Permission for Brutality

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Medievalism in comics is evergreen: from realism to fantasy, it provides an excellent foundation for artists and writers to express their vision. In its broadest sense, this paper looks at the question of how history can be used to legitimise ideology. In a more focused frame, this study considers how medievalism, or a warped interpretation of the medieval period, is mobilised in contemporary popular comics to legitimise brutality—characterised by excessive, one-sided aggression against a victim—and a hostile environment for female and queer characters. Medievalist simulacra (that is, content or units of content which the author presents as being authentic to the time period regardless of provable authenticity) often appear in comics with the intention of adding historicity to the work, and are relatively straightforward to identify as recognisable tropes. This paper will thus look at instances of simulacra, interrogate how these correspond to the presentation of historical authenticity in five comic series (*Rat Queens*,[1] *Heathen*,[2] *1062: Witch Hunter Angela*,[3] *Northlanders*,[4] and *Black Road*[5]) and analyse how the emphasis on medieval historicity, measured through the quantified presence of simulacra, correlates with representations of gender, sexuality, and concrete manifestations of brutality. Though medievalist fantasy opens the doors wide to all depictions of positive female and queer representation, what is the cost of concurring that these qualities are limited to the context of fantasy, when medieval research supports the idea that an "authentic" Middle Ages has space for this type of representation as well?

Lauryn Mayer defines medievalist simulacra as the confrontation with hyperreality,[6] wherein the 'product of disparate elements' creates a new symbol or image—a hyperreal castle, witch, or princess—which 'cannot be defined in relation to a paradigm',[7] the result being a simulacrum that never 'hides the truth—it is the truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true'.[8] The simulacrum is often mistaken for authentic medieval elements, and that authenticity lends authority to the text. William Woods cautions that what the public considers "typical of medieval life" is 'the primary basis of cinematic medievalism—the way modern viewers conceive the

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[1] Kurtis J. Wiebe, Roc Upchurch, and Ed Brisson, *Rat Queens: Volume One: Sass and Sorcery*, ed. by Laura Tavishati (Berkeley: Image Comics, 2015).

[2] Natasha Alterici, *Heathen: Vol. 1* (Bethesda and Missoula: Vault, 2017). Previous edition published January 2016, by Literati Press

[3] Marguerite Bennett, Stephanie Hans, et al., *1062: Witch Hunter Angela* (Scott: Marvel Worldwide Inc., 2016).

[4] Brian Wood, Dean Ormston, et al., *Northlanders: Book 1—'The Anglo-Saxon Saga'* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2016).

[5] Brian Wood, Gary Brown, et al., *Black Road: Volume One—'The Holy North'* (Berkley: Image Comics, 2016).

[6] See Lauren S. Mayer, 'Simulacrum', in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. by Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), pp. 223–30 (p. 225).

[7] Umberto Eco and William Weaver, 'The Return of the Middle Ages.', in *Travels in Hyperreality Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 2002), pp. 59–85 (p. 44).

[8] Jean Baudrillard, 'The Precession of Simulacra', in *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. by Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), pp. 1–42 (p. 1).

Middle Ages',[9] even though what is perceived as authentic is actually generated by modern audiences as recognisable 'stock medievalism', as coined by Bruce Holsinger, and defined by Pam Clements in her summary on medievalism and authority.[10] Examples of stock medievalism can include lovely maidens locked away in towers (possibly guarded by dragons); fat, jolly friars embodied in characters such as Friar Tuck from the modern adaptations of the Robin Hood legend; or wicked hags living in the forest, possibly selling potions to villagers or stealing children to eat. These appear completely natural within a medievalist context, despite the fact that such simulacra are more the result of twentieth century media conflations than ones grounded in historic evidence (thus William Woods's specification of "cinematic medievalism" as a progression distinct from Victorian medievalism). This article will be primarily concerned with medievalist character tropes—such as nuns, witches, pagan priestesses, or medievalist female characters in general— insofar as they have been constructed as simulacra, and how they are placed in the action of the story, specifically regarding violence.

Actions can also constitute simulacra. Nickolas Haydock identifies the link between the medievalist simulacra of action with the connotation of the medieval with extremes 'beyond modern limits', in that the term *medieval* 'refers to that which is abjectly or shockingly outside the legal and customary constraints of post-Enlightenment civilization', listing racism, homophobia and rape as examples of this.[11] I would like to explore the idea of brutality as an action which is unique and separate from violence, and clarify how this can be considered a medievalist simulacrum in the context of these comics.

The conceptualisation of violence in the Middle Ages differs from how violence is conceptualised today, and is moreover set apart from how medieval violence is imagined in contemporary culture. To provide an example of a medieval understanding of violence, Hannah Skoda approaches the issue semantically, identifying two separate terms to designate what people of the thirteenth and fourteenth century considered different types of physical violence. Skoda translates *violentia* as 'disordering brutality' in today's parlance. The separate concept of *vis* identifies the use of force in an act of justice, 'to reinforce social order'.[12] While Skoda demonstrates that there are different types of violence, and that they were identified with different terms in the Middle Ages, she uses the words "brutality" and "violence" interchangeably when equating the Latin terms to their modern understandings.

In a categorisation of contemporary concepts of violence, Siniša Malešević set apart the word "brutality" to denote the extreme, one-sided violence which people associate with the Middle Ages today, citing its connotations with instruments of torture. Malešević states that medieval brutality

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[9] William Woods, 'Authenticating Realism', in *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, ed. by Martha Driver and Sid Ray (Jefferson: McFarland, 2004), pp. 34–52 (p. 47).
[10] Pam Clements, 'Authenticity', in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, pp. 19-26 (p. 24).
[11] Nickolas Haydock, *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2008), p. 8.
[12] Hannah Skoda, *Medieval Violence: Physical Brutality in Northern France, 1270-1330* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 3.

'has become a phrase identified with gruesome forms of violence and as such is commonly used to denounce one's opponents', indicating the injustice of this type of violence and thus meriting a unique term.[13] Here I will use the term "brutality" to designate the type of violence (*violentia*) which is reliant on being validated by a medievalist context: for example, a lovely maiden who is sacrificed to a threatening dragon for the sake of motivating her lover to become a knight. I will allow the modern term "violence" to stand for that medieval term *vis*, that is, violence committed on basis of a fair fight or to maintain some sort of socio-political order: for example, two witches have a magical duel to decide territory boundaries of the enchanted forest. The action of medievalist brutality is defined by Haydock as 'a species of violence that even in a hyper-violent film cannot be shown or even clearly described', a sort of extreme action that happens in comics in the gutter, between frames, often with references to it or with (maximally) seconds of the action clearly depicted in the illustration.[14]

The simulacrum of brutality is measured in this study by examining how the acts of violence are constructed, whom they are directed against, and how often, thus identifying cases of brutality separately from violence in general. How does the type of violence correspond to the level of historical accuracy advertised by the book? I will then compare the ratio of one-sided brutality and fair-fight violence to the larger context of the presentation and frequency of non-hegemonic characters. This results in reportable trends regarding the overall ideology of a comic book in context of its representation of violence and victims. The way that comics treat the simulacrum of brutality as a means to present historic authenticity appears to pivot, visually, on the illustration of brutality against female characters. In this manner, increased brutality as a form of historicity also corresponds with other aspects of the presentation of female characters, including the increased erasure of queer characters.

In a bloody action sequence in comics, if there is violence, there is a winner (a war, a chivalric duel, a raid). When there is brutality, one side is helplessly struck down and there is no winner at all. *Rat Queens, Heathen, 1062: Witch Hunter Angela, Northlanders,* and *Black Road* were selected for their commercial popularity and their medievalist story worlds, and are here analysed for their use of brutality and violence and how these factors correlate to the presentation of characters and the façade of historic authenticity. Only the first collected volume of each series will be considered, for the sake of limiting this study to the initial authorial conception of the comics, and for sake of length. These comics were selected because of their commercial success and overall positive critical acclaim, and their release dates all fall within a close range of each other (between the years 2015 and 2017). All the comics in this study (like most of the industry) boast high quantities of action and primarily violent action, but my essay is concerned with the context through which brutality is included and how it is portrayed.

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[13] Siniša Malešević, *The Rise of Organised Brutality: A Historical Sociology of Violence* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 1.
[14] Haydock, p. 9.

There are no magical beings, witches, nuns, or Pagan priestesses in *Black Road* or *Northlanders*. Nuns or Pagan spiritual women could have been included without disturbing the posture of historicity taken by these comics; there are monks and priests represented in the comics, and males consult an elder who gives mythical Pagan answers to real life concerns.[15] Their female counterparts are, however, absent. On the other hand, all the *Rat Queens*'s protagonists are fantastical or capable of magic: Betty is a humanoid creature called a smidgen, Dee is a necromancer from the cult of N'rygoth, Violet is a dwarf, and Hannah is an elvish sorceress of dark magic. Together they form a sisterhood, not unlike a witches' coven or a convent, in the form of an adventuring band of mercenaries for hire. In *Heathen*, the hero Aydis communicates directly with not only the Valkyries (an inherently mythical female collective), but also with Pagan goddesses like Freya. Witches appear in *Heathen* and are actively showcased and defended in the comic.[16] In *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, both Angela and Serah, the witch-hunting heroes, are part of the same convent (though the nuns engage in fencing practice rather than prayer). The convent and the nuns themselves are partly magical in their vocation and in their fighting competencies, which allow them to add curses and special senses to their armoury. After fantastical adventures which include conversing with ghosts and talking animals, the titular character in *1602* becomes an arch-witch: a type of unnameable, magical Pagan deity of the forest, 'The Enchantress'. In comics with fantastical, magical or monastic women, male counterparts are included with equivalent representation.

The contextualisation of these characters, necessitated by the medievalist context, sets them into monastic or semi-monastic sisterhoods, be that convents, covens, or bands of warriors. In the comics which allow magical female characters or nuns these types of protagonists appear in abundance, in female collectives which easily help the comics pass the Bechdel-Wallace Test (a simple, orienting rubric for identifying if a piece of media depicts female characters in a sexist way or if it is too reliant on stereotyped gender roles and tokenism).[17]

In contrast, in the one short story featuring a set of three female protagonists, titled 'The Shield Maidens' in *Northlanders*,[18] the women are not part of a coven, convent, or sisterhood; they are simply from the same village. Bound together by an emergency, they talk about their husbands (or the lack of a husband) and they draw their strength and ideas from the men of their lives, explaining that: 'She spoke of tactics, of defence. Her husband is—was—a lord of war and of the settlement'.[19] Their fears are of the men that may rape them, or worse, a future without men: 'You talk of our future. What future is there without men?'[20] This is followed up by assurance that they will manage to survive without men, but even the treasure that supports them financially is the

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[15] Wood, Ormston, et. al., p. 171.
[16] Alterici, pp. 85–94.
[17] See Alison Bechdel, *Dykes to Watch Out For #1* (Ithica: Firebrand Books, 1986), p. 22. Bechdel, an American cartoonist, credits Liz Wallace as a co-author of the test.
[18] Wood, Ormston, et al., pp. 57–104.
[19] Ibid., p. 72.
[20] Ibid., p. 74.

property of one husband. *Black Road* does not pause to put two female characters within distance of each other to have a conversation—some female characters are armed and presented as dangerous, but they are isolated.

These female collectives fight with magic, wit, and strength, all tailored to the medievalist context of dark magic, swords, axes, and bows. The opponents on the other side of the battlefield are also female, also magical. This works well in a medievalist setting, wherein the combatant parties are in sisterhoods, possessing medieval fantasy weapons and able to produce magic which is either demonic or miraculous.[21] According to Maureen Moran, hagiographic texts about saints and martyrs helped nineteenth-century readers accept the duality of gender roles encompassed by the women who were depicted as lovely and chaste (for Victorian societal norms) yet engaged in activity, including fighting or violence, outside the sphere of domestic life.[22] This era also saw the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood codify a visual language for medievalist fantasy, in particular female subjects. Jeffrey Brown suggests that the fantastical reimaginations of history function as a type of wish fulfilment; in the case of fantasy about nuns in a convent or witches in a coven, this can be seen in the rejection of claustration and depicting both saints and witches fully emancipated.[23]

The correlations between fantasy and the presence of the simulacrum of medieval brutality and violence are significant. It is true that each unique appearance of brutality in the text is significant in itself, but for the sake of demonstrating the full extent of the prevalence of brutality in relation to the female characters, and its concurrent correlation with other trends in the depiction of female character, I will summarise the appearance of instances of brutality in opposition to violence. This will first be done quantitatively before elaborating on this phenomenon qualitatively. The stark contrast between the comics regarding the sheer volume of brutality in relation to violence clearly illuminates trends in the correlation between historicity and the simulacra of brutality.

First, considering the depiction of *vis,* reduced to a percentage of pages dedicated to violence, *Rat Queens* features the most violence per page at 71%, mostly due to a twenty-page battle, but very little brutality, in line with the quantity of brutality in the other female-led comics (around 5% if we include two pages of mercilessly beating The Queens's helpless training equipment). *1062: Witch Hunter Angela* features just around 19% violent content, revolving around Angela fighting the Witchbreed and Faustian monsters who she is assigned to "hunt", and who constitute quite a fair match in terms of strength. Brutality emerges in one storyline wherein a young Witchbreed girl, Anne Marie, tries to gain more power through a deal with the villain of the story, The Enchantress, and ends up being overpowered and killed. Her body is respectfully wrapped and buried, and her death is not sexualised as female deaths in series like *Black Road* and *Northlanders* are, but I will count it here as brutality in the sense that Anne Marie was not equal to her opponent,

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[21] For more on this point, see Marie Pagliarini, '"And the Word Was Made Flesh": Divining the Female Body in Nineteenth Century American and Catholic Culture', *Religion and American Culture*, 17(2) (2007), 213–45 (p. 225).

[22] Maureen Moran, 'The Art of Looking Dangerously: Victorian Images of Martyrdom', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32(2) (2004), 475–93.

[23] Jeffrey A. Brown, 'Gender and the Action Heroine: Hardbodies and the "Point of No Return"', *Cinema Journal*, 35(3) (1996), 52–71 (p. 52).

and the death is framed as an avoidable tragedy, taking up 2% of the overall content of the book. *Heathen* comprises only 5% of violent material overall, and one page of that is simply a retelling of Beowulf's fight with the monster Grendel. There is no brutality to be found in *Heathen*.

Black Road is roughly the same length as the previous three comics, but features a 12% content of violence (mostly battle scenes or memories of battle scenes) while 10% of the comic is brutality. Many of the scenes of brutality from this comic are tied to the depiction of Christian missionaries in the North killing Pagans, or scenes of intercommunal acts of revenge on innocent villagers. These qualify as brutality rather than political or justice-oriented violence because, though they have socio-political elements (religious conversion, one warlike community retaliating against another), the authors have highlighted the absolute helplessness of the victimised party in these events. The Pagans are collectively immolated in a bound and kneeling position; the village is attacked while all are asleep. Brutality also manifests in unbridled, one-sided violent excess against an inactive figure—for example the body of a dead man hacked at in fury for two pages—and an unarmed priest skewered with swords. The female victims of brutality are also romanticised, and sexualised, for the benefit of the protagonist, as in the death of the protagonist's wife in both *Black Road* and *Northlanders*.

Northlanders, though almost three times longer than any of the other comics, contains neither the highest percentage of violence (17% versus the 71% of *Rat Queens*) nor the most brutality. However, it does have the greatest number of individual depictions of violence: twenty-eight separate instances of violence, while *Rat Queens* features five. *Northlanders* has less occurrences of brutality than *Black Road*, at 9%, but is however qualitatively different, including child abuse, implied rape, and a lot of sexualised violence towards female characters, including sensual and beautified female corpses. 'Rape is necessary to set up a dramatic tension among the characters, as Nickie Philips frames the popular legitimatisation of rape in fiction; however, the characters in *Rat Queens*—Aydis, Angela and Serah—all successfully carry the plot without being driven by tensions caused by rape.[24] When speaking about his research on the Vikings, *Northlanders* creator Brian Wood gushed: 'And those women? Fierce "shield maidens" who would pick up swords and fight the enemy when the men had fallen—how cool is that?'[25] And yet these women, despite his own claims that their inclusion would be historically accurate, are largely absent in his writing.

None of the female-led fantasy stories include the death of a female character, or a male character for that matter, wherein the corpse is presented visually in a sexualised manner. Characters which are killed are given fleshed out identities; they are not beautiful corpses which litter the tragic past of the lead character to validate the violence or rage of that character, as is the case with *Northlanders* and *Black Road* and the relationships that the two protagonists have with their deceased wives. For example, at the time of her killing, Thora (in *Northlanders*) is presented with

[24] Nickie Philips, *Beyond Blurred Lines: Rape Culture in Popular Media* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), p. 129.
[25] Brian Wood, 'Y1K PARANOIA: Brian Wood Talks "Northlanders"', para. 12. <https://www.cbr.com/y1k-paranoia-brian-wood-talks-northlanders/>. [Accessed 1 May 2020].

her breasts almost falling out of her torn clothes, long blonde hair flowing dramatically in the wind, a perfectly red pouted mouth, one eye gouged out, and covered in cuts and bruises; in death, her posture is arranged to look like classical painting of a reclined semi-nude.[26] Sven, the hero, kills her as a form of assisted suicide, and considers it a mercy despite having been presented with many opportunities to help her throughout the earlier part of the story: he has been using her for sex and information, and explicitly refused to help her escape her abusers when she begged. The comic does not explore these questions. The reader is confronted with the visual urgency of the corpse, sex in the form of a battered woman, the depiction of which is another modern trope, as argued by Elisabeth Bronfen.[27] The dead woman becomes only prop or a plot device within a male character's story.

The aesthetic depiction of brutality against characters centres around the female characters in the Scandinavian themed comics *Northlanders* and *Black Road,* wherein the female characters, with the exception of Julia (in *Black Road*), are not depicted engaging in violence. However, Carol Clover describes gender and gender roles in the Norse mind as being less tied to biological sex and more related to the performance of weakness or power, which could be acted by any person arising from the same fundamental base of the 'one-sex model' and which favoured a masculine default (not biologically male, but characterised by the attributes of being powerful and strong).[28] This was a system wherein 'the strong woman was not inhibited by a theoretical ceiling above which she could not rise and the weak man not protected by a theoretical floor below which he could not fall'; ultimately, 'the potential for sexual overlap in the social hierarchy was always present'.[29] As a historical fact, brutality, conflated with a weak individual who becomes a victim of extreme aggression, would be inherently feminine though not limited to sex—a biological woman could engage in violence, be considered masculine, and moreover be regarded positively for her actions.

To this point, the violence demonstrated in *Rat Queens* is exaggerated almost to a point beyond the equality of medievalist blood lust: the heroic protagonists are female or queer, and belligerent. So are their equally bellicose female foes. As far as violence against female characters go, it is always fair fight, and the female body is only abused when an angry orc exclaims mid-battle: 'you put an arrow in my favourite boob, fuckwit!'[30] Otherwise very low on brutality, the volume ends salaciously with the kidnapping and bondage of a female antagonist, who is bound to the floor, yet keeps her toes delicately pointed like a pin-up girl.[31] If considering stringent historic accuracy, this would not be considered disruptive of female biological expectations, but rather a praise-worthy shedding of weakness. However, this is unusual and progressive in comics, while the type brutality

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[26] Wood, Ormston, et al., pp. 264–65.
[27] See Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (1st digital, on-demand ed.) (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006).
[28] Carol J. Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Speculum*, 68(2) (1993), 363–87 (p. 379).
[29] Ibid., p. 380.
[30] Wiebe, Upchurch, and Brisson, p. 40.
[31] Ibid., p. 124.

found in *Northlanders*, directed towards passive female characters, is so common that it merited an ongoing list of occurrences in the Women in Refrigerators webpage,[32] started by comic book created Gail Simone, who rehabilitated the medievalist character Red Sonja with a 2014 reboot which removed her rape and erasure, or 'fridging'.[33] The factor which sets the medievalist comics apart from violent comics at large is that the corresponding intention of historicity creates a context wherein the simulacrum of brutality is not only normal but considered necessary to achieve authenticity.

The presence of brutality and violence over a literary spectrum which spans both historicity and fantasy has other corollaries in the representation of queer characters, almost as equally contrasting as the previous example of the simulacrum of brutality. *Rat Queens*, *Heathen*, and *1062* all feature queer characters, their heroism and love, beyond simple tokenism. Betty, of *Rat Queens*, pursues Faeyri, and their courtship is explored over six pages, more than any other romance storyline in the comic.[34] In *Heathen*, Aydis is openly queer, and the writing very strongly advocates her visibility. Witch hunters Angela and Serah are in a committed relationship with each other, both professionally and domestically, and carry on witty flirtations throughout the story; the arc of the plot revolves around their love and their fighting for each other. Perhaps medievalism opens the doors to convents, covens, and female collectives, and from this point it is easier to write in queer love stories, but in these comics the presence of queer characters is tied up in contemporary heteronormative ideology as well.

Betty's pursuit of Faeyri is highlighted as they navigate respectful dating practices together, demonstrating this for the reader. Betty makes a grand gesture, showing up at Faeryi's door with a bouquet of roses and an apology.[35] The two have a candid conversation, Faeryi says plainly that she cannot deal with the 'drama' of Betty's friend group, and Betty gracefully accepts this and departs, respecting Faeryi's wishes without argument or attempts at coercion. They end up together in the end, but the relationship is notably calm and respectful, and the writers allow enough space for this to be demonstrated without feeling forced. Angela and Serah (in *1602*) also have a warm, loving, and respectful relationship. Aydis (in *Heathen*), the youngest of the female protagonists, only manages to get as far as kissing a girl—and later the goddess Freya[36]—but queer relationships are embraced in the Godlands under the leadership of Freya, and Aydis makes it her mission to literally 'end the oppressive reign of the God-King Odin'.[37] The comics which position themselves as being historic are completely devoid of any characters which do not perform queer storylines.

In the absence of a fantasy setting and fantastical queer characters, realist and pseudo-historic comics do not fill this lacuna with realistic queer characters drawn from history. This despite gender and sexuality in the Middle Ages manifesting differently than it is understood now, and

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[32] 'Front Page', *Women in Refrigerators*, 1999. <http://www.lby3.com/wir/> [accessed 1 May 2020].
[33] 'History', *Red Sonja* <http://www.redsonja.com/history/> [accessed 1 May 2020].
[34] Wiebe, Upchurch, and Brisson, pp. 16, 19, 58-60,120.
[35] Ibid., p. 59.
[36] Alterici, p. 74.
[37] Ibid., author's promotional text on the back cover.

thus there being no reason why they should be excluded in the light of "authenticity" (since many historically accurate models of alternative sexuality or performance of gender exist, as outlined above).

Ranked in order of fantastical to historical medievalism, *Rat Queens* exists in an entirely fantastical story world, while *1602: Witch Hunter Angela* intermixes historical references with elements of pure imagination, and *Heathen* positions itself historically with the fantastical elements taken from the *Laxdæla Saga*, *Beowulf*, and generic Norse mythology. *Black Road* and *Northlanders* fall near each other on this scale as they both aim to present historic authenticity in the story and enforce this through a realistic visual language which is focused on earth-tone colours, natural landscapes, historic architecture, and costumes. Wood notes the necessity of the visual to create a sense of authenticity: 'A lot of it is stylistic, the visual side of the history […]. Scary guys with swords, black boats with dragon heads on them, frozen moors, lissom Nordic women, those helmets with the eye-holes, gods of thunder, death, and sex'.[38] The exaggeration of the characters' bodies is significantly less than in mainstream super hero comics, with the one exception being the male protagonists of *Black Road* and *Northlanders*: in the former, Magnus has a the physique of a contemporary body builder but is still tied to reasonable physical limitations, and the story 'The Cross and the Hammer', in *Northlanders*, features a similar character with a slight Irish variation of his name, Magnus Mag Rodain, to match the setting.[39]

Rat Queens was conceived with the intent to both acknowledge the medievalist fantasy genre while turning it on its head. Creator Kurtis Wiebe specifically stated that he saw his role as innovative and intentional in making 'some positive changes in a quickly changing industry', also noting the emphasis on modern ideals which aim to 'embrace the diversity of the real world by representing it comic books'.[40] Though the genre is rooted in history, he saw his work as saturated with contemporary purpose. This point has not been lost on readers, with reviewer and editor for Vice Magazine Vivek Gopal summarising:

> The Queens are simultaneously annoyed and unapologetic of the trappings of their genre; agency and back story never feel forced but a logical organic extension of living in a world originally designed by white manchildren, i.e. they are done taking your shit.[41]

In this light, *Rat Queens* is doubly anachronistic in both its embrace of more playful parts of the medieval adventure story as well as playing against contemporary medievalism.

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[38] Wood, 'Y1K PARANOIA', para. 12.

[39] Wood, Ormston, et al., pp. 315–454.

[40] Kurtis Wiebe, 'Rat Queens Interview with Kurtis Wiebe', *Geek and Sundry*, 5 May 2014, para. 7. <https://geekandsundry.com/rat-queens-interview/> [accessed 1 May 2020].

[41] Vivek Gopal, 'We Reviewed "Rat Queens."', *Vice*, 2018, para. 9. <https://www.vice.com/en_in/article/zmknx3/we-reviewed-rat-queens> [accessed 11 May 2020].

Angela has been at the centre of franchise[42] which became a story of female strength, friendship, and queer love, revolving around Angela and Sera.[43] As with *Rat Queens*, the contemporary reader acknowledges the modernisation of ideology hand-in-hand with the medievalist genre. Reviewer Allen Thomas noted that '*Angela* is a great jumping-on point for anyone interested in representation, diversity and women with swords'.[44] Even more so than *Rat Queens*, *1602* is very self-critical in its historicity, as when, for instance, Serah mutters (upon observing a fantastical Pagan wedding ceremony): 'That's rather… archaic and anatomical', to which Angela replies: 'We do live in the 17th century, my love'.[45]

Though visually presented as medievalist, the history which *Heathen* positions itself against is contemporary homophobia, rather than a specific expression of medieval homophobia. The language used to talk about homosexuality is strongly referential to contemporary homophobic complaints; for example, a kiss two girls were reported to have shared is described as unnatural or as rule breaking. Although Alterici portrays homophobia as a quality of medieval society, there is no evidence that lesbians were, as a rule, subjected to exile or execution, as the comic implies. Rather, scholars suggest that attitudes towards homosexuality were more nuanced; Preben Sørenson, for one, wrote about terms which could indicate homophobic slurs, such as *ergi* or *regi* (nouns) and *argr* or *ragr* (the adjective form of *ergi*) as 'willing or inclined to play or interested in playing the female part in sexual relations with another man, unmanly, effeminate, cowardly'; however, the word *argr* is not tied to biological sex, and the primary concern of the slurs is the masculine becoming feminine.[46] Gunnora Hallakarvya summarises that 'there was nothing at all strange or shameful about a man having intercourse with another man if he was in the active or "manly" role, however the passive partner in homosexual intercourse was regarded with derision', noting that most sources which forbid homosexuality are from the Christian era, pointing to the Poetic Edda as a source of examples of flexible sexuality among the gods.[47] Even medieval Christianity offered forms of alternative sexuality regarding virginity (a quality of nuns); Jo Ann McNamara explains how 'monastic theorists tended to conceptualise a third gender, apart from the two sexually active genders, harking back to the old view that, without active sexual and

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[42] Created by Neil Gaiman and Todd MacFarlane for a medieval-themed issue of the comic book series *Spawn*. See Todd McFarlane and Neil Gaiman, *Spawn #9* (Berkeley: Image, 1993). This was done through writers Kieron Gillen and Margueritte Bennet. See Kieron Gillen, et al., *Angela: Asgard's Assassin—Priceless* (Scott: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2015), and Marguerite Bennett, Kim Jacinto, et al., *Angela: Queen of Hel—Journey to the FUNderworld* (Salem: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2016).

[43] The character's name is spelled "Serah" only in the series *1602: Witch Hunter Angela*, and appears as "Sera" in all other series.

[44] Allen Thomas, 'Review: Angela: Queen of Hel #1', *Comicosity*, 2015, para. 7.

<http://www.comicosity.com/review-angela-queen-of-hel-1/> [accessed 1 May 2020].

[45] Bennett, Hans, et al., p. 34.

[46] Preben M. Sørenson, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. By Joan Turville-Petre, (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983), pp. 17–18, 80.

[47] See Gunnora Hallakarva, 'The Vikings and Homosexuality' (Fordham University).

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/pwh/gayvik.asp> [accessed 1 May, 2020].

reproductive activity, gender did not exist'.[48] A sort of 'third gender'—that is, an identity outside of the heterosexual social and reproductive activities—appears in the inclusion of queer characters.

Regarding same-sex romantic relationships, Hallakarvya concludes that there is sparse evidence that sexual partners mattered so long as the individual had children and had been legally married at some point, perhaps indicating that one could acceptably be *argr,* or sexually free after having fulfilled the social duty of family life, possibly having secured an easy and accessible Viking divorce. The Staðarhólsbók specifically prohibits a woman from wearing male clothes, cutting her hair like a man, and these sorts of outward indicators, but does not forbid acting sexually in a "male role"; meanwhile, the only sources specifically prohibiting homosexual acts is in Christian sources.[49] In this context, Aydis (in *Heathen*) would not be faulted for being a biologically female warrior, nor was there a law specifically banning her from a female partner (though Viking mores would dictate they would best be mothers of sons). Real, historically pertinent issues, highlighted by Carol J. Clover, were rather female infanticide and the consumption of horse meat in pre-Christian Scandinavian culture.[50]

These comics were created and distributed by industry giants within a few years of each other and within one consumer market. They draw from the shared medievalist tradition in comics and in wider Western culture, yet they diverge in their emphasis on historicity. This divergence correlates with important points of departure in ideology; this correlation might imply for some readers causation, leading them to read the comics which present themselves as historically accurate as validating contemporary thought through heritage. Brutality is exclusive in medievalist comics claiming historic authenticity, while equality and inclusion occur primarily in medievalist fantasy. Fantastical or religious women's power is not compensated by secular women's power—rather, women's power disappears, thus favouring medievalism over medieval history. Clover maps this also as a shift in interpretation of Eddic poetry and the sagas, stating that the contemporary interpretation is that 'the "powerless" woman is the real one, and the "powerful" woman a medieval fiction', while "in earlier generations, more trustful of the Icelandic sagas as sources, construed [the powerful woman] as the pagan original and the "powerless" woman as the degraded voice of Christianity'.[51]

The choice to include witches, fantastical, or magic-wielding characters seems to be linked more to contemporary understandings of the implications of witches rather than a reflection of their role in history. Writing about the presentation of witches in popular culture media of our modern era, Meg Longeran concludes that witches are used as when a character is needed to represent females outside of traditional gender roles, stating:

[48] Jo Ann McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 144.
[49] See Hallakarva.
[50] See Carol J. Clover, 'The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia', *Scandinavian Studies*, 60(2) (1988), 147–88.
[51] Ibid., p. 147.

> Feminists, like witches, remain unpopular speakers of truth to oppressive powers and patriarchy […] these stories exemplify playing with history and a construction of a feminist mythos that is not different than other patriarchal constructed narratives (such as Hobbes' state of nature or Locke's signing of the social contract).[52]

The inclusion of male priests and male controlled Pagan magic comes at the exclusion of female magic in contemporary Pagan communities, as Stefanie von Schnurbein demonstrated in her research on gender and sexuality in neo-Pagan groups; male dominated Pagan groups, such as the Odinist Rite, view the predominantly female practitioners of Wicca as the 'hags of women's lib' and declare homosexuality as an unnatural illness.[53] It cannot be simply coincidence that powerful female collectives, such as covens and convents, are absent in male dominated Pagan comics. There is also a conspicuous link between the comics' earnestness to frame themselves as historically authentic and their exclusion of female magic, which correlates also to the exclusion of queer characters and a significant increase in the depiction of brutality.

Many comics creators, in their enthusiasm to address a historic theme, misunderstand the term "research" and consider a visit to a museum, or reading books which have smoothed the subject for public consumption, adequate to declare expertise. In an interview, Brian Wood boasted of having researched Vikings for a year and half for his work on *Northlanders*, claiming that his personal collection of books on the subject 'would be the envy of any university library'.[54] However, the visual packaging of a comic serves in place of research rigor, and the more museum-inspired the presentation is, the more sincere it appears to the lay-reader. While there is evidence of a general grasp of the shape of Viking ships and historical weapons, Wood's projects rely on recognisable aesthetics, and do not include any real details of Viking society. The text proves that he subscribes to the medievalist simulacrum of brutality, believing how 'of course they were all very violent, horrible conquerors, rapists, murderers, and thieves'.[55]

Thus, while all comics, either fantasy in genre or posturing as historic, are founded heavily on simulacra, only the "historic" genre insists that its artistic presentation is founded on fact. The creators of *Rat Queens* are conscious and reflective of their use of contemporary, progressive ideology; the creators of *Northlanders* have forgone this reflection for the sake of emphasising what they consider the historic nature of their project. The issue at hand is not to "catch" authors at historical inaccuracies—what authors or audiences believe is authentically medieval is more important than what Richard Utz criticises as the pastist[56] 'hierarchical culture of knowledge

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[52] Meg Lonergan, 'Witches, Bitches, and White Feminism: A Critical Analysis of American Horror Story: Coven', *Render: The Carleton Graduate Journal of Art and Culture*, 5 (2016), 1-12 (p. 9).

[53] Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), p. 244.

[54] Brian Wood, 'Y1K PARANOIA', para. 8.

[55] Ibid., para. 13.

[56] "Pastist" is defined by Kathleen Biddick as 'a position that argues for radical historical difference between the Middle Ages and the present. Pastism regards the past and the present as bounded temporal object that cannot come

production and reception' of academia.[57] However, this also implies that what people believe about the past is linked to what they believe is the present, and could thus serve to reinforce beliefs about heritage and continuity.

As Fiona Watson shows in her case study of the film *Braveheart*, public beliefs about the past influence their interpretation of their present identity, as, for example, the reframing the story of William Wallace to promote the very contemporary ideology of individualism and the sense of political disenfranchisement.[58] As a more extreme example, von Schnurbein records that the most common story Asatruers[59] tell of their turn towards the group was the 'awaking childhood memories' often connected with storybook adaptations of Norse mythology or with popular films and comics, which indicates that 'many Asatruers attach great importance to the fact that their faith is connected to what they perceive as cultural roots transmitted through family and childhood experience'.[60] Thus, comics built on the false authority of medievalist simulacra inadvertently become a source of instruction regarding identity and ideology. Indeed, Gwendolyn Morgan specifically notes the use of medievalism in the service of constructing a 'false authority' for non-medieval ideology in that 'fiction is likely to maintain its rapid pace, as the proliferation of medievally themed stories, graphic novels, and films indicates'.[61] How those cultural roots are interpreted and depicted matters greatly.

'Brian Wood may be the best history teacher you never had', boasts one review by Paste Magazine, reprinted on Wood's website.[62] In an attempt to present authentic history, the creators of *Northlanders* and *Black Road* have instead created a vision of the Middle Ages based on very modern ideology, as even the Paganism presented in the comics is the type conceived in the 20th century through movements like the Asatru and Odinists. These comics, therefore, become a 'history teacher' for readers. By depicting brutality against female and juvenile characters, queer erasure, and female subjugation as rooted in history, these comics provide permission for the extensive depiction of brutality and valorise those individuals who look to history for permission to nurture outdated ideologies through the guise of "heritage". The placing of queer narratives, female heroism, and narratives with reduced brutality squarely in the realm of fantasy serves only to fossilise this perception. It reflects the shift in perception, noted by Clover, in seeing female power in medieval literary sources as "fantasy", even though it is there and clearly evidenced and supported by archaeological evidence. The female power, friendship, self-reliance, leadership, and

into contact for fear of scholarly contamination'. Kathleen Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 83.

[57] Richard J. Utz, *Medievalism: A Manifesto* (Kalamazoo: ARC Humanities Press, 2017), p. 82.

[58] See Fiona Watson, '"Braveheart"—More than Just "Pulp Fiction"', in *History and Heritage: Consuming the Past in Contemporary Culture*, ed. by John Arnold, Kate Davies, and Simon Ditchfield (Shaftesbury: Donhead, 1998), pp. 129-40, p. 132.

[59] "Asatru" is a Neopagan religion which broadly subscribes to *völkisch* ideologies, ranging from racial-religious interpretations to Wicca-inspired practices, drawing on Scandinavian and Germanic historical sources.

[60] von Schnurbein, p. 89.

[61] Gwendolyn Morgan, 'Authority', in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, pp. 27–33 (p. 33).

[62] Paste Magazine. See <https://www.brianwood.com/rebels> [accessed 1 May 2020].

engagement so fully manifested in comics such as *Rat Queens*, *1602*, and *Heathen* can easily be supported by concrete historic evidence drawn from primary sources to present a different type of historic authority for contemporary ideologies. However, in the meantime, medievalist simulacra become more entrenched as the authoritative image of the Middle Ages in popular literature and media, propagating a wholly different set of ideologies.

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