood does not guarantee the quality of one's character. Although Ambrose's behaviour might make it seem as if the *Kingkiller Chronicle* condemns hereditary nobility as a source of evil, Kvothe's friend Simmon proves otherwise. Although he is the son of a duke, he does not flaunt his heritage and is described as both kind and intelligent by Kvothe.<sup>59</sup> This suggests that, although hereditary nobility plays a role in how these characters are accepted within their society, it does not determine the quality of a person's character. However, despite the importance of noble character in the novel, Temerant favors hereditary nobility, placing Kvothe at the bottom of the social order—although he eventually works his way up to a position of greater social prominence.

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<sup>59</sup> Rothfuss, *The Wise Man's Fear* 230-231.

These differences in the telling of the tale make the reader more comfortable in this world populated with medieval elements. Had Rothfuss made Kvothe into a larger-than-life medieval hero, he might have been too distant for modern readers to connect with him. However, this places Kvothe clearly outside of the medieval literary tradition. Most medieval literature existed for the reading pleasure of the noble class, since they were the only class with the time and ability to read until the later Middle Ages. Thus, most of these works focused on the deeds of noblemen and reinforced the importance of hereditary nobility. Countless medieval literary works trace the exploits of kings, knights, and lords whose heritage often plays some sort of important role in the tale. Although many aspects of medieval literature bled in the fantasy genre, this was not one of them. Due to the decreasing prevalence of hereditary nobility, most readers would be unable to identify with a highborn hero. Even the wealthy, who hold positions roughly comparable to that of medieval nobility, are not numerous enough to manipulate readership in such a fashion.

However, although it promotes a generally modern set of values, the focus on nobility of character still has a twinge of medievalness about it. Although hereditary nobility was important in the structure of medieval society, some medieval literary works do challenge this idea, suggesting that one should favor a noble character over noble blood. *The Franklin's Tale*, a part of Geoffrey Chaucer's famous *Canterbury Tales*, focuses around a discussion of nobility and suggests that one might consider factors other than heritage when assessing someone's nobility. This is presumably because the franklin telling the tale belongs to a newly emerging middle class filled with successful businesspeople who lack the noble blood of their superiors. However, since this made no significant change in the medieval social order, nobility was still associated

with those who had the appropriate lineage rather than those who demonstrated a nobility of character.

The nature of Kvothe's story also sets him apart. Unlike Thorin—and most medieval literary heroes—Kvothe's quest does not focus on his return to society after a period of exile. As previously discussed, his Ruh heritage marks him as an outsider, but Kvothe demonstrates no desire to abandon or change this part of himself. This connects to Kvothe's existing position. Since he has no place in society to which he could return, his narrative does not follow this part of the traditional romance pattern. However, although Kvothe does not actively pursue a return to noble society, his current position as an innkeeper named Kote suggests that he has somehow been exiled from society. When discussing the various legends about Kvothe, the Chronicler mentions that many people believe that Kvothe is dead. Perhaps the exile is self-imposed, but Kote's general refusal to disclose information about himself makes it seem as if there are people who would prefer it if Kvothe were dead. Although the current incompleteness of a story makes it impossible to tell what drove Kvothe to his seemingly self-imposed exile, several hints to it appear throughout the novels. For example, at the beginning of *The Name of the Wind*, Chronicler reveals that many people have believed that Kvothe died two years ago, suggesting that his lack of involvement with the world outside of the Waystone Inn has been all but nonexistent—presumably with good reason.<sup>60</sup> Chronicler also suggests that Kvothe is not remembered well and states that “the stories [about Kvothe] are saying assassin, not hero.”<sup>61</sup> Clearly, although Kvothe has done many things to draw attention to himself, he no longer wishes to be associated with these deeds, as others view them as unheroic and harmful. Although Kvothe's past may separate him from the great heroes of medieval literature, his exile parallels

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<sup>60</sup> *The Name of the Wind* 47.

<sup>61</sup> *The Name of the Wind* 48.

that of Malory's Lancelot in many ways. The shame of Lancelot's affair with Guinevere forces him out of Camelot, but he inhabits a monastery until he dies, still exiled from the court where he once walked in glory.<sup>62</sup> Although it appears less frequently than forced exile, his self-imposed exile ties Kvothe—albeit rather loosely—to the tradition of medieval heroes.

However, the idea of self-imposed exile suggests something less medieval about Kvothe's character, as few characters in medieval literature intentionally exiled themselves. In this manner, Kvothe's self-exile differs from that of Lancelot. Instead of cutting himself off in order to protect the people of Camelot, Lancelot joins the monastery in Glastonbury because he has been shamed by his relationship with Guinevere and because Guinevere herself is now a nun. Although the idea of self-exile seems selfless, Lancelot's motives in this instance are selfish, whereas Kvothe's are apparently selfless. This alludes to the focus on Kvothe's nobility of character. Instead of putting Temerant in more danger by remaining Kvothe, he removes himself from society, even taking a new name to complete his disguise. In this, Kvothe reveals his general nobility of character: something that Lancelot lacks. This similarity does not appear only in these two characters in their exiles; their previous actions make it clear. Although Lancelot often rescued Guinevere in the face of turmoil and earned renown as one of King Arthur's best knights, he ultimately chose his own lust for Guinevere over his duty to Arthur and the rest of the knights of Camelot. [stuff about Kvothe; stick that one paragraph in here and then say things about how even though they're similar, Kvothe screws up less] Although Lancelot has noble blood, he does not act nobly, whereas Kvothe acts nobly without noble blood. This difference in nobility adds a degree of comfort for readers and presents Kvothe in a much more pleasant light

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<sup>62</sup> Malory 722.



than Lancelot. Kvothe is certainly far from perfect, but his mistakes do not yet equal those of Lancelot.

### Plot

Despite the dissimilarities between Kvothe and Thorin, the plots of *The Hobbit* and the Kingkiller Chronicle utilize medieval literary elements in similar ways: the most notable being the focus on a hero's quest to gain an important person, place, or object—although according to W.H. Auden, some of the most important acquisitions of a quest are the lessons and virtues that the hero learns along the way.<sup>63</sup> Kvothe's quest differs slightly in nature from the traditional heroic quest—instead of focusing his energies on locating the Chandrian immediately and fighting them, he first wishes to learn about them and gain the skills necessary to overthrow them. Still, the subplots that feed into the main quest follow a structure typical of the medieval narrative, describing the various steps in his journey that fed into the grander scheme of the work. Such a narrative is presumably more foreign than familiar to modern readers, as the episodic nature of Kvothe's story can make it easy to forget the overarching purpose of his quest in favor of the goings-on in the smaller sections of the narrative.

The structure of the Kingkiller Chronicle follows the plot of the Arthurian romances of Chretien de Troyes and Thomas Malory more closely than that of the English romances that seem to serve as the primary influences for *The Hobbit*. The works of Chretien and Malory tell the stories of multiple knights from the court of Arthur and focus on their various exploits. This creates a picture of King Arthur's court that contributes to the structure of these stories established by earlier authors and allows readers to understand the workings of Arthur's court as

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<sup>63</sup>Auden, "The Quest Hero," 39-45.

a whole.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Kvothe's various adventures in Temerant follows this episodic formula, as it addresses a plethora of his adventures that tie into the broader tale describing both his search for the Chandrian and clarifying how he wound up in his current circumstances. Elements of modernity also blend into the construction of Kvothe's narrative. The novel is a frame tale, consisting primarily of an older Kote relating his youthful adventures as Kvothe in the first person. This contrasts with medieval literary works, which often have a third-person narrator who is totally removed from the events of the story. The hero has no involvement in how the tale is told; he can only act within it. Thus, readers gain little insight into the hero's mind and will have to infer the hero's feelings via his actions and other characters' reactions to him. The *Kingkiller Chronicle* introduces a new structure. Unlike medieval heroes, Kvothe tells his own story, which provides readers with plenty of insights regarding his thoughts and fears.

[transition] Similarly, Kvothe's sojourn with Felurian parallels the romance motif of Faerie as well as the Rivendell and Mirkwood episodes in *The Hobbit*. In *The Wise Man's Fear*, a fairy seductress named Felurian abducts Kvothe and takes him to her realm for a time before releasing him back to his people. However, Kvothe's time in Felurian's land has a much more pleasant element to it than the dwarves' stay in Mirkwood. Despite being abducted by Felurian, Kvothe manages to leave her realm with his life, sanity, and a magical cloak from her. Although this episode differs from those present in *Sir Orfeo*, it represents yet another side of encounters with fairies in medieval romance. In fact, the generally positive relationship between Kvothe and Felurian is almost identical to that of Sir Launfal, a fourteenth century English romance by Thomas Chestre. In this particular tale, Launfal encounters an exceptionally beautiful fairy woman with whom he dwells for a time. Upon returning to the real world he finds that he is

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<sup>64</sup> Chretien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances* and Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur passim*.

dissatisfied with the beautiful women in the court of Camelot—so much that he tells the queen that he has “loved a fayryr woman/Than thou ever leydest thyn ey upon.”<sup>65</sup> He feels so strongly about this that he abandons the court of Camelot and returns to Tryamour’s kingdom to spend the rest of his life with her. Kvothe shares this feeling of disorientation and dissatisfaction with reality upon leaving Felurian’s domain, stating that, while on his way to the Pennysworth Inn, he feels particularly confined by his boots since he grew accustomed to not wearing them while staying with Felurian.<sup>66</sup> This is typical of those returning from fairy land, since the lifestyle there differs so vastly from that of their reality. If people return from their stay in the Fae, their stay usually causes them to lose touch with reality, leading them to insanity on their return to the mortal world.<sup>67</sup> Both of these encounters are pleasant in nature, as both Launfal and Kvothe use their time in fairy land to recover from the struggles of the outside world—whether those struggles involve living in poverty away from King Arthur’s court because of excessive spending or returning to a lord to inform him of the deaths of a group of bandits. Neither one of them plans to take a fairy lover in a reality separate from their own, but the overall experiences of Launfal and Kvothe with their fairy lovers remain positive.

Most trips into Faerie are meant to alienate both readers and characters. Felurian’s sudden appearance shocks Kvothe just as much as it shocks readers. In this moment, the balance between familiarity and alterity shifts, placing the reader in a situation that is distinctly uncomfortable and not at all familiar. In this case, the imbalance is intentional, as Kvothe feels uncomfortable in the Fae: a discomfort that readers must understand in order to grasp the situation in which Kvothe finds himself. Readers should feel distinctly out-of-place at this

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<sup>65</sup> *Sir Launfal* 694-695.

<sup>66</sup> *The Wise Man’s Fear* 774.

<sup>67</sup> *The Wise Man’s Fear* 703.

moment, as a fairy seductress has presumably never drawn them into the Fae. However, Kvothe experiences this discomfort along with readers. He has never been to the Fae either and does not belong there any more than readers do. Thus, his experience keeps this section of the narrative from becoming too unfamiliar for readers, as they experience their confusion and shock at the same time as Kvothe.

However, not all of Kvothe's experiences in the Fae take on the relatively pleasant quality present in romances like *Sir Launfal*. Kvothe also experiences the darker side of the Fae when he visits the Cthaeh: a Faerie creature in the shape of a tree that is rumored to corrupt every decision of any person who speaks with it. Bast explains this to Chronicler and Kvothe, stating that every choice that a person makes after meeting with the Cthaeh will ultimately lead to catastrophe.<sup>68</sup> Even Felurian warns him against it and does not allow him to speak of his interaction with it when he returns to her. Although Kvothe goes willingly to this tree, the nature of this situation aligns quite closely with the romances in which characters are abducted or threatened by fairies. For example, Orfeo's wife does not go into Faerie willingly; rather, she is stolen away by the fairy king, who promised that he would have her regardless of the circumstances.<sup>69</sup> She suffers even before the king abducts her as her complexion, "that was so red/Is al wan" after months of worrying.<sup>70</sup> Kvothe also suffers many misfortunes as a result of his visit with the Cthaeh, such as damaging his relationship with a potential patron and creating tension between himself and Denna, the woman he loves. Kvothe's misfortunes culminate in the mysterious event that led him into isolation.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *The Wise Man's Fear* 761-765.

<sup>69</sup> *Sir Orfeo* 115-174.

<sup>70</sup> *Sir Orfeo* 107-108.

<sup>71</sup> *The Wise Man's Fear* 773-1032.

Although Rothfuss's fairy episodes differ from Tolkien's, the works of both authors use fairy-like creatures and trips into Faerie to alienate their readers. The authors accomplish this in slightly different fashions, but the medievalness of these episodes points to the continued usage of fairy episodes as a mode of alienation. However, the appearance of both good and bad experiences with fairies creates an interesting dissonance between *The Hobbit*, the Kingkiller Chronicle, and individual medieval works. Both types of encounters occur within medieval literature; however, very few—if any—medieval literary works include both positive and negative encounters with fairies. This is presumably due to the cultural difference between the Middle Ages and the present regarding the role of magic. Throughout the central and late Middle Ages, the Church generally did not approve of magic, as it could easily draw commoners away from Christianity and back towards the pagan beliefs of yore. Thus, magic as a part of the everyday world presumably would have created problems for these authors—which explains the separation between Faerie and the relatively realistic world of the medieval romance. Faerie did not pose a problem for later authors, as their literature was less susceptible to the same type of ecclesiastical scrutiny as the literature of the Middle Ages. However, authors such as Tolkien and Rothfuss have a different usage for the magic of fairy land, as neither one of them seeks to recreate their tales in a version of medieval Europe in which Faerie is real, as many medieval authors have explored this, leaving it rather exhausted. Even though magic exists outside of these fairy realms in both *The Hobbit* and the Kingkiller Chronicle, the inclusion of a place designated as more magical than the rest of these worlds gives them a further dimension of otherworldliness, demonstrating the natural—and occasionally untamed—uses of magic within these worlds.

### **Courtly Love**

One of the most notable differences between *The Hobbit* and the Kingkiller Chronicle is the complete lack of romantic involvement in *The Hobbit*. The Kingkiller Chronicle, however, contains some motifs traditionally associated with courtly love that became essential parts of the medieval romance. Courtly love became a popular literary convention in the Middle Ages. It focused around the idea of a man's love for a woman with whom he cannot pursue a relationship, often the wife of a noble. Troubadours helped popularize this idea, as they often wrote laudatory songs about women in order to gain the favor of their husbands so that they could remain at court and receive payment for their poetry. Clearly, the situation did not allow the relationship between the troubadour and his lady to be consummated, which became one of the central ideas of courtly love. Because the lovers were never supposed to have physical contact, medieval courtiers hailed it as the purest sort of love since it centered around affection rather than physical desire.<sup>72</sup> Overall, Kvothe and Denna's relationship fits neatly within the confines of this definition. Throughout the Kingkiller Chronicle, both individuals repeatedly demonstrate that they care for one another, but neither one reveals any deeper feelings, save for one time when Kvothe misspoke and hinted at his love for her. Although Denna lacks noble heritage and has no husband, Kvothe does not pursue a physical relationship with her, as she mistrusts men due to her work as a courtesan.<sup>73</sup> Despite the lack of physical interaction between them, Kvothe continues to seek her out and often plays his lute for her, much as a troubadour would for the woman he is currently wooing. Such a relationship is rare in both contemporary fiction and society; thus, readers presumably feel alienated by the ongoing romantic tension between Kvothe and Denna, particularly if they lack an understanding of courtly love.

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<sup>72</sup> Fanjeaux stuff?

<sup>73</sup> Rothfuss, *The Wise Man's Fear* 536-540.

However, Kvothe's affection for Denna differs from most courtly love relationships in a few important ways, the most obvious being Denna's social status. She is not a high-born lady; rather, she is a lower-class courtesan who relies on the attentions of men to make a living. Her lack of status adds an element of comfort to the relationship, as readers can understand the life and struggles of a commoner in a way that they could not understand a member of the noble class. Denna's lower status balances out the strangeness of courtly love, making it a concept that readers can understand more easily.

Other elements of their relationship ease the unfamiliarity of courtly love. For example, Kvothe does not woo Denna in hopes of gaining prestige; rather, he woos her because he cares for her, although she remains relatively removed from him. Such a deviation from courtly love generally does not end well for either party, as legitimate feelings often lead one or both people to act on them. Perhaps the most famous example of courtly love gone wrong is that of Lancelot and Guinevere, who loved one another far too much and eventually brought about the downfall of Camelot through the consummation of this love. Although the result of the consummation of Kvothe and Denna's love would be considerably less drastic, the nature of their relationship and their tendency to hide things from one another suggests that any act of love between them would not end well.

Their meeting at the Eolian also inverts the typical structure of the medieval romance. Ordinarily, the hero of the romance comes to the rescue of his love interest, usually to save her from an evil knight who abducted her and planned to either marry or defile her. Notable examples occur in multiple medieval literary works but are particularly common in Arthurian romances such as those of Chrétien de Troyes and Thomas Malory. However, when Kvothe finds himself in need of help when he needs a woman to sing Aloine to his Savien, Denna

provides him with the required assistance.<sup>74</sup> Although this might seem trivial when compared with the bravery of medieval romance heroes, this performance is of utmost importance to Kvothe, as he needs to earn his talent pipes in order to play at the Eolian in the future, which will allow him to continue to finance his studies—which will, in turn, aid him in his ongoing search for the Chandrian. To him, Denna’s assistance presumably seems life-saving, which establishes her place as an important figure in Kvothe’s story. The fact that she saves Kvothe instead of the other way around also subverts the medieval norm, as the women in medieval narratives are always the ones being rescued, not the ones doing the rescuing. This establishes Denna’s presence as a familiar force, as she fits much more neatly into modern notions of womanhood than medieval ones.

However, it is difficult to determine how closely Kvothe and Denna’s relationship will follow the template of medieval courtly love, since the *Kingkiller Chronicle* is still unfinished. In the medieval narrative, courtly love depends on a mutual—although not necessarily equal—level of attraction. Although Kvothe has made his feelings for Denna quite clear, Denna’s current lack of reciprocation forces the state of their relationship to remain unknown. Should a situation arise in which Kvothe attempts to save Denna from the Chandrian, their relationship will follow a courtly love narrative almost perfectly. However, if Denna somehow takes the side of the Chandrian, her relationship with Kvothe will take a sharp and distinctively non-medieval turn. Regardless of any potential future turns that their relationship might take, the structure of their affection for one another reflects many of the qualities typical of medieval courtly romance.

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<sup>74</sup> *The Name of the Wind* 401-404, 414-416.



## CONCLUSION

Clearly, medievalism has had a long-standing influence on the usage of comfortable alienation within the fantasy genre: both in the construction of their plots and development of their characters. The continued usage of quests, sojourns in Faerie, and [other things] points to the long-standing influence of medieval literature in contemporary speculative fiction. However, the dissimilarities to medieval literature suggest much about the modern perception of the Middle Ages. Authors use medieval elements in their writing because most modern readers know little about the Middle Ages; thus, employing themes common in medieval literary works gives contemporary fantastic literature an otherworldly feel.

Analysis of the medieval literary elements demonstrates the development of literary medievalism in fantastic literature. Clearly, the mark of medieval romance remains on contemporary novels, as is demonstrated by the presence of these elements in *The Hobbit* and the *Kingkiller Chronicle*. Both novels follow the same plot structure, include similar elements, and focus on characters who undertake quests akin to those of medieval heroes. Despite the seventy-year gap between the initial publication of *The Hobbit* and that of *The Name of the Wind*, the basic structure of the genre still draws heavily from the same elements of medieval romance. These two works are not the only ones to follow this structure: many other novels—such as the *Riftwar Saga* and the *Earthsea* series—contain these elements.

However, despite how closely these novels follow the medieval romance formula, both of them deviate in their presentation of the hero. At first glance, both characters reflect many qualities of the medieval hero, although Thorin has more in common with the medieval hero than Kvothe does. Although this difference makes it seem as if *The Hobbit* is a near-perfect replica of a medieval romance, the way in which Thorin responds to certain circumstances indicates the

modern values that inform his narrative. Thorin's role as a warrior and a king dominate his role in *The Hobbit*; however, his dying moments suggest that his newfound humility is worth more than his former glory: something that contradicts the notion of honor presented in many medieval romances. Although medieval romance heroes often suffer and realize their own flaws by the end of their quest, they rarely choose to remain in a state of humility, viewing such experiences instead as points of shame that they must work to erase.

Kvothe, who takes on the qualities of a troubadour instead of those of a medieval romance hero, reflects a similar ideology. He fits differently within the world of the medieval romance, but still seems as though he could feature in a medieval romance—perhaps one told by one of Chaucer's middle-class pilgrims, but a romance nonetheless. However, like Thorin, modern values inform Kvothe's values position. Kvothe emphasizes the value of a noble character; his humble status further emphasizes the importance of this quality over high birth or some other mode of social privilege. They are heroes tailored to reflect the values with which modern readers would likely be familiar, not an attempt at reflecting the ideas that prevailed in the medieval world. In fact, modern readers might understand the emphasis on glory present in much of medieval literature as a fault of pride, failing to understand the cultural gap between the present and the medieval past. Although religious figures might have preached against pride, medieval warriors were expected to have solid reputations as military commanders, as one's ability to fight was a necessary part of leadership. This demonstrates the development of comfortable alienation within the genre: by adding elements of humility to heroes, authors of speculative fiction have gradually moved away from one of the original purposes of medieval romance, making the heroes of these novels seem more approachable than their medieval counterparts.

However, although the heroes reflect more modern ideas than medieval ones, the medievalness of these novels deserves recognition as well. Both *The Hobbit* and the *Kingkiller Chronicle* use elements of medieval romance so as to alienate their readers from their current state of existence and absorb them in the somewhat foreign world of these stories. The idea of a quest, a sojourn in Faerie, and [something else] are separate enough from the daily experiences of most readers that they automatically create the desired sense of otherworldliness that aligns quite closely with common elements of medieval literature.

The heroes of both of the novels, however, do not fit neatly within this medieval framework. Thorin and Kvothe both seem to evoke some of the mystery that their settings create, but neither one of them aligns with the typical qualities of a medieval romance hero. Thorin initially seems to fit perfectly into the model, as he is a warrior-king in exile on a quest to reclaim his lost homeland, but his death scene demonstrates that, although his warrior bravado and moroseness prevail for much of the tale, they lose much of their meaning when Thorin realizes how greedily and unkindly he has acted. Instead of using this humility to build himself into a greater warrior, Thorin accepts it as a virtue in itself. By the end of his tale, he no longer wishes to live in glory and seems quite content with humility.

As a brilliant but orphaned member of the Edema Ruh, Kvothe does not fit into the model of the medieval hero as well as Thorin does, although his quest to locate the Chandrian and willingness to help women in need make him similar to medieval literary heroes. Despite these qualities, Kvothe's humble background separates him from the hereditary nobility prevalent within most medieval literature. He does, however, possess nobility of character, which separates him from the medieval romance hero in a fashion similar to Thorin's separation.

Both characters demonstrate [Frodo and Aragorn essay guy's] ideas regarding the role of the humble hero in modern fantastic literature. Although the renown of these novels indicates that the format of the medieval romance still attracts readers, the difference in character suggests that modern readers prefer a hero more relevant to their times, even if said hero exists in a completely separate reality. Clearly, a more modern hero provides an effective balance for a pseudo-medieval setting, thus adding an element of familiarity in a relatively unfamiliar secondary world.

Ultimately, although the repetition of the non-medieval hero in a medieval setting may make it seem as if fantastic literature has remained stagnant for seventy years, the ways in which authors use this technique allows for a considerable amount of variety within the genre. *The Hobbit* and the *Kingkiller Chronicle* demonstrate this: they both follow this pattern, but in completely different ways. The lack of change suggests not a lack of originality; rather, it alludes to the effectiveness of this structure and demonstrates the range of diversity that can occur within it. True, the usage of medievalism as a mode of comfortable alienation is far from new, but authors continue to use it in a variety of ways in order to best suit their audience and the theme of their works.

The lessons learned by the main characters are what divide these tales from their medieval predecessors. While many medieval romances condone glory and rest on the shoulders of those with noble blood, *The Hobbit* and the *Kingkiller Chronicle* give more praise to humility and focus more on the importance of nobility of character than on nobility of blood. In doing so, they distinguish themselves from medieval literature, for although they might appear medieval at first glance, both works are clearly part of the modern period. The authors' usage of medievalism keeps readers slightly alienated throughout, but only to make them forget that,

although it might feel as if they have been transported to another world, the world contained within these novels is not so different from the reality that they know. In the wise words of Kvothe, these novels are indeed “more than the parts that form [them].”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *The Name of the Wind* 418.

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