Reception of Medieval Literature in Science Fiction Series

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In his well-known essay on the different ways of imagining the Middle Ages, Umberto Eco writes, »Dream of the Middle Ages, but always ask yourself what kind. And why.« (Eco 1988: 111–126, here 125)[1] While dreams themselves tend to fall into the realm of creative adaptation in literature, film and computer games, it falls more to scholarly inquiry to ask what kind of Middle Ages we are dealing with and why there is such an unabated fascination to this day. In the field of Science Fiction, both areas touch, though the natural sciences and technology are usually in the foreground. In the following, however, the focus will be on how Science Fiction approaches the field of medieval literary studies.

It is not only in classic Fantasy TV series such as *Game of Thrones* or *The Witcher*, which have become very popular in recent years, that we encounter an appropriation of medieval lifeworlds, but also in pop-cultural Science Fiction such as *Star Trek* or *Doctor Who*, where medieval heroes and heroines, settings, and motifs are taken up and visually brought to life. How this can be examined in medievalist research is still subject of discussion. For example, it is still being negotiated what sort of terminology best describes this form of relationship between medieval culture and modern media. So far, there is broad agreement that the German term *Mittelalterrezeption* is too generic on the one hand and falls short on the other, and that *medievalism* or *neomedievalism*, which come from the English-speaking world, are better suited to describe the peculiarity of the relationship, especially of Fantasy, to medieval texts (cf. Velten 2018: 13–16 and Münkler 2021: 438f.).

Although the genres of Fantasy and Science Fiction are closely related, there are some differences in the way they take up ›the Middle Ages‹. I would like to share a few thoughts on this below by way of an introduction. In his reflections on how to make Umberto Eco's term *new medievalism* applicable to modern Fantasy literature, Hans Rudolf Velten refers to a statement by Eco about wax museums in which he writes that by looking at the reproduction, visitors to wax figures do not desire the original,

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1   All quotations from Eco here and below have been translated from the German edition.

they do not even have a need for the original anymore.[2] While this analogy is easily understandable as far as the reproduction of the Middle Ages in Fantasy literature or films is concerned, it applies only to a limited extent to the treatment of the Middle Ages in Science Fiction. In the latter, for the most part, characters from an imagined future are transposed, either through time travel or through highly developed technology, right into a ›historical era‹ or literary work, thereby claiming authenticity and originality for what these characters experience in the past. Interestingly, however, as I will show, the characters in the series themselves can question the historicity of what they experience. This leads to an compelling intra-fictional debate about what distinguishes history from a story. Accordingly, Science Fiction is more strongly characterised than Fantasy by historicity or, at least, something that is declared as such, and by a certain claim to scientificity.[3] What makes it very similar to Fantasy, on the other hand, are the recurring narrative patterns and forms, such as the design of the prototypical hero. Also, the two genres resemble each other in their need to make the past audiovisually and aesthetically tangible. Umberto Eco has already made a qualitative distinction between the ways in which different genres such as Fantasy and Science Fiction take up the Middle Ages. Referring to the typical effect of Science Fiction on the treatment of historical material, he writes:

> [...] even when science fiction turns into history fiction (and I remember a novel in which the hero, projected into the past, became Leonardo da Vinci), what is of interest about science fiction is not so much the modified history as the mechanics of its modification, that is, the cosmological possibility of the journey back, the »scientific« problem of a projection of possible history, starting from the tendencies of the current world (Eco 1988: 214–222, here 218).

At the same time, the perspectives on the Middle Ages in Science Fiction often oscillate, I think, between the »barbaric place« described by Eco, which he also sees as the Middle Ages of heroic Fantasy, and the »romantic Middle Ages«, which Eco describes as »full of love for the gloom of crumbling castles« and thus typical of the 19th century, but, as he writes, also of »*some modern space opera*« (Eco 1988: 111–126, here 120).

Although the two genres do overlap and the dividing lines between them are not entirely clear-cut, it seems to me that the most obvious difference is that Fantasy creates a new world based on the Middle Ages, whereas in Science Fiction it is more common for time travelers to travel to a historical or literary medieval world of some

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2   Velten 2018: 16.

3   See Velten 2018: 16–17 on why this is much less the case in Fantasy. The claim to authenticity in Science Fiction does not, of course, imply that the medieval world staged in it is necessarily more authentic.

kind that is strongly rooted in cultural memory in that it has already been dealt with so many times.[4]

In addition to the distinction of genres, there is also the distinction of medium to be considered, seeing that it makes a difference whether stories are retold in textual form between two book covers, or in moving images.[5] While in the first case, images are created more subjectively in the mind of the reader through the descriptions in the text, films and series convey a more direct visual-aesthetic experience and evoke »Momente des Spektakelhaften der Inszenierung, der Verlebendigung von statischen Bildern und des Eindringens in eine ferne, kulturell andersartige Zeit« (›Moments of spectacle in the presentation, the vitalisation of static images and the intrusion into a distant, culturally different time‹ Transl. I.M.) (Kiening 2006: 3–101, here 8f.). The screen can give the impression of a stronger claim to authenticity (the fourth wall is rarely broken in Fantasy and Science Fiction), but is of course – like any other medium – also subject to the distortions caused by contemporary perspectives and ideas.

In this article I will focus on episodes from Science Fiction series that not only deal with the Middle Ages in general, but also refer specifically to characters, themes and motifs from medieval literature. In these, too, as will be shown, medieval settings serve as vehicles for ideologies such as an exaggerated heroism, or as a contrastive foil to the technological and medical superiority of the present (and/or fictitious future).[6] In the following, however, I am more interested in two topics that

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4   This does not necessarily have to be the Middle Ages on Earth, but can also be an era on other planets (in our universe or even in a multiverse) – in this case, Science Fiction approximates Fantasy, with an alien world being created within historical fiction; however, one that is not inhabited by elves or dwarves, but by aliens. There are always works in which this distinction is even less clear than it generally is. Mixed forms can be found, for example, in the genre of Fantastik, such as Harry Potter.

5   See also Mecklenburg/Sieber 2007: 95–136, who offer interesting reflections on the convergences of myth and dream in medieval films. On media theory in general, see Wandhoff 2007: 13–34.

6   Rather than giving individual examples at this point, I would like to draw attention to recurring motifs that – according to my, admittedly rather unsystematic, impression so far – are frequently used for this purpose. These include: persecutions of witches, the medieval social hierarchy (estates of the realm) as an instrument of oppression, cruel religious wars, or the plague in a society that was medically unarmed against such an epidemic, etc. Interestingly, these are mostly late medieval or early modern phenomena (ca. 15th/16th century), which are generalised into a long era of Middle Ages stretching roughly from the fall of the Western Roman Empire up to the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century. On the ›voracious Middle Ages‹, which neglect historical differentiations in favour of a utopian continuum and rather loose associations – both with history and with myths and legends –, see Velten 2018: 17.

are popularly debated in the series: Firstly, I would like to consider how the respective episodes discuss the relationship between literature and historiography, which leads to a reflection on fictionality, thus making scholarly discourses approachable in contemporary pop culture. Furthermore, I am interested in how medieval figures, and especially heroes and heroines, are transformed into a contemporary television series and thereby redesigned as identification figures from a modern – and sometimes humorous – point of view. In fact, I think that we find similarities between the procedures used in the modern appropriation of medieval motifs and the methods used in the 'Medievalisation' of historical material, such as ancient myths and tales etc., in medieval texts and works of art. This can shed some light on a form of contemporary historical consciousness.

Three episodes from different series serve as examples for me, each of which takes up different (hi)stories. In chronological order of publication, these are: *Heroes and Demons* from *Star Trek Voyager*,[7] *Robot of Sherwood* from *Doctor Who*[8] and *Camelot/3000* from *DC's Legends of Tomorrow*.[9] In essence, I suggest that all three series discussed, as well as the genre in general, satisfy the pleasure of serial storytelling in a particular way. Regardless of the content, modern series also have characteristic in common with medieval storytelling.[10] This seems to me relevant as a preliminary remark, because despite ever-changing worldviews, we obviously, as Eco has observed, still enjoy the supposed novelty of a story, although what we enjoy is in fact the recurrence of a stable narrative pattern. In the stories, we want to find characters that have often been familiar to us from childhood, with their characteristic mannerisms, their typical ways of speaking and their repetitive techniques for solving recurring problems. In this sense, the series still satisfy our »need to find comfort in the (superficially marked) return of the same old thing« (Eco 1988: 155–180, here 160), which is only just new enough to be exciting. Serial storytelling, according to Eco, delights us not least because it seems to reward our prognostic abilities: »We are satisfied when we find what we had expected, but we attribute this ›finding‹ not to the structure [of the story] but to our acumen« (ibid.). Apparently, we share not only our enthusiasm for the same contents and characters with the Middle Ages, but also our delight in narrative repetition and, as will be shown, schematic characters. The enjoyment of reception oscillates, as Andrea Sieber states, between escapism and participation: either the moving images serve

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7   S 1, E 11; executive producer: Rick Berman and Jeri Taylor; director: Les Landau; script: Naren Shankar; first broadcast: 24 April 1995.

8   12th Doctor, S 34, E 266; executive producer: Nikki Wilson; director: Paul Murphy; script: Mark Gatiss; first broadcast: 6 September 2014.

9   S 2, E 12; executive producer: Phil Klemmer; director: Antonio Negret, script: Anderson Mackenzie; first broadcast: 21 February 2017.

10   On the historicisation of serial narrative, see Kragl 2017: 176–197.

as an escape from reality or it is precisely by the conscious process of »Hereinholen des Fiktionalen in die Wirklichkeit« (›bringing the fictional into reality‹ Transl. I.M.) that an identification with the characters and the story is established (Sieber 2017: 91–118, here 93).

1.   Star Trek: Heroes and Demons

The starship *Voyager*, the first to fly under the command of a female captain, is the main setting of the fifth television series *Star Trek*. Produced in seven seasons between 1995 and 2001, it is about the journey of a crew stranded on the other side of the galaxy and making their way home through unknown territory.

In the episode under discussion, the crew encounters photonic life forms that, among other things, cause all security protocols on the holodeck to fail.[11] However, the story of *Beowulf* happens to be playing there, and the very failure of the security protocols imbues the story with a certain seriousness and, thus, reality: what has begun as a fictional leisure programme turns into a ›real‹ adventure in which life and death are at stake. As it turns out in the course of the episode, the alien life form occupies the role of Grendel in the story, making crew members disappear. The only one able to expose himself to the conflict or establish a first contact without danger is the equally holographic medical emergency programme, the doctor of *Voyager*. With the help of the warrior Freya, he finally manages to solve the misunderstanding with the alien life form and thus free the Danish King Heorot's halls from Grendel.

The very beginning of the episode features an interesting conversation between two crew members. After Ensign Harry Kim, who started the simulation in his spare time, disappears without a trace, First Officer Chakotay and Chief of Security Tuvok go in search of him. In the process, the two talk about the cultural background of the ongoing simulation:

Tuvok: Beowulf?
Chakotay: An ancient English epic set in sixth-century Denmark, if I remember correctly. It's about a hero named Beowulf, who fights a creature that's terrorizing a kingdom and murdering its subjects. Monsters and swordplay – that sort of thing. […]
Tuvok: This ancient earth culture seems fascinated with monsters.

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11   A holodeck is a (fictitious) holographic environment simulator in which any kind of world or even virtual persons can be created by programming, with self-learning artificial intelligence making ›human‹ interaction possible (holograms can even be fully-fledged crew members such as the Voyager doctor). The worlds created can be multiple times larger than the holodeck itself and the simulations appear so perfect that they are nearly indistinguishable from reality. Safety protocols usually ensure that people cannot be injured or killed.

Chakotay: Every culture has its demons. They embody the darkest emotions of its people. Giving them physical form in heroic literature is a way of exploring those feelings.
(Min. 04:50–11:15)

What makes this passage interesting is the anthropological and psychological interpretation put forward by Chakotay, who thereby emphasises the fictionality of the narrative and ascribes a certain cultural meaning to it. He does this not only with the authority of a Starfleet officer who has had sociological and archaeological training, but also in his role as a Native American descendant to whom, among other things, a special approach to spirituality and genuine interest in cultural history are attributed. Both characters take a scientific angle; Tuvok asks intelligent questions from a cultural research point of view, and Chakotay, due to his expertise, is able to answer them competently.

In addition to these observations on the literary function of the monster as the hero's antagonist, the story also reflects on the prototypical hero or heroine. The very basic structures of the heroic narrative pattern seem to be sufficient to evoke memories of old heroic figures. However, not anyone can be a hero; rather, specific traits and behaviours are required to mark a character in the heroic narrative as ›heroic‹ and distinguish it from other agents, such as the old king or his envious, cowardly henchman.[12] In the case of the Doctor, this includes his superhuman abilities, which enable him to adapt to his environment and dematerialise himself in an emergency. In the case of Freya, a character added to the story, it is her courage in the face of danger, her belief in the true saviour and willingness to die for him, and her extraordinary skill with weapons. This continuous safeguarding of the hero's or heroine's superiority, marking it by intelligible signs like physical exorbitance or assigned items such as swords and armour, can be found equally in the mirrors for princes and chivalric romances of the Middle Ages; there, too, they are essential to the heroic narrative pattern (cf. Friedrich 2014: 175–194, here 182.). In this Science Fiction world, narrative patterns are adopted and the heroine's story is retold, but they are also transposed into modern times and, specifically, the Star Trek universe, which is characterised by humanistic ideas and ideals. Ultimately, the aim is not to defeat the enemy with brute force, but to try to understand his alien nature to resolve any conflicts of interest through diplomacy, if possible. The characters from the holodeck story, like Freya, remain true to the old heroic pattern, while the Star Trek characters create a diverging heroic image: for example, at the evening feast with the Danish heroes in the King's halls, the Doctor boasts about how many lives he has saved with his medical skills, which initially meets with astonishment and incomprehension from his audience, who had expected stories of battles with dragons

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12　See also Holtzhauer/Vetter 2018: 226.

or similar. The viewer, on the other hand, is reminded or taught – tongue in cheek – that they have outgrown this form of ›barbaric‹ heroism and that other ideals have come to count.

2. Doctor Who: Robot of Sherwood

Let us turn to another Science Fiction series that draws on a different literary source: the BBC series *Doctor Who*. This series has been produced by the BBC since 1963 and tells the story of an alien time traveler known only as *The Doctor*. Like all Time Lords, he has the ability to ›regenerate‹ when mortally wounded. The process is limited, however, and also involves temporary disruptions such as confusion or memory loss. In addition, his appearance and character sometimes change significantly in the process, and even a change of gender is possible. He travels with his various and varying companions in a space/time machine called Tardis (*Time And Relative Dimensions In Space*), which is disguised as an old-fashioned police box, and becomes involved in adventures at different times, on different planets – with Earth being particularly popular.[13]

The Doctor does not travel very often, but he does travel to the Middle Ages. For this article, I have chosen the last episode (from 2014), which is, incidentally, the one most clearly inspired by literary sources.[14] My focus will be on the metafictional considerations that are made in the series, on the one hand by reflections on what

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13   The series, which is known and beloved worldwide, has been broadcast in Germany since the 1970s. From 2014 to 2017, it won the German Curt Siodmak Award for Best Science Fiction Series four times running and is considered the longest-running and most successful Science Fiction TV series to date.

14   Robin Hood rewritings and retellings are extraordinarily widespread to this day. On that topic in general, see e.g. Potter/Calhoun 2008; on film and television, among others, Fichtner 2011: 129–144 and Ernst 2011: 145–158.

constitutes a true hero, and on the other hand by the use of imagery and specific visual aesthetics.[15]

Like most episodes, this one begins in the Tardis, and the Doctor and Clara, his current companion, discuss where to travel next. For once, the Doctor wants to leave the decision to Clara, asking her where in time and space she has always wanted to go. This results in a conversation about the possibilities and restrictions of travelling in a space/time machine:

> Clara: Well, there is something, someone that I've always wanted to meet. But I know what you'll say.
> Doctor: Try me.
> Clara: You'll say he's made up, that there is no such thing.
> Doctor: Go on.
> Clara: It's… it's Robin Hood.
> Doctor: Robin Hood.
> Clara: Yeah. I love that story. I've always loved it, ever since I was little.
> Doctor: Robin Hood, the heroic outlaw, who robs from the rich and gives to the poor. He's made up. There's no such thing.
> Clara: Ah, you see?
> Doctor: Old-fashioned heroes only exist in old-fashioned storybooks, Clara.
> Clara: And what about you?
> Doctor: Me?
> Clara: Yeah, you. You stop bad things happening every minute of every day, that sounds pretty heroic to me.
> Doctor: Just passing the time. […]
> Clara: Doctor! My choice. Robin Hood. Show me.

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15   One aspect that I have not considered here but would at least like to mention, given its conspicuousness, is the use of humour, with which Usha Vishnuvajjala deals in her essay on this very episode (2020: 201–215). Among other things, she states that this plays an important role in defusing the tension between feeling attached to the supposedly historical figures and at the same time sceptical towards them. Thus, the laughter in this specific episode is mostly levelled against the Doctor's insistence on his rationality and his distrust of Robin Hood. The laughs from the audience, too, would mainly be in reaction to the incompatibility between the Doctor's beliefs and the visible ›evidence‹ presented to him. What makes it funny, according to Vishnuvajjala, is the fact that, for once, the audience knows better than the Doctor. At the same time, humour challenges the idea of the ›Dark Middle Ages‹ by presenting the various perspectives of the characters. The episode thus satirises the insistence on a classical fact-oriented historical periodisation and also serves as a counterbalance to preconceived ideas about the Middle Ages, showing that they can be romantic and disease-ridden, sunny and dangerous, real and imaginary all at the same time. The use of humour, Vishnuvajjala concludes, challenges false binaries and encourages a perspective that allows for both scepticism and belief in medieval fiction.

> Doctor: Very well. Earth. England. Sherwood Forest. 1190 AD-ish. But you'll only
> be disappointed.
> (Min. 00:10–01:37)

So, the first thing to be discussed here is what the TARDIS can achieve at all, i.e., travel through space and time but not into fictional worlds. While Clara hopes to meet a hero of her childhood, the Doctor is convinced that Robin Hood did not ›really‹ exist but is merely a children's books hero. As early as at this point during the episode, Clara points out that heroism does not have to be an attribute of times past, but can be characterised by certain behaviours. This debate will be carried on throughout the episode.

The expectations of the Doctor, who steps out of the TARDIS saying, »No damsels in distress, no pretty castles, no such thing as Robin Hood« (min. 02:02–02:08), are immediately thwarted by an arrow and the figure of Robin Hood emerging from between the trees with his bow. Sherwood Forest presents itself as the perfect *locus amoenus*, and the »pretty castle« is not far away either. Bodium Castle, which was chosen for the setting, had already offered itself as a perfect model for the castle renaissance in the 18th and 19th centuries, which, as is well known, is rooted in the Romantic enthusiasm for ruins and the Middle Ages generally, which manifests itself especially in the landscape painting and literature of the time. This romantic perfection, however, is precisely what makes the Doctor sceptical in the first place:

> Clara: Oh, I cannot believe this. You really are Robin Hood and his Merry Men.
> Robin: Aye! That is an apt description. What say you, lads? […]
> Doctor: Yeah… all very poetic. But it's very green hereabout, isn't it? Like I said,
> very sunny.
> Clara: So?
> Doctor: Have you been to Nottingham?
> Clara: Climate change?
> Doctor: It's 1190.
> (Min. 11:22–11:31)

So, Clara and the doctor meet Robin's entourage; and while Clara is thrilled that everything appears exactly as in the stories she used to read as a teenager, the doctor remains unconvinced, taking blood and hair samples to prove that there is some sort of fraud involved – without success, however:

> Clara: How can you be so sure he is not the real thing?
> Doctor: Because he can't be.
> Clara: When did you stop believing in everything?
> Doctor: When did you start believing in impossible heroes?

> Clara: Don't you know?
> (Min. 12:08–12:22)

In the course of the episode, the Doctor and Clara learn that Robin Hood's antagonist, the Sheriff of Nottingham, intends to use a crashed spaceship (disguised as part of a castle) and his robot knights to gain world domination. The sheriff and knights have been plundering the land to collect all the gold in order to fuel the spaceship. However, its engines are damaged and would cause an explosion that could destroy half of England. The adventurous attempt made by the Doctor, Clara and Robin Hood to prevent just such an explosion includes a bow and arrow contest, capture by the robot knights, and the discovery of the disguised spaceship.

On finding it, the Doctor and Robin Hood are confronted by the on-board computer, which has stored stories of Earth and its immediate environments and reveals information about Robin Hood.[16]

> Doctor: At last. Something real. No more fairy tales.
> Robin: What is this place?
> Doctor: A spaceship. More twenty-ninth century than twelfth. [...]
> Doctor: Disguised itself as a twelfth-century castle. It merges into the culture, tries to keep a low profile, so no one notices. That explains the robot knights. But the engines. The engines are damaged. They're leaking radiation into the local atmosphere, creating a temporary climate of staggering benevolence.
> Robin: I beg your pardon?
> Doctor: I told you. It's too sunny. It's too green. And there is even an evil sheriff to oppress the locals. This explains everything, even you.
> Robin: It does?
> Doctor: Well, what does every oppressed peasant workforce need? The illusion of hope. Some silly story to get them through the day, lull them into docility, and keep them working. Ship's data banks. Full of every myth and legend you could hope for, including Robin Hood. Isn't it time you came clean with me? You're not real and you know it. Look at you. Perfect eyes, perfect teeth. Nobody has a jawline like that. You're as much a part of what is happening here as the Sheriff and his metal knights. You're a robot.
> (Min. 29:18–31:03)

The images in the database seem to me worth a closer look, because they are intended to give an insight into what is known about Robin Hood, into his history. However, it is only superficially a chronological arrangement; in reality, the illustrations are chosen haphazardly, depicting Robin Hood with Marian, Robin Hood with

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16   This information does not have to be expressly retrieved, but is immediately available and flickers repeatedly across the displays, like a screensaver.

bow and arrow, and Robin Hood and his Merry Men. There are also an old book cover and an image from the first Robin Hood film – all from the 20th century. With one exception: a print of a 17th-century poem entitled *A True Tale of Robin Hood*.

What the spaceship's on-board computer makes available to the viewer is an eclectic mixture of fragmented images and scenes, the arrangement of which does not follow any recognisable criteria but only loosely accumulates Robin Hood stories, giving them an appearance of being chronologically connected. Completeness, both structurally and compositionally, is wanting; and with it, time or history itself loses its character as a referential factor and classification category. None of this is new, however; the motifs shown in the images have already come up in the series, but the references cannot be reconstructed or substantiated as specific sources. Instead, they represent unspecified motifs or narrative elements that can be assumed to be anchored in the viewers' cultural memory and around which, consequently, a Robin Hood retelling can revolve. However, the images in the database do not convey any real narrative plot, let alone an ending to the story. Despite, or actually because of, their loose association and above all the recognition they trigger, they nevertheless put forward a kind of claim to truthfulness to the characters as well as the viewers. For attentive viewers, this claim is additionally underlined by the ›historical‹ document which even bears *a true tale* in its name.

For the Doctor, on the other hand, the images in the database confirm his theory about Robin Hood, and eventually he even confronts the sheriff about it. During their conversation, however, it begins to dawn on him that his beliefs and his scepticism about Robin Hood do not fit in with the inherent logic of the story he has been drawn into. What unsettles him most is that from the sheriff's point of view, there would be no advantage in an antagonist, even if he does belong to a classic narrative scheme.[17]

After the Doctor, Clara and Robin Hood join forces to finally defeat the sheriff and prevent the destruction of the world, the Doctor and Robin have another conversation just before leaving:

> Robin: So, is it true, Doctor?
> Doctor: Is what true?
> Robin: That in the future I am forgotten as a real man? I am but a legend?
> Doctor: I'm afraid it is.
> Robin: Hmm. Good. History is a burden. Stories can make us fly.

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17   »Sheriff: Robin Hood is not one of mine. – Doctor: Of course he is. He's a robot, created by your mechanical mates. – Sheriff: Why would they do that? – Doctor: To pacify the locals, give them false hope. He's the opiate of the masses. – Sheriff: Why would we create an enemy to fight us? What sense would that make? That would be a terrible idea. – Doctor: Yes! Yes, it would. Wouldn't it? Yes, that would be a rubbish idea. Why would you do that? But he can't be. He's not real. He's a legend!« (Min. 37:02–37:32.)

> Doctor: I'm still having a little trouble believing yours, I'm afraid.
> Robin: Is it so hard to credit? That a man born into wealth and privilege should find the plight of the oppressed and weak too much to bear…
> Doctor: No.
> Robin: Until one night he is moved to steal a Tardis? Fly among the stars, fighting the good fight. Clara told me your stories.
> Doctor: She should not have told you any of that.
> Robin: Well, once the story started, she could hardly stop herself. You are her hero, I think.
> Doctor: I'm not a hero.
> Robin: Well, neither am I. But if we both keep pretending to be, haha, maybe others will be heroes in our name. Perhaps we will both be stories. And may those stores never end.
> (Min. 42:53–44:09)

Besides developing an interesting definition of the hero as a role model for posterity, who becomes a hero actually through other people's imitation of him, the series also makes a reference to itself – and in its self-referentiality and self-reflexivity it reveals, in my opinion, a form of metafictionality or at least puts emphasis on its own fictional character.[18] By comparing himself to the Doctor and placing them both on the same level of heroism – something Clara has already hinted at from the beginning –, Robin Hood addresses not only the fact of his being invented and created, but also the Doctor's and thus, ultimately, that of the series itself.

The emphasis on the fictionality of the protagonists, coupled with a simultaneous confirmation of the historicity of Robin Hood – who does not seem to be a robot, after all –, reveals a general reflection on aesthetic illusions, which, following Werner Wolf, can be understood as a constant oscillation between distance (the consciousness of illusory nature and proximity (the willing engagement and playing along in the illusion) (Wolf 1993: 111–114). The disruption of illusion that metafictionality causes is by no means the end of aesthetic illusion in general – in which case the story of the hero of the series, the Doctor, would cease to make sense –; rather, the play with the different levels draws attention to the existence of different points of view, thus exposing the subjectivity of our experience and perception (cf. Pichler 2011: 86). In this way, the recipients can assume an explicit observer position and thus have a predetermined function, more so that in narratives that are pure illusion.[19]

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18   On fictionality and ways of exhibiting it, cf. Jan-Dirk Müller 2004: 285f.

19   See also the Handbook on Fictionality, edited by Stierstorfer 2020, and especially the contributions by Schneider: 80–102 and Pichler: 268–296.

3. Legends of Tomorrow: *Camelot/3000*[20]

DC's Legends of Tomorrow is a US Science Fiction television series about characters from the DC universe, which aired for seven seasons from 2016 to 2022. It is a spin-off to the series *Arrow* and *The Flash*, set in the same fictional universe.

The search for the *Spear of Destiny*, which must be protected because it has the power to change history and is therefore sought by various antagonists, leads the crew, who call themselves Legends rather than Heroes, in their time-travelling ship *Waverider* to Camelot, in the year 507 AD.[21] The crew's expectations are already negotiated in the run-up to their journey, informing the audience that knowledge, prejudices and assumptions about the destination epoch vary widely:

> Nate: Medieval England. See, this is what I'm talking about: a nice, well-documented piece of history.
> Ray: Knights in shining armour, damsels in distress, and best of all, jousts.
> Nate: Well, jousting didn't appear in England till 1300 AD.
> Ray: Don't take this away from me. Just forget about history for once, all right? We're in the Age of Legend.

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20   S 2, E12; executive producer: Phil Klemmer; director: Antonio Negret, script: Anderson Mackenzie; first broadcast: 21 February 2017. The title Camelot/3000 is a homage to the twelve-volume DC comic series of the same title, written by Mike W. Barr and illustrated by Brian Bolland between 1982 and 1985. The comic itself is also a retelling of the adventures of King Arthur, Merlin and the (in this case reincarnated) Knights of the Round Table, but follows a different plot than the TV series: In the comics, the Arthurian heroes find themselves in an overpopulated future world in the year 3000 AD, fighting off an alien invasion led by Arthur's old nemesis, Morgan Le Fay. In addition to the name and the revisited Arthurian theme, the TV series also draws issues raised in the comics, such as gender roles and same-sex love. In the comic series, for example, Sir Tristan is unexpectedly reborn as a woman, which forces him to reconsider his previous ideas of gender roles and sexuality as he still loves Isolde, also reincarnated as a woman. Although the two characters, Tristan and Isolde, do not appear in the Legends of Tomorrow episode, the topic is touched on by Sara and Guinevere. See Camelot/3000: DC Comics, limited series, December 1982–April 1985, 12 issues, written by Mike W. Barr; penciller: Brian Bolland; inkers: Bruce Patterson, Terry Austin; colourist: Tatjana Wood.

21   Presumably, this date was chosen because the British chronicles surviving from the early Middle Ages name King Arthur as the leader in the battles against the Angles, Jutes and Saxons, who invaded the country around 500 AD (the first mention of Arthur as King of the Britons, however, dates only from the 12th century, appearing in the Historia Regum Britanniae by Geoffrey of Monmouth). On the other hand, the depiction of characters, robes, weapons, etc. in the episode harks back to the high medieval period. Here, again, the concept of the »gefräßiges Mittelalters« (›voracious Middle Ages‹) comes into play, neglecting historical differentiations in favour of a utopian continuum and rather loose associations. On this subject, see Velten 2018: 17.

> Nate: Well, remember what Santayana once said: »Those who cannot remember history are condemned to repeat it.«
> Ray: Was he a knight? I don't remember his name. And I was pretty obsessed with Arthurian lore as a kid.
> Nate: Hmm, well, if you were, you would know that there were no jousts.
> Ray: Oh… well… agree to disagree.
> (Min. 05:54–06:35)

Playing with the expectations of the superheroes, especially Ray's, is probably a reflection on those of the viewers who have read stories, watched films or even remember images from the Codex Manesse or similar: shining armour, noble ladies in distress and jousting tournaments. The fact that the crew historian, Nate, contradicts them and puts forward a supposedly ›correct‹ version of history is a recurring theme over the course of the episode, with expectations being thwarted and the fictionality of the narrative repeatedly highlighted. In the process, the question of the relationship between historical and literary narration and the connection between literature, myth and historiography, which has been frequently dealt with in literary and historical studies, is already raised and visualised here.

After the crew have dressed in accordance with the expected historical circumstances, they set off and first walk through a fairytale-like forest, with the historian once again taking the opportunity to lecture the others about the Middle Ages:

> Nate: Look, all I'm saying is, the stories you grew up on are just that. They're stories, alright? The Medieval world was a time of turmoil. It was the collapse of Rome, which led to the collapse of civilisation itself. And don't even get me started on health and sanitation.
> (Min. 07:35–07:46)

However, what has just been outlined is immediately negated by knights in shining armour, who have surrounded the group unnoticed. The leader of the group introduces herself as Guinevere and leads the crew to Camelot. At the sight of the magnificent hall and the Knights of the Round Table, Ray asks, »Still think, this is just a story?«, to which Nate reacts in amazement, but remains convinced: »This place shouldn't exist – there is a difference between history and legend.« (Min. 09.11–09:14.)

The discussion about this difference is central to the further conversations of the crew, though it is not a natural topic for Arthurian retellings in Science Fiction series. On the contrary, it is often crucial to the plot that the historicity of characters and artefacts is not questioned. This is the case, for instance, in an episode of *Stargate*, in which the crew are less in search of ideals and heroism than of tangible treasures; nor do they travel into the past but to another planet, where people live in a recreated

Camelot. Their aim is to decide the impending war between the humans and the so-called Ori in their own favour by means of a mysterious weapon, the Holy Grail of the wizard Merlin, which, as legend has it, is to be found in this extraterrestrial Camelot. What is interesting about this episode is that at one point, Wolfram von Eschenbach is explicitly mentioned as a source:

> Mitchel: Wait a minute. We're talking about the Holy Grail, right? In every movie I've seen, that's a cup.
> Daniel: No, the notion that the Grail was a cup or chalice, particularly the one used by Christ at the last supper, was a late addition to the myth. You see in rare accounts it's described variously as a dish or platter or, in the case of von Eschenbach or other Middle East influenced chroniclers, as a ›stone that fell from the heavens‹.
> (Min. 32:12–32:30)

This comment is so remarkable for us because in Wolfram's *Parzival*, the Grail is described as follows:

> [*diu templeise*] *lebent von einem steine:*
> *des geslahte ist vil reine*
> *hât ir des niht erkennet,*
> *des wirt iuch hier genennet.*
> *er heizet lapsit exillis.*
> (Wolfram: Parzival 469, 2–6)

> They [the Knights Templar] gain vitality from a stone,
> that is extraordinarily pure.
> If you have not yet recognised it,
> it is announced to you here:
> it is called ›lapis exillis‹.
> (Transl. I.M.)

What exactly the phrase *lapsit exillis* is supposed to mean is not clear and is still being discussed in academia today. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, one interpretation that was put forward was to the effect that it was a spelling mistake and should actually read *lapis ex caelis* (›stone from heaven‹) (cf. Blöte 1904: 108). Even though it can be assumed that the average viewer cannot directly establish this link, the name Eschenbach is obviously used here as a credible source to make what is said sound historically plausible and deny other supposedly false theories – similar to the function of the poem *A True Tale* in the Robin Hood database. The idea of, or desire for, a unifying ›power‹ of scientific evidence is not without its dangers, seeing that every form of science is characterised by the illumination and discussion

of as many facets as possible. As shown by this example, there are not always clear answers to all questions.

But let us return to the adventures of the so-called Legends. The initial expectations and prejudices of the time-travelling crew about the Middle Ages are repeatedly called into question during the episode. Thus, when they arrive in the past, there are neither »damsels in distress«, nor can they verify Nate's claim that the fall of Rome had put an end to all civilisation, seeing the vividly presented splendour of Camelot. In this way, not only the characters in the series, but also its viewers are subtly confronted with popular expectations that are not fulfilled. The impression given is that the time travellers have direct access to history, undistorted by books or other records of lore. The episode thus questions, among other things, what we can really know about history, seeing how, above all, what the crew historian expects and communicates to his colleagues in his expert role is contrasted by the in-situ experiences of the crew. In this context, the relationship between literature and historiography is repeatedly up for debate.

The appearance of Star Girl aka Merlin, who travelled to this century some time ago to hide a fragment of the Spear, and who shaped the place according to her idea of Camelot, explains a little of the perfection of the legend brought to life, but not its existence per se. On the contrary, the series reflects several times on the extent to which our expectations and even our ›maxims of action‹ are still influenced in adulthood by the stories we have grown up with in our cultural sphere. Later, for example, when a seemingly hopeless battle for the future of Camelot is imminent, Nate tries to stop his friend Ray from risking his life for the past, but the latter states:

> Camelot isn't about history. It's not even about some dusty old books that got a lonely kid through childhood.[22] It's about one noble idea – that we can all stand up for what's right, no matter what. I can't walk away from that.
> (Min. 27:40–27:55)

Here, the ideality of Arthurian chivalry is stylised into something worth fighting and, if necessary, even dying for in a distant future or the present day.

However, the courtly ideal is subject to transformations that make it eligible for transfer to modern times. Thus, for example, it is not Guinevere's abduction that triggers a crisis at court, as in the classical Arthurian novels, but King Arthur himself who is overpowered in a duel by one of his antagonists. Guinevere then takes her husband's place, after being coaxed into it by Sara, and thus seems to follow the destiny she had already explained to Sara at the beginning:

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[22]   Exactly which stories are being referred to is not specified. However, it can be assumed that neither the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth nor of Chrétiens de Troyes are implied, but rather the adventures of Prince Valiant or something along those lines.

Guinevere: I was a warrior, long before I was a queen.
Sara: Why does it sound like you preferred that?
Guinevere: Politics is not one of my passions. But Arthur is a true friend and ally, and I believe in his vision for a more just and peaceful kingdom.
Sara: From what I see, Camelot lives up to its reputation.
(Min. 11:59–12:16)

However, as King Arthur has been defeated, captured and deprived of his free will by future technology, Guinevere steps up to galvanise her followers into action in a moving speech. She succeeds in convincing not only her subjects but ultimately also the *Waverider* crew that the ideal of Camelot is worth fighting and, if necessary, dying for, which is why they go into battle together. In accordance with the classic heroic scheme, they end up victorious and help King Arthur and his court in Camelot regain their former splendour and greatness.[23]

The case of Merlin and Guinevere makes it particularly clear that the old stories need new heroes and heroines in order to be compatible with modernity. The Chrétien-style, idealised but ambivalent King Arthur remains ambivalent. But not because he – as we know him from the medieval Arthurian romances – is immobile or acts rashly, but because his partner is simply the better heroine, knight and tactician. In outline, however, the plot remains largely classical: there is a splendid feast at Arthur's court, which gets disrupted; it tells of the isolation of a knightly hero who finally figures out what is really worth fighting for; it ends with a victory over the antagonists; and the love stories are at least hinted at.[24]

The time travel paradox that history is past and done with, and therefore known to the future, but can at the same time be changed by time travellers, is not addressed in this episode – as is usually the case – by means of digital history records, but with the help of an old, illustrated manuscript that Nate consults, warning the rest of the crew about the potential dangers of the past. Among other things, he learns from

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23   On battles in cinematic realisations of the Arthurian legend, see Hildebrand 2002: 101–110.

24   An interesting topic, which I will largely neglect here because it would require a separate study from an art-historical point of view, is that of the objects and artefacts shown, which, just as the well-known heroes, are likely to trigger recognition with the viewers. However, in doing so they create a loose mosaic similar to the effect on the story about Robin Hood, making our ideas of the Middle Ages materialise. Besides the Round Table, which is modelled, fairly faithfully, after the representation in the Great Hall at Winchester Castle (the castle's banqueting hall is shown repeatedly in the episode, but the Round Table receives special attention in the arrival scene of Sara and her crew: min. 11:44), Excalibur appears, too, with a part of the Spear of Destiny hidden in it. With the help of her superpowers, Amaya (not one of her male colleagues!) later pulls the sword out of the stone because she is convinced that she can protect the Spear of Destiny better than Merlin, aka Stargirl. In the depiction of such motifs and objects, especially in their aestheticisation on the TV screen, history appears particularly impressive and vivid.

it that Sir Galahad, whose place Ray has taken, is to die. The scenes of the actors at the knighting ceremony and Ray's accolade are transformed into the illustrations of the manuscript in a blend-over: stories become sources of history. What Nate quotes at the beginning of the episode, »Remember what Santayana once said: ›Those who cannot remember history are condemned to repeat it‹« (min. 06:21), is verified by the plot of the episode, because by knowing what has happened, the Legends can change the history that has already happened for the better.

To give some room for minstrelsy, the flirtation between the time travellers' captain and Guinevere, already hinted at in the episode, culminates in a passionate kiss at the end, after Guinevere says, »I enjoyed meeting you, Sara Lance – a lot« (min. 38:37), and Ray winks at Sara before they leave: »Every good legend ends with a kiss« (min. 39:12). The allusion to the relationship between Guinevere and Lancelot is almost certainly reserved for an audience who is familiar with the mythological tradition. The comment on how legends are traditionally supposed to end, on the other hand, is sentential and refers to the more common knowledge that even young children can boast if they know a few fairy tales. The episode keeps oscillating between these two poles: on the one hand, targeted at the broad target audience, certain characters and narrative elements are trivialised, while on the other hand, there are repeated allusions to background knowledge, and more complex, almost academic questions are raised.

Like the other episodes presented above, the *Legends of Tomorrow* episode offers narrative plots that are rather loosely oriented towards older stories, which – although still meaningfully anchored and legitimised in their historical or literary framework – are nevertheless to be located in the realm of fiction in terms of both content and presentation. It is this tension between the claim to authenticity of a historical period in a fictional narrative that the episodes address and about which characters like Nate and the Doctor rack their brains. The reflection on the fictionality of the narrative plot itself, i.e., on the fact that heroes or heroines in such stories belong more to the realm of legends than they can shed light on »wie es eigentlich gewesen ist« (›how it actually was‹), does not mean a break with tradition, however; it establishes a direct link to the courtly narrative style that is characteristic of medieval literature.[25]

The narrative structure of the series, too, resembles that of the medieval Arthurian novel and bears witness to the synthesizing power of a narrative, »in dem alle Zufälle auf ein glückliches Ende hin ausgerichtet sind« (›in which all coincidences are orientated towards a happy ending‹ Transl. I.M.) (Friedrich 2014: 176), and the heroes or heroines and society are all reconciled in the end. The context in which the protagonists find themselves links back to mythical patterns that are not

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[25]   See also Herweg 2016: 148, who notes a similar treatment of fictionality in historical narratives with regard to medieval verse chronicles.

specifically taken up but are more or less loosely anchored in the cultural memory of the audience. Through the overarching structure of serial narration, the episode not only recalls certain well-known narratives – in the cases discussed, the story of Beowulf, the legend of Robin Hood and the Arthurian cycle – but also embeds them in broader horizons of meaning by means of the narrative patterns inherent in the series (ibid.). However, as the relationship between literature and history is repeatedly explored so prominently, and because the time travellers do not have the ability to travel in literature, but only to visit – at least one kind of – the historical past, the narratives invite us, I would argue, also to reconsider the image of history conveyed in the series.

Hans Werner Goetz has coined the term »praktisches Geschichtsinteresse« (›practical interest in history‹) for when it generally emerges trom the »Identifikation mit historischen Personen, Gemeinschaften, Gegenständen und vor allem Institutionen« (›Identification with historical persons, communities, objects and, above all, institutions‹ Transl. I.M.) (Goetz 2007: 63). In doing so, he writes with reference to the Middle Ages, the past (however ahistorically portrayed) serves as an ideal and as a benchmark for the present. This is particularly evident in chivalric romances, which, with their ›backwards‹ orientation towards Alexander the Great, Charlemagne or King Arthur, hold up a mirror of right behaviour and true (i.e., earlier) chivalry to the knights of their own time (ibid.: 72). The Middle Ages, with their historical consciousness, thus understand and justify themselves only in view of their past and history. According to Goetz, this orientation towards the past always remains rooted in the present, and historiography can never be impartial but constructs a past that pursues a very specific, contemporary interest. And so, he concludes: »Das mittelalterliche Geschichtsbewusstsein war ein gegenwartsorientiertes Vergangenheitsbewusstsein« (›Medieval historical awareness was a present-orientated awareness of the past‹ Transl. I.M.) (ibid.).

Goetz' observations can be applied to the three series discussed above: here, too, the alleged consideration of the past follows current needs. Our own ideals are historically embedded and thus rooted in a (supposed) tradition, which in turn is considered as legitimising the present. Above all, medieval heroes and heroines are used for this purpose, being redesigned from a modern point of view as identification figures whose moral code is exemplary and whose attitude is worthy of imitation. Remembering well-known heroic figures and their revival, the basic structures of the medieval heroic narrative pattern are taken up but transferred to modern times and sometimes even subject to metafictional reflections.

As I have shown in the above analysis, all three episodes clearly transpose medieval narrative elements into the present and offer a reflection on prevalent discourses in humanities or raise pertinent questions: Why are there tales about monsters? How schematic must or may a hero be? In what ways do literary and historical narratives differ?

It was found that (cultural) scientific questions are certainly raised in the episodes discussed, such as the reflection on the heroic by implicitly discussing the behaviour of the characters or explicitly discussing in conversations what it is that characterises a figure as 'heroic'. Historical or literary figures such as Arthur or Freya often stick to an old, medieval heroic schema, while the characters in the series form a more modern heroic image. Viewers are thus reminded or instructed that they have outgrown this form of 'barbaric' heroism and that other, more modern ideals count.

Furthermore, it was possible to show how questions about the relationship between historical and literary narrative and the connection between literature, myth and historiography are raised and visualised. The display of the fictional character of the protagonists while at the same time confirming their historicity (as in Robin Hood in particular) reveals a general reflection on aesthetic illusions. Well-known names or figures from history or literary texts, as well as artefacts such as swords etc., are often used to lend historical plausibility to the story. In the episodes, this tension between the claim to authenticity of a historical time is exhibited in a fictional narrative, which raises questions in a pop-cultural way that also concern literature, art and cultural studies.

Finally, based on the discussions in the series about the relationship between literature, myth and historiography, we can gain insights into modern ideas of history and compare them to the medieval ones, noting that they are not as different as one might think. Last but not least, Science Fiction does not only illustrate scientific or technical discourses. Science Fiction can also address questions that belong in the realm of the humanities, as pop-cultural phenomena.

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