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Medieval Reimaginings: Female Knights in

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Abstract

This paper will consider three medievalist children's television programmes, *Jane and the Dragon*, *Sir Gadabout* and *The Knight and the Dragon*, and explore the ways in which knightly roles are attributed to their central female characters. Given the cultural power attached to representations of the past, this paper will consider the authorisation for active female participation in today's society. The 'girl power' messages embedded in these programmes challenge destiny, and by the portrayal of female heroism as an exception to 'normal' female behaviour. Consequently, these programmes challenge traditional gendered roles.

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Fairy story, myth, and different constructions of the medieval past are clearly staples for children's entertainment. As a result, medieval tropes, television programmes that draw upon such imagery are easily accessible to a young audience. The cultural and imaginative potential with their access to magic, adventure and a romanticised past. Medievalist imaginings of the past and characters that can be called upon or appropriated by children's television writers and producers. Significant cultural influence which to lay ideological precepts. The cultural influence of representations of the past can work to cement traditional gendered roles. However, though, the popularity and widespread awareness of medieval imagery and fairy tale patterns can provide an opportunity for critique and power often attract a comedic or satirical response, and the unreal and fantastic nature of fairy stories also offer a raft of possibilities to one adapting or constructing a new 'medieval' tale.

This paper will consider three children's television programmes that utilise medieval motifs and settings to challenge traditional gendered roles. *Jane and the Dragon* has been screened on Australian television by the national broadcaster during the 'ABC for kids' afternoon time slot. *Jane*, previously destined to be a lady-in-waiting, is rewarded for rescuing the King's son from a dragon by being knighted.

Certainly, having an established friendship with the dragon does not harm Jane's pretensions to knighthood. *Sir Gadabout and the Dragon* (2002-03)[2] is set in a comical reconstruction of the mythical Camelot, where King Arthur and his knights are preoccupied with narcissistic bickering to notice the kingdom needs protecting. The wellbeing of Camelot consequently falls to the hands of Elanora, who has the secret identity of 'Sir Knight', together with Sir Gadabout's squires, Will (Season I) and Juana (Season II). *Maid Marian and the Heroic Knight* (1989-93)[3], a satire which revels in blatant use of anachronism, depicts Maid Marian as the defender of the kingdom. Robin Hood is merely a cowardly fop who receives credit for Marian's campaigning because no-one can accept his true nature.

Given the medieval setting for these programmes, challenges to entrenched patriarchal notions that assert a male model of heroism, licence and anachronism. Though the courtly model ostensibly granted highborn women great influence, active female participation is a different perspective. Through service in the name of their Lady, knights would perform acts that demonstrated masculine heroism and suffering. A knight's worth was largely constructed through service to his Lady, but the woman herself, for the most part, was a passive relations, and as a mirror in which the man's heroic image could be reflected. As Laurie Finke notes, while courtly relations between men and women, closer analysis reveals that the homosocial bonds by which men established relations with women were "a part of courtly ideology" (Finke, 161). The role performed by a knight's Lady is therefore a passive one, and though as a woman she has active power of her own.

The portrayal of active and heroic female characters within children's television programmes therefore, entails a negotiation between attaching contemporary notions to imaginings of the medieval, such an amalgamation can also assert a significance for women to continue to exert power in the western psyche as they appeal to a contemporary cultural and affective bond. The Middle Ages have been given significance within contemporary Western culture. Though censorious of medievalism, dating particularly from the nineteenth century, "reduced the historical character of the Middle Ages" (Zumthor, 369). Such a mythic category provides a point of contemporary appropriation and of identification.

In her work, *Hollywood Knights*, Susan Aronstein notes that differing constructions of the Middle Ages function as a site of opposition or by alignment. As a barbaric, violent and superstitious 'other' it can work as a contrast to modernity. In a romanticised construction, the past becomes "a site of a lost ideal and a past to which the modern must return." In a more simply distant, escapist and irrelevant, representations of the past inform modern western identity. Identification with the Middle Ages has a legitimating role for contemporary social structures and ideological beliefs. The featuring of female heroines in children's television programmes is an authorisation for active female participation in today's society. These texts also portray gender discrimination and the enlightenment of contemporary Western society. Conversely, the placement of these heroines in medieval times and the structures they face are also a thing of history. The historical context can work to bracket issues of gender equality.

Through the featuring of their female heroines, *Jane and the Dragon*, *Sir Gadabout*, and *Maid Marian and the Heroic Knight* are all cast as exceptions to the rule, and are variously portrayed as being somewhat odd, unusually gifted, and powerful. They can be seen as representative of the 'new girl', whom Marnina Gonick describes as "assertive, determined, and powerful" (Gonick, 2). These television programmes, however, also demonstrate the strength and endurance of patriarchal structures. Maid Marian are all cast as exceptions to the rule, and are variously portrayed as being somewhat odd, unusually gifted, and powerful. In consequence, these television programmes can be seen to confirm gender stereotypes at the same time as the challenge them. "The Heroine" Jane Tolmie argues that the depiction of an active and heroic female as 'exceptional' can, paradoxically, reinforce the idea that for women in society is innately passive. She notes the heroic female, though "independent, strong, feisty and passionate" (Tolmie, 146). A heroine's exceptionality can serve to challenge patriarchal structures for women in heroic roles. On one hand the active heroine provides an exemplar for assertive and liberating behaviour as anomalous and, in some way, unnatural.

she has the support of masculine brute force. Indeed, in the theme song Jane even attributes the success of her prince” [8] . Consequently, Jane’s alliance with Dragon is used to validate her position. Ironically, this is despite the fact that throughout the series Dragon is more likely to be the cause of Jane’s problems than the ally and thoughtful while Dragon’s behaviour is more often portrayed as impulsive and childish.

This privileging of Dragon’s masculine strength demonstrates the difficulty attached to moving past entrenched gender norms that Jane’s initial ‘defeat’ of the dragon rests not in the violent slaying which she intended to perform as proof of her strength, but in establishing a relationship with Dragon, whom she found to be “sweet” . This is pertinent, as the resolution of the film hinges on a feminine rather than male trait. Though Jane demonstrates ‘girl power’, clearly being active, confident, agile, and more stereotypically associated with femininity[9] . She puts deep store in relationships, often places the interests of others before her own, nurturing and caring in her actions. Through its portrayal of such characteristics as knightly qualities, the series challenges those associated with the warrior, as heroic and desirable. In doing so, it places pressure on traditional boundaries of gender.

With its affectionate use of medieval markers *Jane and the Dragon* appeals to an idealised construction of the medieval past, evoking essentialist notions of an authentic and natural lifestyle. *Jane and the Dragon* also has a natural appearance, eerily realistic, achieved through production company Weta’s use of new motion capture technologies to catch and record the movements of real images which are enhanced by the animators. This serves to add a sense of realism to the movement and bodies of these characters it is worthwhile to consider the physical representation of Jane – her long and lanky appearance, her feistiness.

This consideration of her physicality is particularly pertinent when Jane’s body is compared to the bodies of other girls, such as the six-year-old Princess Lavinia. Both these girls possess physical attributes which Susan Bordo notes “evoke her ideal of femininity constructed over the last hundred years in the West” (Bordo, 208). The name ‘Lavinia’ has maternal associations with the duty to make sure that everyone in the castle is happy” [10] . Pepper, through her role as cook for every person in the castle, is a woman. Bordo argues that domestic conceptions of femininity require women to perform the role of emotional labour, self-denial. Beyond this selflessness she also recognises that women who wish to compete in a professional sphere must also exercise self-control, determination, cool, emotional discipline, mastery and so on” (Bordo, 171). Consequently, Jane’s empowerment – and therefore, paradoxically, with both nurturing femininity and individual agency. Consequently, the film’s regimens “offer the illusion of meeting, through the body, the contradictory demands of contemporary ideology. Jane can be seen as an exemplar of this demanding ideal which insists on adherence to contradictory construction.



Certainly *Jane and the Dragon* provides a positive model for active female participation in society as it employs pressure on conventional gender based paradigms of roles and behaviour. It does not achieve this in an unmeant notion that she is extraordinary, by her knightly heritage, and by the “giant green dragon by her side” [11]. Other characters like Lavinia are tied to more traditional expectations of womanhood. Consequently the text is not unequivocal in its representation of the past, but authentic-looking past, the series provides a retrospective authorisation for the exceptional female’s involvement. The idealistic representation of the structures of the Middle Ages hinders *Jane and the Dragon* from fully breaking

Sir Gadabout employs a very different representation of the Middle Ages for its light-hearted parody of Camelot. The colourful sets that give the appearance of a bizarre cross between a cartoon and an illumination, *Sir Gadabout*’s King Arthur, his knights, Merlin and the resident villains – Sir Rancid and Nanny – are similarly larger than life caricatures. Touches such as the discordant trumpet fanfare announcing the start of each programme, Gadabout’s ineptly named magnificent steeds – step-through horses’ costumes decorated with brightly coloured heraldic cloaks; one up, silliness is also obvious in the naming of Camelot’s knights who, along with Sir Lancelot and Sir Gadabout, are a foreign exchange knight from Japan. It is within this context that the younger characters, including Princess Elanora,

This Camelot does not represent a barbaric, violent and superstitious ‘other’, but neither is it the idyllic past of traditional conceptions of Arthurian Britain, as it is dependant on the audience understanding that this King Arthur’s kingdom is a parody. It is pertinent to note that such a satirical representation does not necessarily equate to a mockery of cultural attitudes. As Jameson’s observation that the “‘great parodist’ needs a ‘secret sympathy’ for his source” to argue that irony is not a rejection of nostalgia and its associated pleasures are validated through a knowing self-consciousness regarding sentimentality. An appreciation of *Sir Gadabout* is underpinned by an unspoken acceptance and approval of chivalric ideals. The young and bickering knights, they are exemplified by the young, generally sensible and definitely more admirable characters.

This positive representation of the younger generation as possessing knightly characteristics – such as loyalty, courage and honour – places the promise of a ‘recovered’ and idyllic Camelot in the hands of the young. This promise reveals that the series invites the young to participate in the construction of a better kingdom. Aronstein points to the power that mass media has over the audience – inviting viewers to identify with particular ideologies, and to situate themselves within approved social norms. In a wide audience and targeted children’s programming, television is ideally situated to participate in identity formation. *Sir Gadabout* therefore works to promote behaviours considered appropriate, desirable and culturally productive. If the series is interesting, then, to consider the annexure of ‘girl power’ messages to Arthurian mythology and concomitant

Like *Jane and the Dragon*, *Sir Gadabout* clearly portrays and approves an active female heroine through Princess Elanora. Her power is supernaturally passed down the female line, and has come to Elanora through her late mother, Guinevere. Within the series who knows of Elanora’s secret identity is Merlin, an older male who oversees the use of her powers. Her power and knightly roles are both mediated and validated to the viewer by ideas of caste and destiny. They are also both

Attractive, willowy, and very much exemplifying the image of a fairytale princess in appearance, Princess Elanora’s aspirations. Though fitting within the slender female aesthetic recognised by Susan Bordo, she is not expected to enter the professional sphere (Bordo, 171). Rather, in order to fulfil cultural mores, she is expected to play the traditional role of the ‘weaker’ sex. Her gender and physicality clearly define her place in the eyes of most of the adult generation. When she will grow up to efficiently oversee the knightly protection of the land and the castle, Arthur is horrified: “But she’ll have us all using coasters and such like. It’d be very unsettling”. [12] Another expression of the status quo is seen in Arthur’s reaction toward Princess Elanora. He is horrified at what he perceives to be “a strapping lad picking on a mere girl”, as

baby seal? Hmm, I think not” [13] .



Clearly an audience is meant to align itself with the perspective of a capable and empowered Elanora, and be a guard, but it is not only the incompetent older generation that demonstrates conservative views on female na knight, noting (laughably, to Sir Knight herself) that Elanora’s “not exactly knight material is she? She couldn’t Elanora’s own actions sometimes suggest that she herself feels a tension between her knightly abilities and her Will asks Elanora, who is besting him in an impromptu sword fight, how she became so skilled, Elanora’s resp coquettishly compliment him on how very good he is at swordplay.[15] This demonstrates the difficulty attack roles for women. It is certainly possible for the audience to perceive Elanora’s need to pretend weakness as ar vanity; it is, however, also possible for the viewer see traditional femininity as necessary for social acceptance model in the person of Princess Elanora. Its message though, is far from unequivocal as Elanora is depicted as placed in a culturally awkward position because of her ability.

Maid Marian and Her Merry Men is another overtly satirical view of the Middle Ages and of British national world found in *Sir Gadabout*, the world of *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men* – despite its characters’ tendenc and filthy Middle Ages. Indeed, the opening song of the series, entitled *Mud*, speaks of people not only living in but subsisting on it:

There’s a mad bad King and he’s called King John
And he sits on a big bad throne
And he takes all the people’s money
And he won’t leave the people alone
He taxes their farms he taxes their homes
He taxes their flesh and blood
He lives for the pleasure of counting his treasure
But all the people’ve gotta eat... Is mud[16]

Not surprisingly, the sets and costuming are anything but clean, and there is little of the romantic vision of ‘m quite astounding costumes. Interestingly, Marian herself with her frizzy hair and often grubby face, her oversi anger and disdain, looks anything but the picture of a demure medieval maiden. Neither does she fit within sle



An idyllic vision, however, can still be discerned in Marian's naïve construction of the role she and her merry men will play. Marian and Robin on the run from the 'entire Norman army' (which seems to consist of two incompetent guards) will never be able to return home again. Unperturbed, and with music stirring in the background, Marian delivers her speech on Crispin's Day:

From now on we'll live here in the forest – camp out under the stars, and we'll make bows and arrows and we'll be poor and we'll surround ourselves with a band of highly attractive respectable young men who are just a little bit against tyranny and injustice and cruelty to animals and stuff and we'll swing through the trees on long ropes and we'll be grumpy and we'll do these fantastically brave deeds with a merry smile and people will say, 'good heaven, we have your autograph,' and no one will dare stand against us and our names will go down in history and we'll be famous!

The desires expressed in this impressive run-on sentence demonstrate the influence that national mythologies and popular speech plays with temporalities as it evokes the legend of Robin Hood in its modern and popular form, even though Marian understands how the story should play out and wishes to play her role, but the people of Nottingham, Sheriff of Nottingham, despite the privations spelled out in the opening song. Not only does Marian face constant difficulty in her attempt to lead her fanatical revolutionaries. People are supposed to be terrified of us. You lot wouldn't frighten the Nottingham lads. She takes the credit for any of her achievements to the ineffectual Robin. This again is indicative of the strength of parody. Marian is, than, in the sheriff's words, a "cross little girlie-whirly".[19] Still, though Marian wishes to construct herself as a heroine as easily as Jane and Princess Elanora. Though obviously more intelligent than those around her, she has no sense of time and time again, shown to be remarkably naïve in her idealism.

In spite of this want of 'exceptional' markers, it is clear that audience sympathy is intended to rest with Marian. The show's writer and the actor who portrays the Sheriff of Nottingham in the series, brings with him a pedigree in historical fiction. Indeed, reviews of *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men* often cast the series as a *Blackadder* for younger viewers. In an interview with Allen W. Wright that the show was written with his (then) seven- or eight-year-old daughter in mind. An active daughter could empathise[20]. Viewers are expected to see Marian as an exemplar – to align themselves with her in the show. Whether or not they are expected to identify themselves against the less than desirable medieval past is another matter.

The poverty-stricken, repressive and unclean medieval world portrayed in *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men* is a barbaric, violent and superstitious 'other' against which the present can identify itself as civilised and rational.

Men ironically seems to appeal for audience identification and empathy. This Middle Ages is in no way an idyllic alien world to its viewers. The series' use of blatant anachronism and intertextual reference makes it very clear that the thirteenth century, is a contemporary text and very much concerned with current social and political issues. Targeted at a wide variety of targets ranging from broad notions of injustice, to bureaucratic pedantry, package holiday and subversive retelling of national myth the programme provides a critique, not only of nostalgic reconstructions of values and practices.

Whilst viewers of *Jane and the Dragon* and *Sir Gadabout* might possibly see the barriers faced by their heroine, *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men*'s contemporaneity makes its satirical commentary clearly relevant to modern society. They're so natural and... cred" [21] , Marian's horrified reaction both critiques the series' King John and simultaneously challenges and idealised conceptions of national institutions. Other criticisms, such as Marian's complaint about the state of public services are like; one bus a week, and when it comes it's a fortnight late" [22] – eschew the past altogether (except where it only relate to matters of contemporary significance.

Consequently, in her quest for justice and for recognition, the issues Maid Marian faces as a female heroine can be seen in an interview, Tony Robinson comments on grand narratives and their continued appeal, confirming his own sympathy drawn by the image of Robin Hood, a noble man fighting against a tyrannical society, holding to his own notions of justice. In *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men* he has shifted the axis so that it is Marian who seeks to create a world that conforms to her own values.

And she does it in a very contemporary way. And like most of us trying to do that nowadays she doesn't get it. The things she's having to work with are grossly inefficient and not as bright as her and don't understand what she's doing.

Marian's imperfections make her an interesting exemplar. Rather than promising 'dreams can come true' for those who strive for their ideals in a less than idyllic world.

Jane and the Dragon, *Sir Gadabout: The Worst Knight in the Land* and *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men* each featuring their knightly heroines, approving active female participation in society and in roles traditionally seen as the domain of men of the Middle Ages, each text utilises affective and cultural attachments to the past to appeal for audience identification. While utilising medieval markers and narrative structures, however, can also work to tie medievalist texts to entrenched and contemporary values. *Jane and the Dragon* and *Sir Gadabout*, through their focus on female agency and empowerment. Their heroines' roles are mediated through notions of chivalry and the characters of Dragon and Merlin. The representation of Maid Marian, though perhaps less optimistic and certainly more grounded, utilising the past not as a site of lost values but as a mirror reflecting the foibles and inequities still present in contemporary society.

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Endnotes

- [1] *Jane and the Dragon*. Television program. Directed by Mike Fallows. Created by Martin Baynton. WETA Pr (hereafter *Jane and the Dragon*)
- [2] *Sir Gadabout: The Worst Knight in the Land*. Directed by Ian Emes. Produced by Linda James and Roger F (*Gadabout*).
- [3] *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men*. Directed by David Bell. Produced by Richard Callanan. Written by Tony (*Marian and Her Merry Men*)
- [4] *Jane and the Dragon: Royal Archives*. <http://www.janeandthedragon.co.nz/> (9 June 2009).
- [5] "Character Profiles: Rake," *Jane and the Dragon: Royal Archives*.<http://www.janeandthedragon.co.nz/pro>
- [6] "Jane and the Dragon song lyrics," *Jane and the Dragon: Royal Archives*.<http://www.janeandthedragon.co>
- [7] *Jane and the Dragon*. DVD case blurb.
- [8] "Jane and the Dragon song lyrics," *Jane and the Dragon: Royal Archives*
- [9] See Penelope Bryant, "Killing Me Softly," *Buffalo Law Review* 40 (1992): 487 at note 201.
- [10] "Character profiles: Princess Lavinia," *Jane and the Dragon: Royal Archives*.<http://www.janeandthedrago>
- [11] *Jane and the Dragon*. DVD case blurb.
- [12] "The Betrothal," *Sir Gadabout*.
- [13] "The Betrothal," *Sir Gadabout*.
- [14] "Silent Knight," *Sir Gadabout*.
- [15] "The Betrothal," *Sir Gadabout*.
- [16] "Mud" from "How the Band Got Together," *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men*.
- [17] "Robert the Incredible Chicken," *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men*.
- [18] "Robert the Incredible Chicken," *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men*.
- [19] "How the Band Got Together," *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men*.
- [20] Allen W. Wright. "Interviews in Sherwood – Tony Robinson"<http://www.boldoutlaw.com/robint/tonyrof>
- [21] "How the Band Got Together". *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men*.
- [22] "Raining Forks," *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men*.
- [23] Wright, "Interviews in Sherwood."

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