

Manifestations of Medievalism in the Modern City

Lily Tedford, Class of 2022

My project focused on examining the use and misuse of medieval aesthetics and images in various urban spaces: real or imagined, physically or descriptively. I looked at artwork and images, read contemporary discussions about certain architectures, traced pop culture references, and read many works of history and scholarship that investigated the history of the medieval built environment and its endurance across the last couple of centuries and into the present. I also spent a good deal of time thoroughly reading literature— and in particular, novels in the traditional fantasy genre— to try to understand the significance, motivation, and cultural attitudes behind the medieval-pastoral village landscapes of a “Tolkien-esque” fantasy tradition.

This ultimately led me to shift my central research focus in the second half of the summer, from medieval aesthetics in architecture, urban experiences, and imagined environments, towards a contrasting image in a newer (sub)genre of fantasy literature, urban fantasy, and its apparent rejection of medieval aesthetic tropes in favor of more diverse and modern depictions of cities and all of the hidden or ignored aspects of those cities. I explored how this new emphasis on urban underworlds in fantasy literature might symbolize a cultural shift away from the white-supremacist, colonial, regressive politics of the mediievally-charged fantasy settings of the past, and positioned these urban fantasy texts directly in conversation with both their predecessors in the genre and with scholars writing within the wider area of medieval studies. I think my initial theory of the urban fantasy landscape standing in stark contrast and retaliation to the traditional medieval fantasy setting actually held up a lot better than I expected it to when I first began reading these texts, and my work since then has given me a much deeper understanding of what defines the genre and why it’s so contemporary. There’s so much there that can be explored further, and I’m particularly interested to see what scholarship turns up in the coming years about urban fantasy being a literature of the unseen, because that nearly-ubiquitous trope of the split/hidden city was absolutely fascinating and felt the most of-our-time to me.

I feel incredibly lucky that I was able to find a research path that bridged my interests in the medieval with my interest in urban studies and that led me to the honors project I have chosen to pursue now— writing a collection of urban fantasy short stories set in my hometown of Portland, Maine. And I’m excited to continue learning more about this engrossing niche going forward!

Faculty Mentor: Professor Jill Pearlman

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