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## ***Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones* By Shiloh Carroll**

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*between appointments*

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### *Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones* By Shiloh Carroll

#### Additional Keywords

Shiloh Carroll, George R.R. Martin, Medievalism

fan response on the internet. By analyzing the frequency and popularity of various different categories of memes, she is able to draw conclusions about what the creators and perpetuators of these memes liked and disliked about the first Jackson *Hobbit* film.

On the whole, this volume contains many noteworthy essays and is worth the reading. However, the editing leaves a bit to be desired. For example, the very juxtaposition of the pairs of essays in the first two sections reveals far too much repetition of information between the works; a more aggressive editor might have discussed the contents with the contributors and come up with suggestions for modifications that would have reduced the redundancies. A proper editor would realize when a scholar has spent too much time on an irrelevant digression and ask the author to cut it down. A proper editor would recognize words consistently being misused by an author whose first language is not English, and kindly suggest the correct alternatives to the author (or simply change them himself). Finally, while the inclusion of the last two essays, both of which dealt with issues raised by the first of the Peter Jackson *Hobbit* films, is a good step towards broadening study of *The Hobbit* to more than just the original book, both essays suffer from only having access to the first film of the trilogy. Either omitting them altogether, or delaying publication until after the release of the third movie so that the authors could reference the entire work, would have resulted in a more satisfactory final product.

—David L. Emerson



**MEDIEVALISM IN A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE AND GAME OF THRONES.**  
By Shiloh Carroll. D.S. Brewer, 2018. 192 p. ISBN 978-1843844846. \$33.67. \$20.99  
Kindle format.

“THIS BOOK EXPLORES MARTIN’S AND HBO’S approaches to and beliefs about the Middle Ages,” states the cover of this book. Excellent news. As Carroll observes, cast members of the show “refer to the setting of *Game of Thrones* as ‘back then’” (145), appealing to history as a basis for the creative decisions they enact, while the unsophisticated assumption that Martin is “more realistic” than other fantasy authors has thus far bedeviled criticism of his work and its televisual adaptation. A serious critical investigation of Martin’s response to the Middle Ages would be a great contribution to the study of his work. Carroll’s book on the subject is therefore disappointing. This is not to say that I

particularly disagree with much that she has written. But this is at heart less of an investigation of Martin's medievalism than a survey of the already customary queries and complaints about his tale on page and screen, bracketed by some general remarks about the concept and practice of medievalism.

Carroll certainly identifies her terms ably. In her introduction she carefully distinguishes between medievalism and neo-medievalism, citing Martin's work as an example of the latter, less a reaction to the Middle Ages themselves than a counter-reaction to those of others. This is a valuable distinction, particularly given Martin's dismissal of the "Disneyland" Middle Ages he sees many genre fantasists as perpetuating. Carroll goes so far as to query exactly which authors Martin refers to when he discusses the point in interviews, an interesting question seldom put to authors seeking to place their work within the genre. A great corpus of 'typical' fantasy is widely supposed to exist (Philip Pullman's dismissal of the genre spring to mind here), yet such suppositions are often allowed to stand unquestioned, which raises the question of exactly who writers such as Martin, Pullman, and Neil Gaiman are referring to with their often vociferous claims of exceptionalism. Carroll is to be applauded for raising this issue, even if she does not explore it very far. She also differentiates between romantic and gothic medievalism, *per* Richard Matthews's formulation of the topic. These are all useful distinctions, points that Martin's fans, as Carroll points out, do not always make when defending his work. She makes her *prima facie* case compellingly by defining it in relation to the assumptions that previous commentators have expressed on the topic.

Unfortunately Carroll does not anchor many of her subsequent ideas to that point. Having established Martin as a neo-medievalist author, she opens her subsequent chapter by discussing how his work follows the patterns of actual *medieval* literature. The grounds on which she makes these comparisons (interlacement, the privileged narrative position of the second estate, the fair unknown) make sense; the comparisons are revealing. However credible such discussion is, though, it does not fit with the intention of the book as stated in the introduction. Carroll then proceeds to give much of the chapter is over to itemizing instances of 'anti-romance' that seem rather too obvious for comment. Sansa Stark's disillusionment with chivalry, Jaime Lannister's queries about its actionability, and Tyrion Lannister's contraventions of its ideals are explicitly raised in Martin's discourse, needing more analysis than introduction. Carroll makes some valid points about these matters—Sansa "does not give up on her ideals [...] instead, she internalizes them" (44)—but does not really say how this reflects or nuances Martin's medievalism. She equates the Brotherhood Without Banners with Pyle's 1883 *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* (47), a clear example of neo-medievalism that might have been the basis for an entire subchapter. She does not go into detail on the comparison, however, or use it to

illustrate any broader pattern in Martin's work. She states the facts without using them to build the case implied by her initial queries.

Subsequent chapters follow this trend. The chapter on gender relations is a case in point. Carroll begins by citing the various "literary and historical streams" that inform modern understandings of medieval constructions of gender relations—"anti-feminist treatises from the Middle Ages, medieval romance, medievalist fiction from writers such as Tolkien and Tennyson, and even scholarship on the Middle Ages" (54)—then scarcely mentions these promising sources of Martin's neo-medievalism again. Instead she considers Westeros's culture of "toxic masculinity" and itemizes the various ways Martin's female characters cope with it. In her chapter on postcolonialism she equates Martin's presentation of the descendants of the First Men with Sir Walter Scott's depiction of the Anglo-Saxons. If Carroll wanted to examine Martin's neo-medievalism, this would be another ideal set-up for such discussion, explaining in detail how Martin received and responded to *Ivanhoe* ("one of his greatest influences" [117]). Such discussion develops little beyond the acknowledgement of the influence, however. Similarly, Carroll discusses how Martin has set Essos up as an emblematic inscrutable orient, observing that "much as Said argues the Occident constructed the Orient in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance" (127), but does not go into any detail on what she means by this or provide any examples of such texts. She simply regards the point as "troubling." Rather than analyzing the causes and effects of Martin's neo-medievalism Carroll mostly follows previous commentators, mulling over the already customary bugbears of Martin scholarship—rape, patriarchy, orientalism, homophobia, lack of diversity in the *Game of Thrones* writer's room, whether any of the above belongs on television. These are valid topics for discussion, and I do not take any issue with Carroll's treatment of them, which is some of the most measured and academically responsible I have seen so far. But the focus pulls away from her supposed subject. She seldom adequately links the controversies she discusses with the neo-medievalism she so elegantly diagnosed in her introduction.

When Carroll does discuss Martin's medievalism her analysis reflects her focus. On several occasions she describes Westeros as a 'grimdark' medieval world; the term turns up in her index. She borrows it from Helen Young (who in turn took it from Martin's online fans) and may not be aware that it is a jocular allusion to the rhetorical excesses of *Warhammer 40,000*, a shared genre-fantasy universe which instantiates more commonplaces of gothic fantasy than its fans, and indeed its authors, seem to appreciate. The notion that Martin's medievalism is gothic—which Carroll eventually raises in passing—makes perfect sense. This answers, credibly enough, one of the core questions she poses; Martin's medieval world is *not* as realistic as it is sometimes praised as

being, but a deliberate rhetorical construct comparable to a particular line of thought in pre-existing medievalism and neo-medievalism. I for one am pleased somebody finally said this. An investigation into the origins and effects of this apparently deliberate exercise in unsympathetic medievalism could be fascinating. Carroll offers little such analysis, however. Martin's medievalism is seldom more than a frame for her discussion of the controversies surrounding his work, raised mostly in introductions and conclusions to chapters focused primarily on only loosely related issues. This seems an unpropitious approach to the subject.

The strongest point that emerges from Carroll's book is her suggestion that it is "unfortunate" (181) that an attempt at realism has produced a text that re-enforces rather than interrogates unsympathetic notions about the Middle Ages. This is a valid point, but one that Carroll has perhaps fallen victim to herself. The media remains oddly defensive about the success of *Game of Thrones*, preferring to ignore the popularity of cinematic and literary fantasy and see that of Martin's tale as unusual. To explain this aberration, they have seized enthusiastically upon grimdark aspects of Martin's tale and diagnosed the story, and in a sense dismissed it, as a *succès de scandale*. Carroll's book amounts to a serious academic investigation of those matters and, to be clear, succeeds as such. In fact it could serve as a readable general introduction for those first looking into Martin's books (something I am pleased to know exists; one of the quickest ways of putting a global multimedia phenomenon into perspective, I have learned, is to tell people you study it). But her reflections on popular talking points do not do much to elucidate Martin's medievalism, simply because the confrontational aspects of his tale elbow the putative subject of her book to its margins.

—Joseph Young

