Muscular Medievalism

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"Medieval society assumed a community of men dependent on men in a violent world where physical strength meant survival and where women were devalued, where women's bodies were the disposable property of men, where women's prayers were worth less than those of a man, and where their souls—if they actually had souls: there was some debate on the matter—their souls were subordinate to the souls of men, even in heaven…. In medieval society, men acted and women were acted upon."

—Jerome Mandel[1]

"Grab your balls (GYB) and be the man you want to be without looking over your shoulder to see if she thinks you are ok."

—Allen J. Frantzen[2]

"Whenever popular culture gets a bad idea about the Middle Ages, it's usually some scholar's fault."

—Tom Shippey[3]

Just how patriarchal *were* the Middle Ages? Ask any combination of creative producers of medievalism and you're liable to learn that no matter how bad you think things were in medieval times, history was probably even worse.[4] The medieval era is the dumping ground of the contemporary imagination, rife with torture, refuse in the streets, rape, slavery, superstition, casual

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[1] Jerome Mandel, "'Polymorphous Sexualities' in Chrétien de Troyes and Sir Thomas Malory," in *The Body and The Soul in Medieval Literature*, The J.A.W. Bennett Memorial Lectures, Tenth Series, Perugia, 1998, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 63-78, (66-7).

[2] Medieval scholar Allen J. Frantzen earned some notoriety at the end of 2015 when his men's rights activism blog started receiving attention from his peers. This particular statement is from the section on "How to fight your way out of the feminist fog" on http://www.allenjfrantzen.com/Men/femfog.html. See also Rio Fernandes, "Prominent Medieval Scholar's Blog on 'Feminist Fog' Sparks an Uproar," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 22 January 2016, http://chronicle.com/article/Prominent-Medieval-Scholar-s/235014. [Editors' Note: for grammatical correctness, we have silently amended the original quote from "you shoulder" to "your shoulder."]

[3] Personal conversation at Neomedievalism: The 22nd Annual Conference on Medievalism: London, Ontario, October 2007.

[4] Feminist scholars have been struggling to redefine this reductive view of medieval women for decades. See, for instance, Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Albrecht Classen, *The Power of a Woman's Voice in Medieval and Early Modern Literatures: New Approaches to German and European Women Writers and to Violence Against Women in Premodern Times* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007); Jane Chance, *The Literary Subversions of Medieval Women* (New York: Palgrave, 2007); and Amy Vines, *Women's Power in Late Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011).

slaughter, and every other human vice we supposedly stopped indulging in once we became "enlightened."[5]

Take, for instance, HBO's *Game of Thrones*, which holds such a revered place in contemporary American popular culture that it's treated to weekly recaps in respected newspapers like the *Washington Post*. The author of the epic fantasy series the show is based on, George R. R. Martin, claims to be delivering an unapologetically 'real' version of the Middle Ages in his *Song of Ice and Fire* series. Martin says he was inspired to pen his particularly brutal portrayal of medieval times because other writers "…were getting it all wrong. It was a sort of Disneyland Middle Ages, where they had castles and princesses and all that."[6] And if Martin's novels are any indication, getting it right means saturating the faux-medieval world with rampant misogyny and rape. The words "rape," "raped," "raper," "rapist," or "raping" combined appear at least 171 times in Martin's books, and that's not counting the frequent uses of "fuck" and other supposed synonyms for rape. However, Martin explains away the sexual violence in his novels with his vision of history: "Well, I'm not writing about contemporary sex," he clarified to one interviewer. "It's medieval."[7]

For Martin—and for his legions of fans—the abundance of sexual violence and the disturbing conflation of sex and rape in the books and on the show are, in fact, markers of medieval authenticity. Indeed, rape-as-authenticity is a key component of the show: "It's not our world," argued executive producer D.B. Weiss in defense of the rape scenes on HBO's show, "but it is a real world, and it's a violent world, a more brutal world. . . It's a world where these horrible things are definitely pervasive elements of their lives and their cultures. We felt that shying away from these things would be doing a disservice to the reality and groundedness of George's vision."[8] To be clear: violence against women isn't just a byproduct of historical authenticity in the show and in the novels.[9] It is, according to their creators, what *makes* these medieval-inspired works of entertainment

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[5] Portions of this section were presented at the following conferences: "Medievalism, Masculinity, and Authenticity," Conference on the Middle Ages in the Modern World: University of St. Andrews, Scotland, U.K., June 2013; and "Medievalism and the Pleasures of Patriarchy" at the 20th International Medieval Congress, Leeds, July 2013.

[6] George R. R. Martin, "Author of 'A Song of Ice and Fire' Series: Interview on The Sound of Young America," interview by John Hodgman, *The Sound of Young America*, September 21, 2011, http://www.pri.org/stories/arts-entertainment/books/john-hodgman-interviews-george-r-r-martin6041.html. For a detailed analysis of Martin's conception of fantasy, see Shiloh R. Carroll's "Rewriting the Fantasy Archetype: George R. R. Martin, Neomedievalist Fantasy, and the Quest for Realism" in *Fantasy and Science Fiction Medievalisms: From Asimov to A Game of Thrones*, ed. Helen Young (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2015), 59-76.

[7] Rachel Brown, "George R.R. Martin on Sex, Fantasy, and A Dance with Dragons," *The Atlantic*, 11 July 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/07/george-rr-martin-on-sex-fantasy-and-a-dance-with-dragons/241738.

[8] Jace Lacob, "'Game of Thrones' Sexual Politics," *The Daily Beast,* 5 June 2011, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/06/05/game-of-thrones-sexual-politics.html.

[9] For more on gendered violence and authenticity in Martin's novels and the HBO series, see Shiloh R. Carroll, "'You Ought to be in Skirts and Me in Mail': Gender and History in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*," in *George R. R. Martin's* A Song of Ice and Fire *and the Medieval Literary Tradition*, ed. Bartomiej Blaszkiewicz (Warsaw: Warsaw University Press, 2014), 247-59. For a discussion of one controversial episode in particular, see Paul B. Sturtevant, "Was Sansa's Abuse Normal in the Middle Ages?" *The Public Medievalist*, 28 May 2015, http://www.publicmedievalist.com/got-rape-and-middle-ages/.

authentic. The violence against and degradation of women in the world of Westeros is as important to the "medieval" setting as the armor, the castles, the weapons, and the charmingly fetishized details about food. But using violence against women as a shortcut to bolster authenticity is hardly limited to Martin's creative endeavors: the casual rape of women and girls, often as a kind of "background noise" behind the "real" plot, pervades almost every work of medievalism that is proclaimed "gritty" or "authentic," the often-anonymous victims themselves rendered disposable tropes in the service of historicity, from the History Channel's show *Vikings* to popular games like *The Witcher* and *Dragon Age*.

These works of medievalism often cross the fine line between critiquing a bygone era's misogyny and celebrating it for the pleasure of its readers, players, and viewers. Behind such works of medievalism lurks the odor of nostalgic fantasy, a longing for the opposite side of the disempowered feminine equation: a muscular medievalism. Muscular medievalism imagines the past as a man's world in which masculinity was powerful, impenetrable, and uniquely privileged. Muscular medievalism is the medievalism à la mode, and it has leaked out of the comparatively harmless space of television, print, and digital media to inspire xenophobic politics, acts of terrorism, and brutal war. The mythologically masculine Middle Ages, which serves as collective justification for the worst traits of both patriarchy and humanity, has terrifying global political consequences.

I

"We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition. This is the reality in which we live. And this is why all efforts to escape from the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are vain."
                    —Hannah Arendt, Preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Summer 1950.[10]

When asked what's medieval about modern society, two recent phenomena usually come to mind, and we've already covered *Game of Thrones*.[11] The second is the rise of ISIS, the so-called Islamic State, in the Middle East. This summer marks the second anniversary of ISIS declaring itself a caliphate in an attempt to resurrect a medieval Islamic empire. Not only does ISIS celebrate its associations with the medieval past, but Western media and politicians regularly identify ISIS as "medieval" to characterize its cruelty, barbarism, and backwardness. A few examples include

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[10] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968): ix.
[11] Portions of this section were presented as "Dark Revivals," the 29th International Conference on Medievalism: Atlanta, GA, October 2014. Portions were also published online as "Dark Revivals: Medievalism and ISIS," *The Public Medievalist*, 16 October 2014.

headlines such as: "The New Dark Ages: The chilling medieval society Isis extremists seek to impose in Iraq"; statements that Islamic State fighters "are smack in the middle of the medieval tradition and are bringing it back wholesale into the present day"; and the British Deputy Prime Minister's assertion that "The UK upholds the rule of law, unlike these barbaric, medieval types in ISIL."[12]

Medieval scholars have been fighting this characterization in online editorials, issuing professional correctives on the abuse of the word "medieval." For instance, on "The Conversation," an Australian news website, Clare Monagle and Louise D'Arcens pointed out that calling ISIS medieval is "negative branding" that places the organization "opportunely outside of modernity, in a sphere of irrationality."[13] Monagle and D'Arcens also suggest that although ISIS participates in this labeling through its desire for a caliphate, "Their notion of a glorious fundamentalist Islamic Middle Age is also a fantasy. It bears little relationship to the historical record of the very complicated and diverse forms of Islamic governance that evolved in the Middle East and around the Mediterranean."[14]

These are important corrections, if only to remind the world that ISIS's vision, and our view of it, is counter-historical. Medieval Islamic societies were known for religious tolerance, literary and artistic achievements, and scientific progress. And yet, whether or not ISIS and its critics invoke history correctly, they have found their fantasy version of the Middle Ages incredibly useful. ISIS's polished, compelling propaganda intentionally appeals not only to an imagined medieval past, but to the same brutal, patriarchal neomedieval fantasy that takes center stage in *Game of Thrones*. Both attract audiences to a savage world in which warriors achieve glory and power through abhorrent acts of violence. Both emphasize the superiority of men and trade in women as rewards for brutality (even if HBO pacifies its viewers with a mixed critique). Both claim to be authentic and real in their depictions of the medieval past, yet both will fail any rigorous fact-checking for historical accuracy.

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[12] Adrian Lee, *Daily Express*, 21 June 2014, http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/483920/Iraq-Isis-Extremists-Dark-Ages-Muslim-Baghdad-Jihadist; Bernard Haykel, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/; Anoosh Chakelian, "Nick Clegg: It's Not Obvious What the UK Can Do Legally on New Terror Powers," *The New Statesman*, 2 September 2014, http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/09/nick-clegg-it-s-not-obvious-what-uk-can-do-legally-new-terror-powers.

[13] Claire Monagle and Louise D'Arcens, "'Medieval' Makes a Comeback in Modern Politics: What's Going On?" *The Conversation*, 22 September 2014, https://theconversation.com/medieval-makes-a-comeback-in-modern-politics-whats-going-on-31780. See also Ishaan Tharoor's interview with Bruce Holsinger in "Is the Islamic State 'medieval'? A Medievalist Says No," *The Washington Post*, 10 October 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/10/10/is-the-islamic-state-medieval-a-medievalist-says-no/.

[14] Monagle and D'Arcens, "'Medieval' Makes a Comeback," 22 September 2014.

But in both cases, accuracy really isn't the point.

ISIS propaganda, geared mostly toward Western audiences, uses a pastiche of clips from medieval-themed movies, images of young children in bouncy castles that sport the ISIS logo, and posters that use blatant Tolkien references.[15] Despite its professed desire to resurrect a medieval Middle Eastern form of government, ISIS draws heavily on Western medievalism to draw recruits from Europe, the United States, and Britain who were raised on neomedieval media with violent, heroic narratives. To young men who feel dismissed and disempowered, ISIS sells a video game medievalism that lets potential recruits cast themselves as conquering, fierce religious warriors: one recent American recruit confessed in a high school essay written before he left for the Islamic State, "I believe that I have greatness in me….I want to be a superhero."[16] And the ISIS fighter, balaclava-clad with a curved sword in one hand and a Kalashnikov in the other, whether straddling a horse, seated atop a tank, or striding in lockstep formation, could have come from straight from central casting in any of today's video games, graphic novels, or films.[17] It hardly matters that his go-to look is a pastiche of different historical and fictional screenshots. His image speaks a language that gamers, fantasy fans, moviegoers, and TV audiences instinctively understand. It is an image that says: power.

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[15] The image above was pulled from an ISIS propaganda website, to which I would rather not provide the link. The artist is anonymous. Note the Tolkienesque phrasing: "One man to unite them all." (This refers to the "Mahdi," the redeemer of Islam prophesied to arrive before Judgment Day.)

[16] Adam Goldman, "'I am fed up with this evil': How an American went from Ivy League student to disillusioned ISIS fighter," *Washington Post,* 30 June 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/i-am-fed-up-with-this-evil-how-an-american-went-from-ivy-league-student-to-disillusioned-isis-fighter/2016/06/29/155e777e-3e07-11e6-80bc-d06711fd2125_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-more-top-stories-2_bhuiya-915a-stream%3Ahomepage%2Fstory.

[17] The image on the next page is of Islam Yaken, a now-deceased ISIS fighter who had a propensity for tweeting images of himself as Islamic State propaganda. Image taken from Richard Spencer and Magdy Samaan, "Islamic State's New Icon is a Hipster Jihadi," *The Telegraph,* 6 August 2014,
 http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/11011634/Islamic-States-new-icon-is-a-hipster-jihadi.html.

As in *Game of Thrones*, a key component of muscular medievalism is its need for the suffering and exploitation of women in order to validate its vision of masculinity. In the autumn of 2014, the new caliphate declared that the enslavement and rape of women and girls is central to its ideology. ISIS's glossy, almost corporate, monthly English language magazine, *Dabiq*, included an article called "The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour," which explicitly argued, "One should remember that enslaving

the families of the *kuffar*—the infidels—and taking their women as concubines is a firmly established aspect of the Shariah, or Islamic law."[18] Women and girls report being stored in a warehouse in Mosul with locked doors and blacked-out windows, forced to take off their head scarves to be assessed for their attractiveness, and, if chosen, dragged out by their hair to be raped or forcibly married. A woman interviewed by *The Guardian* describes being held "in a dark hall together with hundreds of other women, and girls. Some of them children who were not more than five years old….On a daily basis," she explains, "men entered the room...to choose themselves a treat."[19] It is, as one NPR commentator called it, an "industrial level" of sexual violence that is both methodical and intentional.[20] Dyan Mazurana suggests that fighters believe that they are "treated well" by the Islamic State, and part of that treatment is access to women, specifically being "rewarded" with

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[18] For the first emergence of the ISIS statement on slavery, see Allen McDuffee, "ISIS Is Now Bragging About Enslaving Women and Children," *The Atlantic,* 13 October 2014, http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/isis-confirms-and-justifies-enslaving-yazidis-in-new-magazine-article/381394/. On the continuance and system of this horrifying practice, see Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape," *New York Times*, 13 August 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html?_r=0. ISIS continues to hold over 3000 Yezidi women and children as slaves. See Skye Wheeler, "UN Panel Reports on ISIS Crimes on Yezidis," *Human Rights Watch*, 21 June 2016, https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/21/un-panel-reports-isis-crimes-yezidis.
[19] Annabell Van den Berghe, "Humiliation Replaces Fear for the Women Kidnapped by ISIS," *The Guardian*, 19 October 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/19/isis-forced-marriage-syria-iraq-women-kidnapped.
[20] "Sexual Violence under ISIS Control," *On Point*, National Public Radio, 25 September 2014.

female captives to be used as wives, concubines, or simply victims.[21] Even women who are not enslaved under ISIS's regime are stiflingly repressed: as Mona Mahmood reports in a 2015 piece for *The Guardian*, not only are women "forced to be accompanied by a male guardian, known as a mahram, at all times, and are compelled to wear double-layered veils, loose abayas and gloves" even when they are in labor, but the hospitals have been emptied of female doctors, the universities have closed, and official ISIS publications state that "girls [can] be married from the age of nine," and "women should only leave the house in exceptional circumstances and should remain 'hidden and veiled.'"[22]

And yet, despite the explosion of reporting on the fate of ISIS's conquered territories, the world's reaction to this horrific violence against women and girls—apart from the usual Twitter outrage—is largely complacent. The enslavement, ritual rape, and murder of thousands of children and grown women—on a scale that would demand immediate action if the persecuted group were anything other than women—is lamented, but ultimately dismissed as part of the "medieval" nature of life under the Islamic State, thanks, in part, to our misguided fantasies about the past.

II

"Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of man who can fabricate it."

—Arendt, *Totalitarianism*[23]

"Accuracy is for snake-oil pussies."

—Dominic Cummings, Director for the Brexit "Vote Leave" campaign[24]

Of course, the world *is* reacting to ISIS, just not in the way that one might hope. The Western world's response to the rise of a violent, patriarchal totalitarian terrorist regime in the Middle East has been to court its own neonationalist, patriarchal, and totalitarian impulses. The neomedieval patriarchal religious state beckons with the promise of a lost status reclaimed, appealing both to people who are marginalized, like many first-generation immigrants, and those who simply see themselves as marginalized, like Anders Breivik, the Norwegian mass-murderer who fancied himself

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Mona Mahmood, "Double-layered Veils and Despair…women describe life under ISIS," *The Guardian*, 17 February 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/17/isis-orders-women-iraq-syria-veils-gloves.

[23] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 350.

[24] The title of John Crace's article is actually "'Accuracy is for snake-oil pussies': Vote Leave's Campaign Director Defies MPs," *The Guardian*, 20 April 2016, (http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/apr/20/accuracy-is-for-snake-oil-pussies-vote-leaves-campaign-director-defies-mps)—and no, I can't believe that reporting and politics have been lowered to this level of discourse either.

as a Templar "taking back the West" from Marxists and Muslims.[25] In Europe, where anti-immigrant sentiment has been escalating for the better part of a decade, far-right parties like Front National in France, Greece's Golden Dawn, and the Dutch Freedom party are on the rise, as is the level of anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish violence in these countries. Britain has just voted to secede from the European Union based on anti-immigrant sentiment, with the weeks after the vote seeing record reports of racist violence on the British streets.[26] The "Brexit" vote occurred just one week after the murder of Jo Cox, a British lawmaker and member of Parliament who worked to rescue Syrian refugees; she was shot and stabbed to death by a British man with connections to the neo-Nazi white nationalist movement "National Alliance" who shouted "Britain first!" throughout the attack.[27]

But the elephant in the room (pun intended) is the media sponge of American politics, the outspoken, masculinist, potential future tyrant, Donald Trump, republican candidate for president. Trump, who was until recently something of a jester figure in American politics, has found himself surfing the same wave of xenophobic sentiment that is sweeping the rest of the Western world, his campaign to "Make America Great Again" consisting mainly of cutting the United States off from the outside world and banning Muslims and Mexicans from entering its borders.[28]

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[25] Daniel Wollenburg, who analyzed the frenzied writings of Anders Breivik—the mass-murderer who claimed to be a Templar—argues that just as many scholars have mischaracterized the Middle Ages as ". . . a time of collective will" in opposition to the postmedieval period, which is "marked by the emergence of the 'human' and human beings' awareness of themselves as individuals." See Wollenberg, "The New Knighthood: Terror and the Medieval," *postmedieval* 5.1 (2014): 21-33, especially 25, 28. For the pervasiveness of these sentiments in Europe today, see Daniel Wollenberg, "Defending the West: Cultural Racism and Pan-Europeanism on the Far-Right," *postmedieval* 5.3 (2014): 308-19.

[26] On the rise of racist violence after the Brexit vote, see Homa Khaleeli, "'A Frenzy of Hatred: How to Understand Brexit Racism," *The Guardian*, 29 June 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/29/frenzy-hatred-brexit-racism-abuse-referendum-celebratory-lasting-damage?CMP=share_btn_fb.

[27] Griff White and Karla Adam, "Killing in Britain Spawns a Reckoning over Rhetoric on the Eve of EU Vote," *Washington Post*, 16 June 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/suspected-killer-of-british-lawmaker-jo-cox-ties-neo-nazi-ties-group-says/2016/06/17/2067ea0a-33ef-11e6-ab9d-1da2b0f24f93_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_britain-425am%3Ahomepage%2Fstory.

[28] The image below is the cover of the 8 December 2015 issue of the *Philadelphia Daily News*.

Many have noted that Trump is a classic authoritarian "strongman," one among many rising globally, putting him in company with Vladimir Putin, Hugo Chavez, and Bashar Al-Assad—and, of course, more classically, Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin.[29] Trump's candor about his desire for violence and racist policy seems novel, and many dismiss it as blustering, but his outrageous statements are par for the course with authoritarian aspirations. Hannah Arendt's recollection of the public apathy that led to the second World War serves up a chilling warning: "In order not to overestimate the importance of the propaganda lies one should recall the much more numerous instances in which Hitler was completely sincere and brutally unequivocal in the definition of the movement's true aims, but they were simply not acknowledged by a public unprepared for such consistency."[30]

Early twentieth century totalitarian regimes also had a notorious obsession with medievalism: in particular, a mythological, muscular medievalism that justified their vision of national patriarchal authority. Likewise, Trump has a long legacy of associations with medievalism: even Umberto Eco's germinal essay on medievalism, "The Return of the Middle Ages," evokes Trump Tower as one of two "postmodern neomedieval Manhattan new castles," an instance of what Eco calls a new feudalism, with "courts open to peasants and merchants and the well-protected high-level apartments reserved for the lords."[31] A 1995 *New York Magazine* profile explains that,

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[29] See Pippa Norris, "It's Not Just Trump: Authoritarian Populism is Rising Across the West. Here's Why," *Washington Post*, 11 March 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/11/its-not-just-trump-authoritarian-populism-is-rising-across-the-west-heres-why/. See also Rob Crilly, "America Craves a Strongman," *The Telegraph,* 2 March 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/donald-trump/12180393/America-craves-a-strongman.-Donald-Trump-is-it.html; and Gillian Brassil, "Donald Trump Tweets Like a Latin American Strongman," *Politico*, 24 March 2016.

[30] Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 343.

Politically, Trump poses as a populist, but the evidence suggests he may harbor monarchist tendencies. The doorman uniforms at Trump Tower were designed to make them look like palace guards, with towering black bearskin hats. Trump once proposed a Madison Avenue apartment building, Trump Castle, that would have had a drawbridge and a medieval-style moat. (The idea died, and he later recycled the name for a casino.) He [even] named one of his sons Barron.[32]

Most telling, however, is that Trump's rhetoric on the neomedieval Islamic State reveals a disturbing fetishization of their "medieval" patriarchal power. In a June 28, 2016 speech in Clairesville, Ohio, Trump responded to a recent terrorist in Turkey by declaring:

> We're living in medieval times. We have to stop it. We have to be so strong. We have to fight so viciously and violently because we're dealing with violent people. [applause] ….Look, we have laws, and the laws say, you can't do this, you can't do that, you can't do, you know, a lot. Their laws say you can do anything you want and the more vicious you are, the better….So we can't do waterboarding but they can do chopping off heads, drowning people in steel cages. They can do whatever they want to do. And, you know, they eat dinner like us. Can you imagine them sitting around the table or wherever they're eating their dinner, talking about the Americans don't do waterboarding and yet we chop off heads. They probably think we're weak, we're stupid, we don't know what we're doing, we have no leadership. You know, you have to fight fire with fire [applause].[33]

Trump's transparent rhetoric about his goals reveals more than just his authoritarian leanings. He reveals that the Western far right, though it claims to define itself against the brutal, medieval patriarchy of the Middle East, is fueled, in part, by *jealousy* of that same, violent, neomedieval patriarchal power. The promise of power and superiority that draws fighters to ISIS —and titillates viewers of *Game of Thrones*—is the same promise that the Western far right hopes to fulfill in an era that feels dampened by silly constraints like "laws" and "political correctness." Medievalism has always provided reassuring fictions when power structures are threatened, whispering that the lost superiority of medieval nations, and of medieval men, is lurking inside all of us, waiting to be reclaimed. Medievalism rose up in Victorian England, when so many colonized spaces struggled to free themselves from British rule. It flourished during Reconstruction in the United States and it thrived throughout the movement for women's suffrage on both sides of the pond. The fantasy of a pure, orderly medieval past that reified male privilege was critical to the regressive ideologies and the

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[31] Umberto Eco, "The Return of the Middle Ages," *Travels in Hyperreality* (New York: Harcourt, 1986), 62.

[32] Andrew Rice and Nick Tabor, "Our Trump Dump," *New York Magazine*, 29 January 2016, http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/01/donald-trump-timeline.html.

[33] Trump's speech, should you choose to endure it, is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhQU6lnU77Q.

recruiting efforts of both Nazi Germany and the "knights" of the Ku Klux Klan.[34] And it's equally critical to ISIS propaganda, the nightmare neomedieval vision fueling *Game of Thrones*, and far-right anti-immigration rhetoric.

<div align="center">III</div>

Philippa Byrne's recent editorial in *The Conversation*, entitled "Why Medievalists Should Stop Talking about *Game of Throne*s," argues that, "*Game of Thrones* is a chaotic amalgam of periods and places with dragons thrown into the mix. If it's not set in any one period, we're limited in how far we can discuss it in relation to 'history'. We can only talk about vague ideas of 'influence' and 'inspiration', terms which can mean anything."[35] Byrne recommends that instead, it is "well worth talking about historical dramas." Byrne is not wrong in her characterization of Westeros more as a bastard pastiche than a direct medieval descendant, but as medievalism scholars know, running popular media through an academic authenticity-checker merely skims the surface of the work scholars should be doing to unpack these neomedieval fantasies. ISIS, George R. R. Martin, and Donald Trump use the Middle Ages not as they were, to be sure, but as they want the Middle Ages to have been. Medievalists and medievalismists alike know plenty about such skewed, illusory constructions of history, the nostalgic undercurrents of nation-building, and the narratives that gloss and polish selective violence based on race, class, gender, and faith. We know that the barbaric acts so often deemed medieval predate the Middle Ages and follow for centuries after it. We know, unfortunately, that violence is addictive—that whole generations of warriors have destroyed and self-destructed in the pursuit of their own heroic narratives. We know that men who imagine themselves to be heroes will enslave, rape, torture, and murder those they see as less than human. And above all, we know well how sadism and cruelty can be elevated, how it can thrive hand-in-hand with progressive ideas, technological innovation, love, joy, spiritual growth, cultural exchange, and intellectual energy. No age in human history is so different from our own in this way: we can be savagely hateful, even as we are beautiful, flourishing, and thoughtful. Our job as medievalists—as *humanists*—is not to wall off the Middle Ages from public discourse when it's being misused or mishandled. Our job should be to guide the world through humanity's inhumanity, to diagnose it, to reveal the history of its consequences, and, at the same time, to show the world the long legacy of literature, art, history, music, and philosophy that can overcome it.

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[34] See Amy S. Kaufman, "Purity," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014): 199-206.

[35] Philippa Byrne, "Why Medievalists Should Stop Talking about *Game of Thrones*," *The Conversation*, 15 June 2016, http://theconversation.com/why-medievalists-should-stop-talking-about-game-of-thrones-61044.