

DRIVER, Martha W. and RAY, Sid. eds. 2004: *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*. Jefferson: McFarland. 232 pp. ISBN 0786419261.

This collection of essays focuses, as its title indicates, on popular films dealing with the medieval hero. The work is divided into five parts, each one dedicated to the exploration of a specific topic: historicity, heroic children, female heroes, contemporary appropriations, and the use of film as teaching material for the class. Each section is preceded by an introduction by editor Martha W. Driver except for part IV, whose introduction is signed by co-editor Sid Ray. The foreword to the body of articles is not provided by the aforesaid editors but by film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum, who declares himself alien to medieval scholarship; the other contributors, on the contrary, come mainly from English, French and Linguistics departments rather than from film critique.

In the Preface, Driver and Ray define their agenda: to study the medieval past as the site for the heroic in films not only located in the Middle Ages, but also in other time and genre frames as “spaghetti westerns, science fiction movies, neogothic films, and even Hong Kong action cinema” (5). This makes it somehow difficult to delimit the concept “medieval hero” and the scope of the essays presented, as some of the films analysed are to be regarded, in my opinion, more as variations on the universal, timeless Jungian heroic archetype rather than as conscious acts of medievalism on the part of the film-maker(s). This is particularly evident in some of the articles, as in the case of Diana E. Slampyak’s discussion of Ang Lee’s acclaimed movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), where the construction of the female heroic character, the Wudan female warrior Jen, depends deeply – as the author acknowledges – on the conventions of nineteenth-century Chinese popular novels of the *wuxia pian* genre. Nevertheless, the connections between the articulation of heroism in this tradition and that of western medieval literature do not go beyond the fact that their respective protagonists, as any hero in all times and places, must undergo a quest for self-knowledge and psychological and emotional enhancement parallel to his/her advancement in physical prowess. To a certain extent the same objection applies to Tom Henthorne’s examination of Spielberg’s film *E.T.*

(1982) in “Boys to Men: Medievalism and Masculinity in *Star Wars* and *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial*,” where the author maintains that the protagonist boys’ coming-of-age and their access to masculine maturity is articulated around their chivalric defence of the “alien-in-distress.” The gallant protection of a friend’s life at the cost of one’s own is probably the most universal of *topoi* in the representation of friendship relations, whether the setting of the narrative is the European Middle Ages, classical Troy, or the Vietnam War. Likewise, Sainato’s assessment of Buffy –the protagonist of television series *Buffy the Vampire-Slayer*– in “Not Your Typical Knight: The Emerging On-Screen Defender” somehow overstretches the parallelisms between this gifted American “petite young blonde” as model for (post)modern young females and the medieval knight as paradigmatic hero.

In the Preface, “Hollywood Knights,” Driver and Ray state that “medieval film’s appropriation of the Middle Ages to impose what is often a conservative ideology on the present is easily accomplished in the depictions of ideal masculinity where whiteness, heterosexuality, youth, strength and entitlement rule” (9). The knightly virtues typically associated with this ideal, “nobility, piety and strength,” however, coexist with the characters’ “rebelliousness, outlawry and rakishness” (9). The issue at stake is the necessity of medieval films of staging verisimilar heroes within this specific historical context, and this is the problem addressed by Driver in her prologue to Part I. The two articles included in it, Salo’s “Heroism and Alienation through Language in *The Lord of the Rings*” and Wood’s “Authenticating Realism in Medieval Film,” deal specifically with historicity and authenticity in the representation of the medieval. Salo researches the invented languages in Tolkien’s work and their transference to the screen in Peter Jackson’s filmed trilogy of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, 2003). The author points out the dependence of these languages on Tolkien’s expertise as a philologist; his deep knowledge of Latin and old Celtic and Germanic languages and literatures allowed for the recreation of their linguistic features as well as cultural backgrounds in the languages of the imaginary races of *The Lord of the Rings*. Salo describes how fictional languages as Quenya, Sindarin or Khuzdul, and the artistic manipulation of English by the author provide the Tolkien universe with a –philologically speaking– “highly plausible pedigree” (29), which confers the story a sense

of historical reality. On its part, Woods' article roots the discussion on historicity on the fact that the contemporary image of the Middle Ages depends, mainly, not on our accurate knowledge of medieval history but on our previous experience of the medieval acquired from "watching films and other sources" (47), that is, from the popular genres. Although modern audiences are tolerant with historical inconsistencies, the hero's decorum – expressed in his/her sense of loyalty and faith (49)– and fittingness to the medieval past become thus determinant to articulate the fables of identity posited by the films.

Part II deals with heroic children on the screen; as Driver indicates, the films built around this figure quite often reproduce readings of the medieval deeply influenced by Victorian Arthurianism. Kevin J. Harty's "Shirley Temple and the Guys and Dolls of the Round Table" analyses in this section *Little Miss Marker* (1934) as representative of twentieth-century Arthurianism. The knightly values cherished by an abandoned little girl –the Hollywood icon of ideal childhood in the 1930s, Shirley Temple-- serve as inspiration for the moral regeneration of some gangsters which transform into a new caring and happy family for the protagonist. Set in the United States of the post-depression years, this fable celebrates the civilising and redeeming effects of projecting medieval ideals on modern times and societies. The second essay in this section, by Tom Henthorne, provides an illuminating insight into the process of coming-of-age from boys to men as shown by films. *Star Wars* (1977) and *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* (1982), according to the author, "promote conservative models of masculinity" (74) by elevating nostalgia for a medieval masculine ideal to the model of behaviour for contemporary boys. In both films, the gendering of heroism relies on the fact that these male bonds –between the hesitating and shy Jedi knight Skywalker and the maverick Han Solo, and among the boys who save the endangered alien in *E.T.*– create stability for the whole community, something that ultimately affects women too.

Part III approaches the study of female heroism in medieval film. Of particular interest is Anke Bernau's "Girls on Film: Medieval Virginity in Cinema," an evaluation of the constructions of medieval virginity in the context of the contemporary resurgence of virginity movements. Here the author revises different filmed versions of the history of Joan of Arc and their

treatment of virginity as “commodity” (105) conditioned by the specific economic and social paradigms nowadays operative in the United States. Next, Slampyak’s essay mentioned above, “Chivalric Virtues in Female Form: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*’s Wudan Princess as Medieval Hero,” offers an illustrative contextualisation for the film –released in 2000– in Chinese popular fiction, yet its reinscribing into the matrix of European medieval romance is not completely convincing. The last contribution to the section is Sainato’s examination of *Buffy the Vampire-Slayer*, the 20th Century-Fox television series (seasons 2001-03). The author focuses on the enacting of a urban girl as a modern icon of warlike femininity. Buffy’s ethics posit the compromising of emotions and duty as a formula to create new heroic profiles appealing to contemporary audiences for which birth, class and gender issues are secondary to individual commitments and personal heroic quests. Accordingly, this is extensive to other democratising medieval films such as *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves* (1991), *First Knight* (1995), *Shrek* (2001), *A Knight’s Tale* (2001), or even *Excalibur* (1981).

Part IV, “Time Bandits,” explores the various appropriations of the medieval hero by what Sid Ray terms “wider audiences both educated and popular” (147). Ray maintains that *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) set a landmark in the history of medieval movies by means of its peculiar political, ironic reading of the topics in the presentation of the Arthurian matter. The three articles included in this section deal with the construction of knightly characters and the updating of chivalric values to face modern conflicts and social preoccupations. The discussion starts with Grindley’s work “The Hagiography of Steel,” which studies the hero’s weapons as cultural constructions; as it is explained, the knight’s armour, shield and sword and their modern equivalents codify his character no matter whether the narrative is an action film like *Dirty Harry* (1972), *Conan the Barbarian* (1982), or the pseudo-Beowulfian *The Thirteenth Warrior* (1999). Then, Torregrossa’s “The Ways of the Wizard” describes the function of magic and the figure of the medieval magician of popular fiction as the embodiment of the virtues of wisdom and courage, as evidenced in the implemental roles as icons of masculinity represented mainly by Merlin, but also by Gandalf, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Harry Potter in their respective stories. Lastly, Caroline Jewers’ “Hard Day’s Knights” approaches three knightly narratives, *First*

Knight (1995), *A Knight's Tale* (2001), and *Black Knight* (2001). Jewers observes how the medieval setting is useful to discuss issues of gender, class and race as a response to contemporary challenges at the core of the contemporary discourse of democracy and globalisation in western societies.

Finally, Part V provides the reader with different experiences in the use of medieval film as teaching tool. More than as theoretical discussion, the contributions of Edward Benson and John K. Ganim offer a survey on their challenging use of filmic representations of the medieval in the classroom and on their students' responses to this challenging material as a form of critical thinking. In "Oh, What a Lovely War! Joan of Arc on Screen" Benson centres on films dealing with Joan of Arc and the Anglo-French conflict at different stages of the twentieth century, and relates them to the politics of imperialism and violence at specific historical moments. Ganim's "The Hero in the Classroom," on its part, addresses the students' expectations on heroism and the ironic gaze in our contemporary construction of the Middle Ages, biased as it is by centuries of popular reception of the matter. From the Gothic fantasy in television phenomenon *X-Files* to Scottish nationalism according to Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*, all kind of material provides research and discussion topic for the classroom; but also, as Ganim's experience shows, these popular productions can be combined with classic foreign films as Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) or Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), high culture cinema devised for audiences different in scope and interests from the average Anglo-American college student. What the author styles as the "willing suspension of historical belief" (245) inculcated by television and other forms of entertainment does not only denounce the real character of these popular Middle Ages as fabrication, but also enhances the students' critical appreciation of the gap between the postmodern pastiche and the "philologically and archeologically correct Middle Ages" (246). One must add, however, that any revision of a historical period inevitably projects later cultural categories on it, and consequently the question of "archaeological correctness" is open to interpretation.

Although the ambitious scope in topics addressed and filmic texts analysed could have been shortened for the sake of a clearer delimitation of its critical interest, it can be said that Driver and Ray's effort has been worth

it. The appeal of this work lies probably in the pertinent thematic arrangement of the different exercises in the study of medievalism that conform the volume and, regardless the specific weakness of some of the papers, mostly in the editors' informed presentation of the state-of-the-question in the different fields approached.

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