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## ***The Medieval Worlds of Neil Gaiman: From Beowulf to Sleeping Beauty*** by Shiloh Carroll

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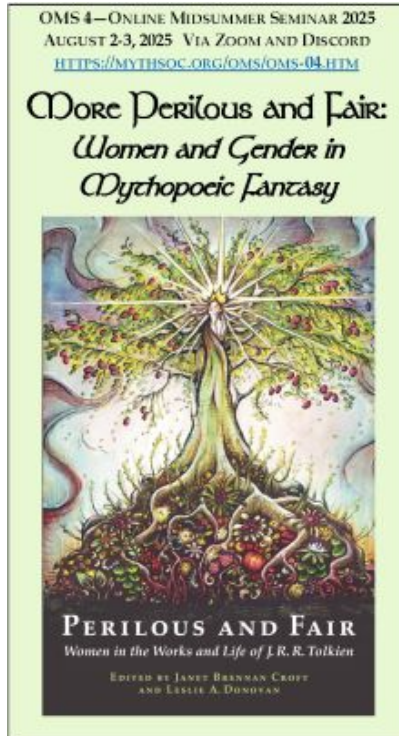
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### *The Medieval Worlds of Neil Gaiman: From Beowulf to Sleeping Beauty* by Shiloh Carroll

#### Abstract

Review of the book *The Medieval Worlds of Neil Gaiman: From Beowulf to Sleeping Beauty* by Shiloh Carroll.

#### Additional Keywords

Norse mythology

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**THE MEDIEVAL WORLDS OF NEIL GAIMAN: FROM BEOWULF TO SLEEPING BEAUTY.** Shiloh Carroll. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2023. 214p. 978-1-60938-913-0. \$27.50 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-60938-914-7. \$27.50 (ebook).

PREVIOUS CRITICAL STUDIES HAVE APPROACHED the works of Neil Gaiman (1960– ) from a variety of theoretical perspectives: gender, genre, gothicism, liminality, mythology, psychology, philosophy, postmodernism, and reader response theory, among others. Shiloh Carroll, author of *Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones* (D.S. Brewer, 2018), offers a different perspective as she analyzes the medieval and medievalist traditions which, she finds, have heavily influenced “nearly all” of Gaiman’s work (7). In *The Medieval Worlds of Neil Gaiman: From Beowulf to Sleeping Beauty*, Carroll teases out layers of inspiration from medieval Everyman plays, dream vision poems, Norse mythological texts and Victorian fairy-tales, themselves built upon medievalist tropes (170-171). The short chapter lengths (15 pages on average) and numerous didactic statements (e.g., “Arthuriana is the term used to refer to the broad, sprawling collection of interconnected stories that build on and refer to each other,” 50) establish the target audience as general readers and students, rather than specialists, but the book will actually be more useful to those who already have some familiarity with Gaiman’s writings.

The main body of the book comprises eleven chapters, each one focused on one or more of Gaiman’s works and the medieval/ medievalist sources and influences which shaped them. Each chapter is structured in three parts: first, the background of selected sources and influences; second, an overview of one or more related Gaiman work(s); and third, an analysis which brings these together to show how Gaiman adapted or appropriated his medieval/medievalist sources and influences in his novels, short stories, graphic novels, and poems. The first three chapters argue that Gaiman’s groundbreaking *Sandman* graphic novel series (1989– ) was heavily inspired by medieval texts. In Chapter One, “Sandman and Everyman,” Carroll identifies the series’ lead character, Morpheus, the eponymous Sandman, Lord of Dream, and Prince of Stories, as an allegorical representation along the lines of the medieval Everyman character from such morality plays as *The Summoning of Everyman*. Morpheus, like Everyman, embarks on an allegorical journey where he confronts the consequences of his sins (e.g., pride, anger, cruelty) and learns instead to embody virtues (e.g., love and self-sacrifice). In Chapter Two, “Crossing the Threshold: *Sandman* and Medieval Dream Visions,” Carroll illustrates Gaiman’s use of the traditional narrative structure of dream vision texts such as Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, Macrobius’s *Commentary*, and the poems *Pearl* and *The Romance of the Rose*. In Chapter Three, “Abandon Hope:

*Sandman* Goes to Hell," Morpheus journeys through the Underworld where he is forced to face his own sins. There, he converses with Lucifer on issues of free will, destiny, divine justice and redemption, the exploration of which places *Sandman* in direct conversation with Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, as well as the Jewish rabbinic *Midrash-Aggadah* texts. As Carroll contends, the *Sandman* series shows Gaiman's familiarity with classical and medieval texts which he uses as foundations "for his own arguments about the nature of evil, the afterlife, and human nature," and thus Gaiman advances these perennial debates as "ongoing human concerns" (46).

The next three chapters are something of a grab bag, with analysis of the influence on Gaiman's works of Arthurian legend, European folk and fairy-tales, the Tarot, and medieval Christian perspectives. In Chapter Four, "The Wizard Tim: *The Books of Magic*," Carroll examines the influence of Arthurian romance, Scottish fairy ballads, and the Fool's tarot journey on Gaiman's *The Books of Magic*, a four-part graphic novel series (1990-1991) set in the same DC Comics universe as *The Sandman*. The series protagonist is twelve-year-old potential wizard Timothy Hunter who is guided on a journey of self-discovery through the past, present, and future of magic. In Chapter Five, "'To the World': *Good Omens* and the Apocalypse," Carroll finds inspiration in Gaiman's and Terry Pratchett's novel *Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch* (1990) from the biblical Revelation, medieval women's hagiography, and Arthurian legend, although the expectations related to these are comically inverted. The Satanic nuns of the Chattering Order of St. Beryl, for example, defy the expectations of medieval female saints' lives where silence, virtue, and suffering are valorized. Carroll's examination of Arthurian resonances in a two-minute scene added to the first season of the *Good Omens* television series (2019) misses the better comparison of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table to *Good Omens'* adolescent Antichrist Adam and his band of friends. Where Camelot offers the hope of peace but devolves into the chaos of the Battle of Camlann, Adam is prophesied to bring about a war between Heaven and Hell but instead averts it and brings about a measure of peace. In Chapter Six, "Poisoned Apples and Magic Roses: Fable and Fairy Tale," Carroll ties the medievalism of Gaiman's short stories, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (1994) and *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (2012), to Victorian fairy-tales through their medieval settings and feudal societies. While this is a seemingly apparent association, Carroll illustrates ways in which Gaiman disrupts traditional fairy-tale tropes, for example, by making Snow White a vampire or by queering the conventional gender roles in "Sleeping Beauty."

Carroll revisits Gaiman's subversion of fairy-tale tropes in Chapter Seven, "'Go and Catch a Falling Star': *Stardust* and the Fairy-Tale Tradition." She reads *Stardust's* Tristran as a type of "fair unknown" like Chrétien de Troyes's

*Perceval* or Thomas Malory's Gareth, as well as a fairy lover similar to Marie de France's *Lanval*, although he, too, disrupts fairy-tale expectations. Carroll writes that Gaiman "gently push[es] back against harmful tropes or traditions" (104). And, while she discusses some of Gaiman's subversions—such as the voluntary capitulation of the witches (in the novel, if not the film) and Yvaine's saving of herself—Carroll stops short of labeling *Stardust* as the *anti-fairy-tale* it is, for the novel does not so much "gently push back" as completely upend traditional fairy-tale tropes at every turn. Some examples Carroll could have brought into clearer focus include Tristran's making the heroine a captive rather than rescuing her from captivity, Septimus, the seventh son of a king, being a ruthless fratricide rather than a magically-endowed hero destined for the throne, and Una, the only royal daughter, remaining unmarried and ruling Stormhold by her own hand as opposed to marrying Tristran's father (as in the film). Tristran and Yvaine, likewise, do not so much live happily "forever-after" as they live happily for a while, until the mortal Tristran dies and leaves the immortal Yvain to rule on eternally alone, having no children and forever separated from her star-family (again, the film reverses this).

The last four main chapters analyze Gaiman's fascination with Northern medieval texts and are, in my opinion, Carroll's best in terms of incorporating her scholarship with Gaiman's storylines. Chapter Eight, "'Loki Has Done This': Norse Mythology," deals with Gaiman's retelling and reimagining of stories from the medieval Icelandic *Eddas*, while Chapter Nine, "Odin and Low Key and Shadow: *American Gods*," argues that Gaiman created an anti-medieval medievalist novel with New World versions of ancient Norse gods. Chapter Ten, "'Eating, Drinking, Killing, and Fornicating': Robert Zemeckis's *Beowulf*," and Chapter Eleven, "Where Shadow Meets Grendel: *Beowulf*, 'Bay Wolf,' and 'The Monarch of the Glen,'" show Gaiman's fascination with the Old English poem, *Beowulf*, which he has adapted, appropriated, pastiched and re-visioned several times. As Carroll repeatedly points out, Gaiman's approach to these writings is the same approach he uses with any text: he simply tries to tell good stories but updates them for the modern world (113). Thus, Gaiman gives us a Heorot which is a drug-fueled nightclub, new gods of the Internet who battle American copies of Odin, Loki, and others, and sympathetic Grendels and Grendel-moms. Carroll carefully stitches these together with their medieval precursors, pointing out Gaiman's nod to Old English poetics, his subversion of the monster/hero dichotomy, and his re-examination of the class conflict and ancient archetypes inherent in his sources.

While it is not necessary to have read Gaiman's works to appreciate *The Medieval Worlds of Neil Gaiman*, the volume will be best enjoyed by those who already have some familiarity with his *oeuvre*, a fact which may be at odds with the presumed target audience of general readers. For, although Carroll provides

summaries of plots and characters, texts like *American Gods* or *The Sandman* series are so complex that brief synopses do not provide enough background to fully appreciate his stories or her textual analysis of them. Still, Carroll's book could serve as a useful guide for teachers hoping to introduce their students to medieval literature through Gaiman (or, conversely, to Gaiman through medieval literature). And, for those already familiar with some of Gaiman's works, Carroll's well-researched medievalist readings should offer some satisfying new perspectives.

—Kris Swank

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**J.R.R. TOLKIEN IN CENTRAL EUROPE: CONTEXT, DIRECTIONS, AND THE LEGACY.** Edited by Janka Kascakova and David Levente Palatinus; Routledge Studies in Speculative Fiction. New York & London: Routledge, 2024. 188 p. ISBN 9781032525563. \$170. In English.

TOLKIEN FANDOM TENDS TO FOLLOW A PATTERN: discovery; formation of discussion groups; fan activities such as costuming, role playing, the publishing of newsletters, fan fiction and art; then deeper research into Tolkien's life and sources; and as fans grow older, studies of Tolkien (and fantasy) in academia. Concurrent with fandom is the attitude of the literati and academia toward Tolkien: unawareness; deliberate ignoring; disparagement or dismissal; and as fans grow more numerous, studies of Tolkien (and fantasy) in academia, often under the rubric of popular culture or such. In non-English-speaking countries, translation and English studies play a role. But the details of how fandom and academic recognition are expressed vary according to the culture and politics of the country and the date by which Tolkien's work is introduced.

Recently, we have accounts published in English of Tolkien fandom in Iberia (Spain and Portugal) in *Nólë Hyarmenillo*; in Italy, *How to Misunderstand Tolkien* (both reviewed in *Mythlore* #143) and a few essays in Italian in *Tolkien: Uomo, Professore, Autore*; and now in *J.R.R. Tolkien in Central Europe*.

The purpose of *J.R.R. Tolkien in Central Europe: Context, Directions, and the Legacy*, as editors Janka Kascakova and David Levente Palatinus state in their