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## ***Thinking Queerly: Medievalism, Wizardry, and Neurodiversity in Young Adult Texts* by Jes Battis**

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## ***Thinking Queerly: Medievalism, Wizardry, and Neurodiversity in Young Adult Texts*** by Jes Battis

### **Abstract**

This is my review of Jes Battis's book *Thinking Queerly: Medievalism, Wizardry, and Neurodiversity in Young Adult Texts*. Battis's book reads beautifully and easily, even if you are not well-versed in disability studies or queer theory, and I imagine that even a reader who is not especially knowledgeable about either medievalisms or YA literature could also follow along well. This book is written in an uncommonly accessible, even conversational style, that is utterly enthralling, and yet Battis's work still shows impressive scholarly rigor and scope. If I were to describe the book in a single sentence, it would be this one: Jes Battis thoughtfully and successfully navigates a broad array of texts, both medieval and modern, to paint a compelling portrait of the traditional wizard figure, adolescence, neurodiversity, and pedagogical concerns in the field of medieval studies.

### **Additional Keywords**

queer representation

# R E V I E W S

**THINKING QUEERLY: MEDIEVALISM, WIZARDRY, AND NEURODIVERSITY IN YOUNG ADULT TEXTS.** Jes Battis. Berlin Germany: De Gruyter, 2021. 241 p. ISBN 9781501521898. \$102.99.

When I mentioned I was reviewing this book to an expert in disability studies, she replied, “Ah, it sounds like it’s in a theoretical conversation with Remi’s *Authoring Autism* (2018). I will forward the chapter I am thinking of to you, so you can read it before you start.” Regrettably, life interfered, and I did not read that excellent work. I jumped into Jes Battis’s *Thinking Queerly* with little theoretical knowledge of disability studies or queer theory, little interest in wizards, my undying love for Sir Gawain (who I knew would be in at least one chapter) and some shaky but passionate opinions on how the Middle Ages might be integrated into the young adult (YA) genre. Battis’s book had languished on my to-do list for long enough, and I was determined to cross this review off that list, even if it meant struggling to grasp an entirely unfamiliar schools of literary theory and languishing in self-loathing, whilst trying to find something articulate to say. In truth, my fears were for naught. Battis’s book reads beautifully and easily, even if you are not well-versed in disability studies or queer theory, and I imagine that even a reader who is not especially knowledgeable about either medievalisms or YA literature could also follow along well. This book is written in an uncommonly accessible, even conversational style, that is utterly enthralling, and yet Battis’s work still shows impressive scholarly rigor and scope. If I were to describe the book in a single sentence, it would be this one: Jes Battis thoughtfully and successfully navigates a broad array of texts, both medieval and modern, to paint a compelling portrait of the traditional wizard figure, adolescence, neurodiversity, and pedagogical concerns in the field of medieval studies.

That said, here is the rest. Battis’s main argument in this book is “that the medieval wizard is the character who occupies that fraught space, linking the power of magic with the trauma of a supernatural and queer adolescence” (2). Drawing on their own experiences “as a queer kid on the spectrum” and their “desiring medieval wizards in the same way that Tolkien desired dragons,” Battis examines an impressive breadth of texts from the Middle Ages

into the present (3). These texts are all given descriptions and background in the book's very helpful appendix, so readers who are unfamiliar with—for example—the thirteenth century *Mabinogion* or Rainbow Rowell's *Carry On* (2015) can readily learn more about them without much effort. Such an appendix not only makes it easy to gain background information to better appreciate Battis's book but also provides a useful resource for scholars who may wish to do their own further research in medieval and modern texts and media navigating adolescence.

Drawing on Katherine Bond Stockton's theorized queer child who "grow[s] sideways," Battis begins with portrayals of adolescence in medieval literature (Battis 4). As implied by the title and introduction, most of this conversation centers on wizards, specifically Merlin. Battis's first chapter "My So-Called Merlin" (27-58) "argue[s] that Merlin represents a queer and neurodivergent medieval teen—halfway between a demon and a human boy—whose very in-betweenness places him within a position that marginalized teens can understand" (24). This chapter traces Merlin's different depictions throughout literature, both past and present, and an emphasis is placed on Merlin's neurodivergence and queerness. In particular, Battis has insightful, compelling thoughts on the emphasis of *shapeshifting* and on transgender characters found in the Middle Ages. I was thrilled to see Battis's inclusion of several under-studied portrayals of Merlin alongside his significantly more well-known depictions in Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth century *Le Morte d'Arthur* and T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* (1938). Battis's reading of Robert de Boron's late twelfth or early thirteenth century depiction of Merlin as someone who "isn't mad—just sensitive" and the connections they draw between neurodivergent children in modern media, such as the TV show *Young Sheldon* (2017—present) is well-crafted and thought-provoking (37). Other relevant texts in this chapter are Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* (which was my favorite section), the *Prose Merlin*, Cory McCarthy and Amy Rose Capetta's *Once & Future* (2019), and Cassandra Clare and Wesley Chu's *Red Scrolls of Magic* (2019). This chapter also touches on Merlin as being a sort of mentor to Taliesin, which gestures towards a sort of recurring theme in this book. While Battis's work is about wizards, medievalism, and YA texts, it also acts as a kind of queer treatise on scholarship in the field of medieval studies, making note of how academia treats neurodivergent, queer, and BIPOC scholars as well as the inaccessibility of many integral medieval texts. The parallels between issues in academia, particularly in medieval studies, are given increasing amounts of attention as the book nears its conclusion. These parallels are not really something a reader might expect from this book's title and summary, so they are something of a surprise. But they work in a very engaging way with the literary texts Battis examines.

Battis's second chapter "The Futures of Morgan le Fay: Solidarity and Knowledge in *Sabrina* and *Tiffany Aching*" (59-92) asserts that "it's impossible to isolate Morgan across nearly four hundred years of medieval literature, but that's partially the point: she resists all attempts of clarification" and proceeds to examine how Morgan is a sort of ancestress to female witches (60). They begin with an exploration of Morgan's medieval depictions and draw attention to how Morgan is—or is not, depending on the writer—part of a community of enchantresses. This angle is not one I have seen taken with Morgan before, and the in-depth exploration of Morgan's interactions with her fellow witches, including a magical battle between Morgan and the Dame d'Avalon in *Prophésies de Merlin* from *Cologne*, is of particular interest. There is a brief analysis of Morgan's actions in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* followed by a parallel between Morgan and neurodivergent people: "the clinical/academic desire to 'solve' Morgan, in some ways, echoes the desire to 'solve' neurodivergent people and bring them more in line with normative thinking and behavior" (72). This connection is a good example of something which this book does very well, in linking the medieval texts we study to broader issues facing neurodivergent students and scholars. From here, Battis examines *Sabrina Spellman* and *Tiffany Aching* and how these two witches are inheritors of Morgan's legacy.

In Battis's third chapter "Wizards in School: Queering the Magical Academy (93-126)," they describe schools for wizards as "a curious piece of medievalism" (93). Similar to their earlier connection between scholars' desire to 'solve' Morgan and the neurotypical urge to 'solve' neurodiversity, Battis uses this chapter to draw connections between medieval schools, wizard schools, and modern-day scholarship in the Middle Ages. Namely, Battis includes a brief note regarding the "inaccessibility" of medieval manuscripts, while acknowledging the "very practical reasons why manuscripts need to be housed in a certain way" (107). Battis also notes the disproportionate amount of academic work put on non-tenured faculty, difficulties in students receiving accommodations in digital environments, and the anxiety of Zoom meetings. These very real concerns with academia have parallels in wizarding schools, wherein magic itself is "flawed" (110). While there are some references to Harry Potter in this chapter, primarily Battis examines *The Magicians* (2015–2020) and Rainbow Rowell's *Carry On* along with a selection of medieval schoolbooks and Geoffrey Chaucer's depictions of scholars. This chapter works as a sort of scholarly history, acknowledging the importance of a community—as alluded to in Battis's chapter on Morgan—and works to acknowledge an LGBTQ+ history in that space between the Middle Ages and the present.

The fourth chapter "Bad Magic: Wizardry and Queer Failures in Communication" (127-156) notes how "[m]edievalism, in trying to undo

perceived ‘failures’ of the Middle Ages, can also fail spectacularly” (127). Battis discusses these ‘failures,’ such as the racist treatment towards the black actress Angel Colby when she was cast as Guinevere in BBC’s *Merlin* (2008–2012). Drawing on Ebony Thomas’s work *The Dark Fantastic*, Battis further notes that “the show doesn’t know what to do with this version of the queen, and so her story ends unhappily ever after” (127). Thus, these ‘failures’ are both in the reception of medievalisms but also within texts and media. In this section, Battis very strongly draws a parallel to the classroom, noting how “[m]edieval studies has failed to create a safe space for all kinds of students and scholars, and we must do better” (130). They also examine how the Middle Ages in the popular imagination is flat, singular, and does not accurately acknowledge the diversity of thoughts within the period, such as how “philosophies of sin, transgression, and failure were complex, often contradictory” (130). Of all the chapters, this is probably the most theoretical, and it concludes by noting that in YA texts specifically, magic is more likely to be associated with failure than with hope, despite the seemingly boundless potential of magic. A sample of the texts explored in this chapter are Peter S. Beagle’s *The Last Unicorn* (1968), Sarah Reese Brennan’s *In Other Lands* (2019), and Anne Ursu’s *The Real Boy* (2013). This chapter ends with an acknowledgement of how “people of color on the spectrum are even more vulnerable” than white people with autism, and Battis notes how shows with autistic characters, such as *Atypical* (2017–2021) and *Young Sheldon* “focus on charming white protagonists with ample support systems” (154). This chapter begins in Camelot, and it really ends by acknowledging broader, cross-temporal acknowledgments of intersectionality and the lack of depictions of marginalized people, despite the seemingly increased push towards diversity. That is, even when diversity is put into a narrative, it is not necessarily handled well, and a significant swath of people are still unable to find themselves in popular media.

Battis’s fifth chapter “Do You Really Want to Snyrt Me? Queer Adolescence in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” (157-187) examines *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* through the framework of “entwinement” (158). Before focusing on this poem, Battis examines another variety of Gawain texts, particularly the thirteenth century *The Rise of Gawain*, which endeavors to explain Gawain’s childhood. The conclusion which Battis comes to is that Gawain is “known for his prowess and sociability, but also for being young, which sets up an odd paradox. Gawain can’t quite live up to his reputation” (160). From here, Battis then turns to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and explains how—while scholarship often focuses on the sexual advances of the temptation of Lady Bertilak—there is a compelling, potential other reading regarding the queer possibilities between Gawain and Lord Bertilak. In their examination of this, Battis performs a thorough and impressive close reading

specifically of how Gawain's kisses with Bertilak are described. They also note that while the poem "can't possibly valorize an erotic relationship between Gawain and Bertilak [...] this remains one of the most strangely positive depictions of queer intimacy in late medieval literature" (170). Battis explains the surprisingly positive aspects of this queer relationship, and then, they consider how YA adaptations of the poem frame this, which is an equally enlightening discussion as that of the poem itself.

The book concludes powerfully with "Epilogue: Gandalf's Charm" (189-202) which examines the wizard figure, particularly Gandalf, and how these magical characters have nonbinary identities—which often remain unacknowledged. This discussion culminates in Battis's summation that "if this book has a core argument, it's the necessity of diverse wizardry for audiences who are consuming both medieval and medievalist texts" (199). Battis ends the text by reiterating their personal and passionate love for the wizard figure and brings together the threads of depictions of magic *and* these broader issues of the exclusion of queer, disabled, and BIPOC scholars in academia—particularly within medieval studies—to a neat, poetic end.

There are infinite merits to this book, as a vast study of wizards in medieval and medievalist YA texts/media, and as a critique of medieval studies. This book is well-researched and highly accessible, and it most definitely has broad appeal. I can easily imagine K-12 educators, college instructors, medievalists, and students making great use of this text. It is not written in the formal, traditional style often expected of scholarship, but for this book, that is kind of the point. This volume is about queerness, and it is written in a style that in many aspects reflects the queerness. Probably the best determination of if readers will enjoy the volume is by asking themselves the question: would you like to know if Gandalf shares kinship with drag queens? This is an anecdote which Battis mentions early in the text, involving an article they once submitted and a reviewer's indignation at the suggestion (3). Battis only somewhat addresses this question about Gandalf directly, but the query itself is very much in the spirit of this text. This book is about wizards, queerness, and neurodiversity, but in another sense, it is also about reconsidering what we might call "traditional" medieval studies and medievalist authors like Tolkien. So if the answer to that question is 'yes, obviously,' that reader will doubtlessly derive much enjoyment from this wonderful and brilliant book.

—Marisa Mills

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