

Thinking Like a Wizard: Medievalism in YA Literature

This talk is part of a larger project on wizardry and medievalism in YA literature. Two questions drive this project: 1) what's medieval about the figure of the wizard, and 2) why has the YA genre so enthusiastically adapted this figure? Queer medievalism informs this work, in the form of what Carolyn Dinshaw calls "amateur temporality" (22): cobbling together medieval histories to make a queer moment. One thread that I return to throughout is the idea that wizards *think differently*—that their magical outsidersness makes them sly, and very queer, in ways both metaphorical and literal. This talk will focus on the character Simon Snow from Rainbow Rowell's book *Carry On*. Simon belongs to a typical "chosen-one" narrative, but Rowell is committed to breaking down this tradition. In a *Vanity Fair* interview, Rowell says that she wanted to "take that vocabulary and take those concepts and just twist and turn and play with them." So what's medieval about this novel? I'll talk a bit about the wizard school tradition, and how Simon's school—the Watford Academy—reflects a medieval school with some twists. I'll also talk about Jack Halberstam's notion of queer failure, and how it relates to a broader medieval tradition of failing to know things, or to feel them.

Hogwarts, Brakebills, The Roke School of Magic, and Watford Academy—all are part of what we now call the wizarding school tradition in YA literature. All hidden schools with magical curricula designed to mold unpredictable teens into responsible magic-users. In her work on Hogwarts, Pat Pinsent notes that these schools are often focused on imparting "the right kind of knowledge of the universe," and they pivot around a lesson: "If children meddle with knowledge beyond their years, they may regret it" (29). This echoes parental concerns around teens accessing knowledge too early, including vital knowledge about their own bodily

autonomy, sexuality, and gender identity. It also reminds the reader that teen heroes are often woefully unprepared to tackle adulthood, let alone to save the world. We romance the idea of kids learning magic in a hidden school—we joke about never having received our invitations to Hogwarts—but what do these schools actually represent?

Magic schools often hold out the promise of liberation for students, while punishing them for even the hint of insubordination. They also guard their secrets jealously. Like Harry Potter, Simon Snow is not allowed to work magic beyond the grounds of Watford, in spite of the fact that the world beyond Watford is facing an ecological disaster. A force known as the Insidious Humdrum is creating magical dead-zones that resemble holes in the ozone layer, with nothing left behind except “[a] mundanity that creeps into your soul” (93). The supernatural threat in *Carry On* is the absence of magic itself, as well as the dean of Watford, known as the Mage. In the end, Watford can only be saved by its students. The university model only works if it recognizes the strengths and needs of individual learners, rather than shoring up the privileges of instructors and administrators.

Simon is forced to spend half his time in the “real” world, so he exists as an orphan being constantly shuffled through Britain’s care system. You’d think that he’d feel better when he finally gets to escape to Watford, the magic school that operates as a recently-democratized academy. Instead, he has to live with a snarky vampire roommate, while trying to fix his own faulty magic. The relationship between Simon and his roommate, Baz, turns out to be the central romantic pairing within the novel, and Michael Cart describes it as “at once tender and stormy” (136). This reminds me of Eileen Joy’s description of the medieval elegy as “[a] stormy affect”—more on that later. Simon also has to deal with megalomaniacal tendencies of his mentor, the Mage, who radicalizes the school under the cover of being a good Marxist. *Carry*

On is quite openly an adaptation of *Harry Potter*, and my students have entered into spirited debates on whether it's fanfiction, homage, or a literary text that stands on its own. The main difference between the two series is that, while Harry Potter emerges as a kind, socially adept character in spite of his trauma, Simon stays brittle, awkward, and questioning. He has trouble with words, in a way that defies the very linguistic rules the novel's magic system:

None of it comes naturally to me. Words. Language. Speaking. I don't remember when I learned to talk, but I know they tried to send me to specialists. Apparently, that can happen to kids in care, or kids with parents who never talk to them (108).

The magic in *Carry On* is based on idioms and popular sayings (such as yelling *Up, Up and Away* to cast a flying spell), which makes Simon's lack of articulation a problem. Wizards are traditionally supposed to demonstrate mastery over words. Ursula Leguin's character Ged in *The Wizard of Earthsea* learns how to name (and re-name) the physical world by using the right words, and Hermione is a master of magical pronunciation in *Harry Potter*. Where does that leave Simon? Rowell blames his communication difficulties on being left in care, which suggests that lack of intimate contact has rendered him speechless. Thinking of Simon as neurodivergent opens, perhaps, a more inclusive space for young readers who might also identify with Simon as a character with trouble speaking "properly." Young readers who have also been sent to specialists, and whose own methods of communication have likely been criticized (or even attacked through practices such as behavior modification). In this light, Simon materializes as an important character for marginalized readers—a queer, anxious kid who has trouble expressing his thought and feelings.

Maybe the whole point of being a wizard is to think differently, critically, of a world that doesn't quite understand you. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, the titular wizard is all sly comments, side-eye, and tricky prophecies that don't quite unfold the way you'd expect them to. Later medieval texts, like the *Prose Vulgate* and Robert de Boron's *Merlin*, envision Merlin's childhood as a disorienting struggle between good and evil. Born from a human mother and a succubus father, young Merlin is a creepy toddler, discoursing on ethics and metaphysics when he can barely walk. As a teen, he finds himself caught up in various royal schemes, while unsure of his own magic and its dark source. If the medieval fragments of his adolescence are anything to go on, Merlin was a weird kid, unable to negotiate a medieval society that saw him as visibly queer. A kid who saw dragons fighting underground. Not the kid who gets chosen first to play knightly games with other boys. When you can predict how someone will die three different ways, people tend to lose your invitation to courtly balls and other social gatherings. To be Merlin is to be solitary and skeptical, a bit like Simon, who generally refuses labels—even the label of “chosen one.”

Carry On sets most of its action within a deviously-complicated boarding school. Hogwarts and Watford are full of rituals, uniforms, and hierarchies that are fundamentally medieval in their thinking. Rowell updates this by having her characters attend classes on political events, but the hierarchy of Watford is still essentially medieval, and the focus on magic echoes a medieval curriculum that included courses on what we might now call magic. These fictional schools—part helpful, part dangerous—also invoke the medievalist myth of the “devil's school,” or *scholomance*, an institution for the dark arts mentioned in *Dracula*. Rowell edges against this myth by hiding Watford beneath a system of charms, and Baz completes the mythic cycle as a vampire who is also a wizard. Baz's struggle with being a vampire, like Simon's

struggle with being a “flawed” wizard, is what informs the title of the novel—both must carry on, while carrying each other. I’m interested in what these fantasy school narratives draw from medieval structures, and how the medievalist elements of *Carry On* might allow unexpected opportunities for Simon and his chosen family. Simon is an essentially medieval student who carries a sword, memorizes charms, and depends upon the shelter and protection of Watford, just as a young medieval clerk might depend upon their school.

Simon notes that Watford is “the only place magicians live together, unless they’re related” (18). The school functions as a community, and its gates proclaim a message of unity and tolerance: “MAGIC SEPARATES US FROM THE WORLD. LET NOTHING SEPARATE US FROM EACH OTHER” (25). He’s quick to deflate this feel-good message, calling it a “nice sentiment” that probably doesn’t hold true. But Simon’s favorite thing about Watford is its endless supply of cherry scones—he isn’t there for the academics. In fact, he sees the campus as a comforting home, rather than a place to gain a magical education. Baz is the more committed student, who happens to be acing most of his classes (due, perhaps, to some legacy privilege, as the novel suggests). Watford cleaves to a fairly traditional liberal arts curriculum, including classes in Greek, Latin, Political Science, History, and Elocution, which turns out to be the major skill behind spell-casting. This reflects the seven liberal arts that underpinned medieval universities, including “[the] Trivium (Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic) and Quadrivium (Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, Astronomy)” (Norton 8). In fact, magic was also an area of medieval academic study, though it was generally seen as a dangerous upper-class vice. Catherine Rider notes that “magical texts...[seem] to have been common among scholars and students at medieval universities. In 1277 they were among the books banned from the

University of Paris by the city's bishop, Etienne Tempier, and the university issued another prohibition in 1398" (111).

Students at Watford are segregated by their assigned sex, and Penelope lives in "the Cloisters," described as "a long low building...[it] has only one door and all the windows are made up of tiny panes of glass. (The school must have been mega-paranoid when it started letting girls back in in the 1600s)" (59). Pupils at Watford have realistic assignments, like inventing a new spell, and Simon casually practices medieval duelling in his tower bedroom. All of this is tongue-in-cheek, but Rowling is also deconstructing the wizard-school narrative by trying to visualize how these students would actually be educated. Simon, Penelope, and Baz study a traditional literary canon (including *Hamlet* and Victorian literature), and smart-phones are banned, while taxes are enforced by the Mage. In this respect Watford diverges from a medieval university, whose instructors and administrators were exempt from taxes. As Norton explains, it was not the university itself as a corporation that enjoyed this exemption, but rather "masters and scholars as individuals" (88). Watford also issues diplomas, and the students appear to learn a wide variety of topics, from "magic words" to medieval history. Simon even mentions that Penelope's mother teaches medieval history at "a Normal university. She's published a whole shelf full of mage books, but she doesn't make any money doing it" (312). Watford seems to mirror an ordinary academic institution, with a few esoteric subjects. So how does it prepare these students to be wizards in the wider world?

In short: it doesn't. But it's not entirely the school's fault. The Mage is the one who fails Simon. He fails to be an ethical mentor, a decent father, or a credible instructor in any subject, and much of the novel explores this failure as a slow burn. In an episode of the podcast *Witch, Please* (2.07), Hannah McGregor and Marcelle Kosman note that *Carry On* refuses any

type of narrative closure. Baz's mother—Watford's former chancellor—tries to send him a message from beyond the grave, but it's never quite delivered. The Mage also dies before he can reveal to Simon that he is, in fact, Simon's father (a fact which might help Simon process his own trauma). Simon's mother, Lucy, never gets to meet her son. Baz's mother never gets to see that her son has survived, even thrived, after being turned into a vampire. McGregor argues that “we never get the satisfaction of seeing a character fully understand anything” in the novel, given the splintered narrative perspectives. The result is both a queer failure (to paraphrase Halberstam), but also, I'd argue, a peculiarly *medieval* failure. In the early medieval context, you never “fully understand anything” in a fallen world, because humans lack a divine perspective.

In that sense, there is something elegiac about *Carry On*. Old English elegies are full of mourning and inarticulate sadness, because their speakers often lack any sort of Biblical instruction or reassurance. They are *anhaga*, “wretched exiles,” wandering down dark paths, at the mercy of wolves in the margins. In early medieval literature, sadness and confusion are conditions of life, rather than symptoms to be treated. The seafarer has only birds as his silent companions; the wanderer mourns a world already gone, while unable to see what will come. Through its refusal of narrative closure, Rowell's novel is, perhaps, being *more medieval* in its conversation about trauma. We carry on—we are not cured. In *Brilliant Imperfection*, Eli Clare has argued against cure-based narratives within disability studies: “At the centre of cure lies eradication...[it] arrives in many different guises, connected to elimination and erasure in a variety of configurations” (26). This is not to say that medieval mourning is somehow more reasonable than therapy, but that it might be *a kind of therapy*. Simon and Baz must live with their failures—live in a sad world—while finding ways to make that living tender, enduring.

Baz sums this up when he delivers a Gothic speech to his mother's bones, which lie in Watford's medieval catacombs:

You came back, and I missed you. And then I did the thing you wanted me to do, so you probably won't ever come back again...[But]—I just wanted to tell you that I'm going to carry on. As I am. No matter how much I think about it, I don't think there's any scenario where you'd want me—where you'd *allow* me—to go on like this (510)

Simon never hears this speech, which might tell him so much about Baz—instead, he gets the short version, which is Baz's gently teasing: "Carry on, Simon," at the end of the novel. The full speech, however, is vital to understanding Rowell's project. Baz and Simon cannot understand each other, yet they fall in love and form a kin group with Penelope. Baz understands that his mother—whose flame-scarred hands touched him gently as a child—would kill him if she knew he'd become a vampire. Simon claims that there are no "magickal orphans," but that's precisely what he is. Baz chooses to "go on like this," in spite of having no evidence that this will be a viable, bearable life. Both characters reshape their worlds by imagining futures that should not exist. In a medieval sense, what they both envision is a kind of mercy—an access to love and survival that must exist in spite of all evidence to the contrary. In this way, I'd argue, the phrase "carry on" becomes a kind of medieval riddle that haunts Rowell's novel from beginning to end.

This begs a question: does the pleasure of the riddle come from solving it, or *not* solving it? Like magic, riddles are both pedagogical and fundamentally unknowable. We fail to solve them, and this queer failure is what makes them matter, because not knowing things is one of our

first and most continuous lessons. “Carry on” functions much like the curious refrain in the Old English poem “Deor”: *Þæs ofereode / þisses swa mæg* [L13-14]. The phrase can be translated as “this, too, shall pass,” or “that passed over, so this may [too].” The key word is the subjunctive phrase *swa mæg*, which locks the refrain in a sense of indeterminacy. We don’t know if the dark thing is going to pass over—it *might*. Presumably, we must carry on as if it will. *Deor* is a riddle in itself, because so few Anglo-Saxon poems have refrains at all. Why this one? What is the true obstacle that we must, or might, endure? I’ve seen medievalists with this phrase tattooed on their bodies, in a beautiful display of solidarity in ambiguity. Carrying on as a medievalist in an academic system that devalues premodern knowledge; carrying on as a teacher under changing governments which are increasingly hostile or apathetic towards universities.

Carry On gives us a final scene of Simon and Baz moving in with each other. Simon now has a cumbersome tail, and Baz has certainly been traumatized, but they’re still able to form a relationship. Penelope remains in the picture, and everyone moves forward, in spite of the fact that Watford has imploded. Simon literally kills the dean of his school, but the school continues, under a new administration. Both Simon and Baz remain tricky, sad, and complex, without ever fully dismantling their anxieties. Magic doesn’t relieve them of their feelings, though it does connect them with wild and ineffable power: what Tolkien calls “joy as poignant as grief.” *Carry On* deconstructs the wizard-school narrative by producing characters who actually destroy their alma mater. But this is all part of the process, as they become adult wizards who critique the rules they learned, and the classes they took. Their failures suggest a path for queer readers who might not feel chosen, or worthy of saving the world. Simon carries on through a world of storms and missed connections, and “cruises utopia,” to paraphrase Jose Esteban Muñoz—invoking a queer horizon that’s both modern and medieval.