

Queer Medievalist Markets and the Fantasy of the Convention Space

Anyone who's ever watched *Game of Thrones* or read a fantasy novel has encountered the scene of the medieval market, where a bewildering array of materials combine to create a wild sensorium that may or may not have been historically accurate. This discussion will focus on the fantasy convention circuit as a kind of medievalist marketplace, where medieval ideas and textures combine to create a fraught and fascinating queer present. I'll address two contemporary YA novels that involve medievalist and fantasy-themed conventions: Jen Wilde's *Queens of Geek*, and Britta Lundin's *Ship It*. Both of these novels feature teen protagonists who experience conventions through a lens of anxiety, while at the same time finding queer and neuro-divergent communities within the convention space. The main characters in these novels are working to shape inclusive fandom, and their fan texts involve medievalist elements that we see echoed in broader convention spaces as a whole. These characters take medievalist symbols—like demons and warrior queens—and update them for a contemporary teen audience. They also exploit medievalism to its queerest potential, by drawing upon what Carolyn Dinshaw calls “amateur temporality”—a queer sense of asynchronous medieval time that blurs casual play with professional understandings of the era.

Medievalism as a concept deals with how medieval historical and literary material gets incorporated within contemporary stories, from the sex and violence of *Game of Thrones* to highly-researched novels by Elizabeth Chadwick and Bernard Cornwell. Kevin and Brent Moberly offer a flexible definition of the term medievalism: “Although the imagined worlds of popular medievalism are not, as many scholars have pointed out, the ‘real Middle Ages,’ they are nevertheless also ‘not *not*’ the real Middle Ages” (174). A lot of what I teach is not *not* the real

Middle Ages. In *Mass Market Medieval*, David Marshall paints a picture of himself immersed in medieval kitsch: “I can sit on a wooden monks’ bench in my living room decorated with faux-ruined medieval arches and tapestries...while I watch a documentary about knights and tournaments” (6). He could just as easily be describing a fantasy convention space, where blacksmiths and taco trucks operate side by side. I want to think of the medievalist market—like its actual historical counterpart, the medieval market—as a space of excess and embodiment. We’re going to talk about demons in love, *Supernatural*, fanfiction, neurodiversity, and evil queens. Sorry. Not sorry.

Medieval markets were both chaotic and controlled systems. As trade routes and populations exploded in the thirteenth century and beyond, marketplaces were increasingly diverse, and they often defied legal attempts to contain them. Refusing to stay within their bounds, these marketplaces were loud, sensate, formless, even as civic regulations attempted to hammer them into shape. Butchers might feature a boar’s head on a stake, buzzing with flies, while bakers placed their shiniest loaves in display spaces. Some of these strategies are echoed in the chaos of modern convention spaces. Lincoln Geraghty, in his 2015 assessment of Comic-Con, notes that “[the] convention spills out into the city streets and other public and private buildings. Fans occupy more places and create more spaces for their activities and practices than the industry can define and control” (78). When I attended Chicago’s Comic-Con in 2015, the bounds of the market were in constant flux. I saw children asleep in prams; lone convention-goers, leaning against temporary cubicles as they consulted maps and itineraries; friends sitting on the carpet, sharing nachos, as a blacksmith demonstrated a long-sword nearby. I could only imagine how many people were hooking up. Everywhere, I could see what Daniel Kine describes as a “spectrum of participatory neomedievalisms” (86).

I'll move now to talking about *Ship It* as convention literature with a few medievalist twists. Lundin's 2018 book was hotly anticipated: a novel about queer fandom, by a queer writer who'd made the show *Riverdale* a breakout success. At first glance, this doesn't seem like a novel that deals with any medieval material. It's positioned as something thoroughly contemporary, with its teen protagonist—Claire—standing in for the voice of current fanfic writers. But Claire's beloved show, the fictional *Demonheart*, is as visibly medievalist as *Supernatural* (the show upon which it was transparently based). Both shows focus on demons and the demi-humans that hunt them. *Buffy* was one of the first programs to blur these lines, by presenting a “slayer” who had the habit of developing significant relationships with vampires. *Demonheart* does much the same thing, by presenting a relationship between Smokey and Heart—the hunter and the demon. Claire is pushing for Smokey and Heart to kiss in an upcoming episode, which would cement her pairing of them as canon.

By mirroring *Supernatural*, Lundin is able to critique issues of “queer-baiting” around the show (and the *Demonheart* panel in the book seems to directly echo a 2013 *Supernatural* panel at JerseyCon, during which actor Jensen Ackles dismissed a fan who was trying to discuss bisexuality in the show) Michael McDermott defines queer-baiting as “deliberate encoding of subtextual homoeroticism...without the intention of ever ‘following through’” (133-34). Lundin's story builds off controversy around *Supernatural* fans who have called out the showrunners for this very practice. Her novel takes us into the fictional world of *Demonheart*, while also giving us two competing human perspectives on the show. Claire is anxious, questioning, and isolated, while the second POV belongs to an actor named Forest who's conflicted about his own masculinity. Forest plays the demon-hunter on the fictional show, and Claire somewhat uncharitably calls him “a battle axe with a haircut.” Their roles collide when

Claire calls out the creators of *Demonheart* for queer-baiting their audience, which results—astonishingly—in the show’s publicist adding Claire to the convention circuit as a kind of ethical fandom representative. This should be every fan’s dream, but for Claire and Forest, it becomes a nightmare of competing identities.

Claire is certain that the demon Heart can be saved, and that Smokey is the one to save him. But aren’t demons supposed to be evil? Not necessarily. Medieval literature presents a variety of “neutral” demons, as well as in-between demons (like Merlin himself), who don’t have a defined place on earth or in heaven. In his twelfth-century *Dialogue of Miracles*, Caesarius of Heisterbach mentions “a demon who disguised himself as a handsome young man. In this guise, the demon offered to work as a servant for [a] Christian knight.” When the demon was exposed and asked why they’d decided to work for a human, they responded: “[It] it the greatest consolation for me to be among the sons of men” (qtd. in Newman 103-4). Like Smokey, this demon is neither good nor evil, but rather a neutral angel looking for consolation among humankind. There was a whole sly taxonomy of minor demons and devils that tended to proliferate, both in religious literature and the more sensational romance tradition (for example, Bertilak the Green Knight, whose exact nature remains mossy and obscure. In this way, Lundin is drawing upon an old medieval narrative of demonic temptation, while updating the struggle by setting it within the context of a fantasy convention.

A turning point occurs after Claire discovers one of the medievalist props from the show: A D&D-style “bowl of holding” (84). Claire examines the nonsense symbols carved into the bowl, which is plastic, rather than iron, as it had appeared on-screen. She thinks about how the bowl was a ritual tool in the show, full of mystery, somehow totally separate from this cheap prop in her hands. *Demon Heart* runs on medievalist images—particularly of recuperation—but

under the harsh convention lights, it turns out to be a contemporary surface without much depth. Claire spends much of the novel trying to make the show matter, especially for queer viewers. In the end, the show's viewer admits to queer-baiting with a tidy capitalist justification: “[We had to]. Otherwise you would never have loved our show” (274). The showrunners of *Game of Thrones* could have easily said something similar—it was a show in many ways founded on a queer idea of the middle ages that it could never properly deliver. But for Claire, the medievalist potential in her fandom *does* become a redemptive force. In particular, she explores her own sexuality by dating the character Tess, who's known for producing medievalist fan art from the show. In this way, a queer teen from Nebraska finds love through her fan loyalty to a medieval demon. Love wins.

My second example of convention fiction, with a medievalist twist, is Jen Wilde's *Queens of Geek*. This was published in 2017 by Swoon Reads, whose titles often include queer romance (Claire Kann's 2018 *Let's Talk About Love*, for instance, has an ace protagonist). Wilde's book focuses on two friends negotiating a convention space: Taylor is on the spectrum, and highly invested in a medievalist fandom (*Queen Firestone*), while Charlie is bisexual and promoting her first movie. The author is on the spectrum herself (she mentions this in a 2017 *Bustle* interview), and she writes in a clear way about Taylor managing her own anxiety. In the first few pages, Taylor says: “My shoulders tense and my palms start to get clammy. The thought of spending the next three days in lines with hundreds of people makes me break into a nervous sweat” (3). I had a similar experience at Chicago's Comic-Con. I was surrounded by strangers in bright costumes, flashing media, loud noises, and a space full of twisting corridors. Like Taylor, I found myself on display, having to mask any sort of anxiety in order to connect with people who were probably anxious in their own ways. *Ship It* presents the convention as a

space for debate and analysis, while *Queens* presents it as a borderline antagonist: something both revelatory and overwhelming for Taylor. It reminds her of daily struggles with stimuli and social interaction, which make it difficult for her to access her own medievalist fan culture:

Sometimes I see people at the supermarket or somewhere else mundane, smiling and cheerfully making small talk with strangers and not looking tense or uncomfortable at all, and I just want to go up and ask them how they do it. How do they manage to do everything they need to do and go out in the world and be human without feeling the weight of it all crushing them into oblivion? (9)

How do you thrive in a fandom when communal space actually triggers your anxiety, making it impossible to participate? For Taylor, this becomes a continual balancing act, which she discusses with her Tumblr fans. The convention space is thrilling, but, like the world outside, it can be equally tough to navigate. When discussing the creator of *Queen Firestone*, Taylor says: “[Skyler Atkins] created a world I feel safe in. Let’s be real; I don’t feel safe in the real world. It’s big and scary and confuses the shit out of me sometimes. But in Everland, Queen Firestone reigns and protects her queendom...[She’s] scared, but she keeps fighting” (21-22). All we really know about Queen Firestone is that, like Harry Potter, she’s an orphan whose parents were killed by monsters. When Taylor cosplays as Queen Firestone, she feels not just “beautiful” (200), but “royal” (260). She’s accessing a long line of queens who also survived in a hostile world, from Æthelflæd to Elizabeth. Queen Modþryð, for example, memorialized in *Beowulf*, plays in the Anglo-Saxon word *mod*: meaning anything from “imperious” to a kind of heart-mind. Leslie Lockett describes the volatile sense of *mod* as “a whistling kettle,” singing its

power. Taylor steps into the role of a medievalist warrior queen whose history and competency make her feel safe. In doing so, she's taking what she needs from the medievalist fabric of her favourite series.

In spite of the overstimulation of the convention space, Taylor is energized when she gets to interact with her own fandom. The *Queen Firestone* novels are set in a medievalist world called Everland, which the convention recreates in meticulous detail. At the village market, “two little girls engage in a sword fight in front of a booth selling cosplay daggers, swords, and armor” (118). Taylor claps her hands in delight, which I read as a joyful stim. The convention space becomes a palimpsest, with the Everland market laid over the capitalist market space. Taylor is able to walk through this queer market, where she feels like a hero, instead of a commodity. She's able to repurpose what might simply be the trappings of a medieval society—daggers, armor, a queen's costume—into empowering symbols that allow her to survive in a world where she doesn't normally feel understood. Here, she's able to find living space within a fantasy world that might not be explicitly created for anxious people on the spectrum. Her interactions with the market are queer, asynchronous, sometimes stretched to what Tolkien calls “grief poignant as joy. Her rhetoric is what Melanie Yergeau describes as “neuro-queer,” in that it queers rhetorical rules. Yergeau argues that neurodiversity can be “about enriching our ideas of rhetoricity,” and goes on to state: “I want a rhetoric that tics, a rhetoric that stims...[a] rhetoric that averts eye contact” (21; 31). Taylor does all of these things, and her medievalist fandom is often what propels her into the social world.

One of the most significant moments in the novel occurs at the convention's marketplace, when she meets Josie, a graphic novelist who is also on the spectrum. Josie asks: “Are you an Aspie girl too?” Taylor replies: “Yes. I've never met another Aspie girl before...I mean, that I

know of. I guess I probably have, just not another girl who *knew* she was on the spectrum” (120). The scene of two women on the spectrum, interacting in fiction, is so rare that I can recall only a few examples. Shows like *Community* occasionally have the character Abed interact with someone who shares his broadly-imagined autistic traits, but there’s never a sense of...well...*community*. What Taylor finds here is a queer medieval marketplace *as community*. Her conversation with Josie is ultimately more transformative than her romance at the end of the novel, or even her discovery of acceptance within the wider convention space itself. In this scene, Taylor sees herself reflected in another person for the first time. It’s overwhelming. They both tumble through the conversation, and Taylor reiterates how often she feels weak in the real world. Josie’s response is succinct and instructive:

You are not weak. People like us...[We’re] brave. We’re the ones who get up and face our worst fears every day. We keep fighting...[Things] that most people consider to be normal, daily parts of life are the very things we fear and struggle with the most, and yet here we are, moving forward anyway” (123).

These characters meet in a faux “market,” which is ostensibly designed to sell cosplay daggers. Instead, they experience a moment of community and healing, surrounded by the medieval elements of their own fandom. Taylor reweaves what could be the most cynical aspects of the convention space into something real and welcoming, where she can belong and feel like a warrior queen and peaceweaver at the same time.

These markets and marketplaces—both the capitalist energy of fantasy culture, and the queer spaces which it creates—have alternately held me, frustrated me, and erased me as a fan. I

grew up in these marketplaces. I grew up in malls and bookstores and ad-hoc spaces where the bright covers of fantasy novels were both an escape and a financial consideration (how could I ever own all of the *Dragonlance* books, which weren't available in the library?) I've seen these markets replicated at conventions and academic conferences, where capital shapes us, even as we carve out queer spaces within halls and hotel "break-out" rooms. We break out. We make a mess. We den in the ruins of a mass-market fantasy industry that's been shifting since the eighties—thanks to the work of feminist urban fantasy authors—from epic quests to more subtle stories of liberation.

Markets remain a fantasy space where anything can happen. Think of the patchwork future markets in *Firefly*, where Kaylee—a cyber blacksmith, really—finds a medievalist dress that is a confection of pink ruffles. Or DiagonAlley, where even Neville Longbottom finds a wand that will one day foster his particular kind of fractured magic. The smithy at Winterfell, which gives Arya her needle. Or the book room at the International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, where shy scholars can eat doughnuts while searching for their most obscure special interests. Lots of things can be joyful markets: dancefloors, kitchens, screens, and poems. Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, where merchants speak in what Jonathan Hsy calls a "polyglot" of languages. A classroom can be a market in the queerest sense—not a de-humanizing transaction, but a clatter of dialectics, a polyphony of minds and genders. The characters in both these YA novels embrace a medievalist fandom because it seems to represent a world distant from their own. But in the end, they encounter community, safety, and power within these marketplaces—what scholar Elise Vist calls "a reparative playground." The medieval remains strikingly relevant within these contemporary YA narratives, which celebrate geeks, queens, and brilliantly queer women.