

**Recreating the Medieval Past through Neomedievalism: Knights,
Tournaments and Fangirls in Popular Romance**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the paradigm of neomedievalism in historical popular romance novels as the process of recreating the medieval past through a combination of character types and medievalist tropes accepted by the readership as iconic.

Considering that the typical readers of popular romance novels set in the Middle Ages are less preoccupied with historical accuracy, and neomedievalism does not prescribe specific gender tropes (Ford 2015), we shall explore the ways in which knights are developed as male characters, and whether the cultural assumption about the medieval past as "a time of unrelieved misogyny" (Ford 2015: 31) is subverted in heteronormative popular romance contexts. While popular romance novels are usually heroine-centric, the selected novels by author Alice Coldbreath feature the knight archetype repeatedly and prominently, with slight variations related to background, thus suggesting that the readers are particularly interested in a certain type of rugged, military manliness associated with a warrior physique, prowess in battle and honour.

Unlike other novels typical of the popular romance genre, Coldbreath's novels do not take interest in war but in tournaments attended by the knights, predominantly war veterans with romantic interests, frequently as part of the audience, and sometimes as knowledgeable and invested supporters. Throughout this paper, our focus will be on the representation of the knight and its two ideals – chivalry and prowess – on display during tournaments, as well as on the dichotomy knight/lady (and implicitly, man/woman), and their manifestations in the medieval popular romance genre.

Keywords: *neomedievalism, knight, tournament, popular culture, historical romance.*

1. Introduction

The popularity of the Middle Ages in various cultural artefacts and practices is undeniable, and many such examples of medievalism have been analysed. Some medievalisms have become iconic, be they books, films, video games, or political rhetoric, while others are more insidious. One idea that caught our attention is the notion that the Middle Ages were misogynistic and the popular romance novels set in the Middle Ages were, by extension, misogynistic as well. Having read a variety of medieval popular romances written in the past four decades, we were able to conclude that the theme of female subjugation was occasionally present throughout these novels and that females were subjected to male authority. We have also encountered stories that place the heroine in a position of power, as a warrior or leader of their community, however, they relinquish that position as they assume the role of a wife (and that of a mother). Some stories were enjoyable despite their non-feminist undertones, while others were disagreeable, precisely because they featured overt misogynistic behaviour, such as verbal or physical abuse towards women.

The medieval novels written by Alice Coldbreath are because they recreate the Middle Ages in a playful manner, reminiscent of the highly entertaining film *A Knight's Tale* (2001). We have chosen to perform an exploratory and descriptive analysis of the medieval universe the author creates, focusing on the theme of chivalry, which acts as the framework for a romantic relationship in the heterosexual paradigm. The theme of chivalry is manifested in the repeated use of the knight archetype, and the detailed descriptions of the tournament as an occasion to demonstrate prowess in combat. Furthermore, we believe that readers are interested in reading stories about extraordinary men with attributes such as a muscular physique associated with warriors, an aptitude with arms, courage, loyalty, and strategic pragmatism, as well as virility, devotion, and passion in their romantic relationship. The medieval setting is part of the appeal of such fantasies, which play on the knight/lady dichotomy.

2. Defining concepts

2.1. Medievalism and Neomedievalism

Amongst scholars, there is an ongoing discussion regarding the terminology and the relationship between *medievalism* and *neomedievalism*. While they are both considered to be vague, the former can be defined more straightforwardly, starting with the description of medievalism provided by Workman, the founder of the journal *Studies in Medievalism*, as the “process of creating the Middle Ages” (Utz & Shippey 1998, apud Matthews 2015) and “the study not of the Middle Ages themselves but of the scholars, artists, and writers who had constructed the idea of the Middle Ages that we inherited” (Utz 1998, apud Utz and Shippey 1998); Workman also stated that *medievalism* referred to “the study of the Middle Ages on the one hand, and the use of the Middle Ages in everything from fantasy to social reform on the other, are two sides of the same coin” (Emery 2009, apud Emery & Utz 2004), bringing to attention the concept of the Middle Ages as an artificial construct in constant flux owing to the individual/society’s evolving process of imagining the medieval period. The definition of *neomedievalism* is less straightforward, as it depends on the existence of medievalism. Regardless of any vagueness of meaning the two terms may demonstrate, they clearly deal not with the medieval period itself, but with the cultural artefacts and practices that followed the period known as the Middle Ages, artefacts and practices which were inspired by, constructed or recreated the Middle Ages. Matthews (2015) underlines the fact that there is no precise method in the study of medievalism and emphasizes the lack of consensus on the use of the term *medievalism*, which is used by some to refer to the discipline, and by others to refer to the object of study.

In the seventeenth volume of *Studies in Medievalism* (2009), Holger Petersen and Shippey argued that the plural form “medievalisms” was a more appropriate term, an idea supported by many other scholars, as the interest in the Middle Ages may be

manifested in multiple forms, separately developed yet capable of interacting (Shippey 2009). Eco (1986) had previously outlined ten types of medievalism, while Trigg (2004) proposed three types of medievalism (traditional, modernist, and postmodern); moreover, Matthews (2014) suggested that medievalisms could be placed on a bipolar continuum, with grotesque medievalism at one end, and romantic medievalism at the other. Additionally, Emery (2009) distinguishes between what she deems historically based 'high culture' studies of the medieval period, and productions of the popular culture, inspired by that period.

Neomedievalism is considered by scholars to be just one of the many types of medievalism, nothing new as its name might suggest, since it is still bound to the medieval period; however, Amy S. Kaufman (2010) affirms that, unlike medievalism, neomedievalism is less preoccupied with (re)creating the Middle Ages, and more with assimilating and consuming it, with "presentism" as one of its defining features, alongside an irreverent desire to reject history.

In their "Living with Neomedievalism" essay, Robinson and Clements (2010) succeeded in providing a clear picture of what neomedievalism, as a postmodern ideology, has in view:

Unlike in postmodernism, however, neomedievalism does not look to the Middle Ages to use, to study, to copy, or even to learn; the perception of the Middle Ages is more filtered, perceptions of perceptions (and of distortions), done without concern for facts of reality (...). This lack of concern for historical accuracy, however, is not the same as that held in more traditional fantasy works: the difference is a degree of self-awareness and self-reflexivity. Nor is it the same as what we conceive to be medievalism (2010: 62).

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Robinson and Clements insist that neomedievalism does not attempt verisimilitude, and the consumer (reader, viewer, or player) is aware of the historical inaccuracies of the constructed "medieval" world. Furthermore, anachronism, pastiche, and bricolage are playfully, even humorously, used in the anti-historical distortion of the Middle Ages, resulting in neomedievalism as an alternative universe of medievalism.

Closely connected to the concept of neomedievalism is that of simulacrum, which allows for further discussion on the difference between medievalism, a cultural recreation that (to a certain extent) is genuinely linked to the Middle Ages, and neomedievalism, a construction that can be considered "medieval", but lacks a connection to a medieval source (Toswell 2010; Mayer 2014). Toswell argues that neomedievalist texts show no effort to engage with medieval culture, instead merely using the trappings recognized as medieval; additionally, Meyer calls attention to the fact in the process of fragmenting medievalist texts and repurposing those fragments (sometimes in a playful manner), neomedievalism simultaneously invokes the model and the copy, concluding:

Thus far, we appear to have a concept that should work very well with the definition of the simulacrum; the neomedieval text as a copy (the invocation of the "medieval" in the conscious creation of an alternative universe) that has no extant "original" (because of both the admitted inaccessibility of the medieval past and the inscribing of current issues and ideas onto the already lost Medieval Ages). (Meyer 2014: 229)

The (re)presentation of the Middle Ages in any of the available media, be it a book, film, television programme, or video game, focused on conveying a feel of history, has long held the interest of the public, an interest which has only grown over the last decade. One instance of popular culture where the Middle Ages have been used as inspiration is the popular romance novel in its medieval romance manifestation.

2.2. Popular Culture and the historical romance novel

Marketed for the masses, popular romance is a female-centric genre that has at its core a courtship plot and a guaranteed happy ending for the protagonists, traditionally within the normative paradigm of heterosexuality, capitalism, and white Protestantism (Kamblé 2014). Regis (2003) defines the romance novel as a work of prose fiction that “tells the story of the courtship and the betrothal of one or more heroines” (14), adding that, for a work of fiction to be a romance novel, it must contain eight narrative elements, which she identifies as follows: a definition of society, the meeting between the protagonists, an account of their attraction for each other, the barrier between them (identified by Diamond as the ‘obstruction’), the point of ritual death, the moment of recognition, the declaration of love, and the betrothal. Regis continues to explain that while all compulsory, these elements may appear in any possible order and combination, and the journey is what is appealing to the readership, not the foreknown conclusion. Despite the precise narrative framework and form, popular romance is diverse, lucrative, and with a dedicated readership. Popular romance is such a broad and diverse genre that it can be classified into subgenres and subsets, based on a variety of criteria and features of the novels, as is the case when distinguishing between contemporary and historical romances.

Ramsdell (1999) defines the historical romance novel as a love story with a historical setting, stating that the historical setting and its use in the story is a critical element of the subgenre, adding that the historical period must be distant enough to create the feel of unfamiliarity and mystery for it to be considered romantic. The historical period used as the setting allows for categorization in subsets such as medieval, Highlander, Georgian, Regency, or Victorian romances (British setting), and Antebellum or Postbellum romances (American setting). Ramsdell proceeds to distinguish between two types of novels, namely *Romantic Historicals*, in which actual historical

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events and figures are prerequisites for the ploy, and *Period Historicals*, in which the historical elements are in the background of the story. Period historical novels are less focused on providing readers with historically accurate depictions of life and events of the past; rather they create a feeling of history by using references to specific objects, fashions, activities and practices, as well as the social structures typical of that time. Regis highlights that in historical romances the “society is carefully drawn and its unfamiliar principles explained” (Regis 2003: 31). This contributes to an enhanced element of fantasy which allows an immersive experience for the readers, an important part of the appeal of the genre.

The medieval romance subgenre is itself very diverse, with plots set in different territories, such as England, Wales, or Scotland, with characters of Norman, Saxon, Highlander, or Welsh origins, referencing various historical events and figures, and contains specific lexical items related to what is known as the medieval life. Like other types of historical romance novels, popular medieval romances feature characters of noble origin as protagonists and attempt to recreate life in the medieval past by depicting the characters in emblematic settings (fortified mansions or castles), engaged in activities considered typical for the Middle Ages. Authors such as Julie Garwood, Elizabeth Lowell, Kathleen E. Woodiwiss, Jude Devereaux and Judith McNaught have written medieval romances which could be analysed as medievalisms due to their link (as tenuous as it may be) to the actual medieval past – Geneva Diamond (2015) has indeed analysed Garwood’s medieval corpus as such, asserting that the medieval setting permitted constant masculinization of the courtship plot, with medieval heroines subjected to male authority and identity. In Garwood’s medieval novels, women were objects to be acquired, as prizes to be won or brides to be married, and men insisted that the women yield to their authority as husbands and rulers (Diamond 2015).

If the authors previously mentioned anchored their romances in the medieval past, Alice Coldbreath dismisses that past altogether,

choosing instead to create an alternative medieval universe, which she has developed and built upon throughout the series of novels set in that universe. Self-proclaimed “No.1 Best Seller in Medieval Historical Romance on Amazon”¹, Alice Coldbreath published her first medieval novel, *Her Baseborn Bridegroom* (initially published as *Her Bastard Bridegroom*), in 2016; since then, she has published eight more titles set in the same universe, with a tenth novel expected in late 2023. The novels are set in the fictional kingdom of Karadok, with no temporal expressions to indicate the medieval past, except for the author’s statement that the novels are “set in a medieval style landscape”, included in disclaimers for each of her novels available on Amazon.

3. Analysis of the *Coldbreath* Medieval Corpus

3.1. Coldbreath’s Medieval Universe

The debut story is set soon after the conclusion of a civil war between the North and the South of the fictional kingdom of Karadok, with the Southern side victorious, while the Northern side suffered many losses. The remaining member of the Northern royal line – a woman – has been placed under house arrest, and the ruler of the now-United Kingdom of Karadok is of the Southern royal line and a cousin to the Northern princess. Each novel focuses on the romantic relationship between two protagonists, always a man and a woman of noble lineage, however minor that may be. Two of the male protagonists are titled at the beginning of their stories, four will gain a title as the stories progress, one is an heir presumptive, and another an heir apparent; all protagonists are knights of either southern or northern origin, and most have fought in the civil war or have witnessed it as squires. While one of the protagonists is illegitimate, he was openly accepted by his father and brothers, and upon the conclusion of his story, he is legitimized by the King and awarded a title. One protagonist is a virgin upon marriage, another has been celibate for a decade, and the others are all sexually experienced, but have never had significant

¹ <https://www.alicecoldbreath.com/>.

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romantic attachments. Male secondary characters in this medieval universe hold positions such as squires, pages, stewards, equerries, and so forth, and are part of the clergy, an element to be briefly analysed further ahead.

As previously mentioned, the female protagonists are almost exclusively of noble origin, one being the northern princess. One heroine is the daughter of a very rich merchant, which allows the author to briefly explore the matter of class and social status. The majority of female protagonists are virgins upon marriage, an event that takes place before the couple falls in love. Even though some marriages are imposed by male authority (ordered by the king for political reasons, or demanded by men in positions of authority, such as fathers or uncles), others are initiated by female characters. There are instances where men manipulate or force women into accepting a marriage.

All nine novels are interlinked, with the first three being grouped around three brothers (*Vawdrey Brothers*), and the other series of six (*Brides of Karadok*) interconnected in various ways, with the elder Vawdrey brother as a recurring character who arranges marriages or aides the couples in some manner. Another common element is the queen's constant involvement in the romantic relationships of her subjects. As a second wife to the widower king, and a foreigner from a territory known as the Western Isles, she does not enjoy a successful marriage, she takes a special interest in what could be called "courtly love", and is considered to be reading too many romances. Her focus on the brides and her manipulative involvement in the marriages is often disruptive, and she sometimes brings about the element of obstruction in the courtship plot. Throughout the eight published novels, the portrayal of life at court in times of peace is depicted in terms typically associated with the medieval: the setting is a castle, where the king and queen are each attended by lords and ladies; the queen and her attending ladies spend their time engaged in feminine pursuits such as embroidery and tapestry, or patronizing artists such as playwrights and bards; the courtiers share their meals in the main hall, while the more

exalted nobles may have meals brought by servants to the family quarters. Various occasions, such as betrothals and marriages, are celebrated with banquets and dancing, and there are references to a winter holiday which is celebrated as the Solstice in the south, and the Yule in the north. Another significant occasion that features prominently in Coldbreath's novels is the tournament, a chivalrous competition, which the author recreates in detail.

In addition to the features of the fictional medieval universe of Karadok mentioned thus far, it is worth acknowledging the aspects pertaining to everyday life and activities that are frequently referenced in Coldbreath's corpus of medieval romances. Throughout the novels, there are references to medical knowledge, social stratification, and a variety of household activities and everyday pursuits, which are associated with the Middle Ages and worth exploring at length in a more detailed study of medievalism. Due to the restricted nature of this study, however, I will outline those iconic items frequently employed by the author, belonging to a variety of semantic fields, as follows:

- women's clothing: *shift, overdress, underskirt, kirtle, houppelande gown, particoloured gown, girdle belt, fur-lined mantle, slashed sleeves, lacings;*
- women's headdresses and hairstyles: *headdress, horned-headdress, steeple-hennin headdress, wimple, torque/toque, templar, coif, padded headband, caul, veil, gold netting, circlet, buns over the ears, coiled braids;*
- men's clothing: *Tunic, doublet, hose (with different-coloured legs), trews, braies, smalls, pointed shoes;*
- armour and heraldry: *chainmail shirt and hood, surcoat, gambeson, chausses, spurs, sabaton, visor, shield, lance, long sword, pennant, standard, banner, heraldic device, crest, bugle;*
- household: *castle, timbered manor house, demesne, moat, chamber, quarters, tower, banqueting hall, castellated walls, mullioned windows, buttery, tapestry, rushes, trestle table, tapestry loom, chatelaine, parchment, reed pen, abacus, chatelaine, distaff, meat-spit, caudle, portcullis;*

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- entertainment: *jester, minstrel, ballad, symphonia, tournament crown;*

As the betrothal and marriage are keystones of the romance novel, Alice Coldbreath elaborates upon the rules and customs throughout her series. In the novel *His Forsaken Bride* (2018), the author outlines the fact that the King may be petitioned for a divorce, a marriage may be annulled on certain grounds, a marriage may be prevented if the couple is found to be even distantly related, and that a betrothal contract may be kept open by sending monetary gifts in as a compensation for the unfulfilled promise (marriage). In addition, social attitudes towards women who are rejected by their betrothed, or abandoned by their husbands are sketched. In *Wed by Proxy* (2019), Coldbreath further expands on the topic of wedding vows, which may be made by proxy; however, if the marriage is not consummated, annulment is possible. *The Unlovely Bride* (2020) introduces the idea of a handfasting performed by a man of faith in a shrine at a crossroads, and *An Inconvenient Vow* (2022) comments on social attitudes towards women who abandon their husbands, or women who are found guilty of immorality: ecclesiastical court judgment, punishment for sexual misconduct, such as flogging, branding, cutting off ears, the skimmington ride, the ducking stool, the pillory, social isolation, etc.

On the matter of gender differences, this medieval universe has misogynistic undercurrents, as the men do not face repercussions for similar transgressions (siring illegitimate children or being sexually active before marriage is socially acceptable), and they are always in positions of power and authority, as titled rulers, knights, husbands, fathers or other male family members, and guardians. By default, married women should take their husbands' words as law, and the fact that women are allowed some agency in the female domain is little consolation. Furthermore, there is commentary that pages and squires enjoy far more freedom than young noble females, who are subjected to various social constraints. The women facing the most censure are the noblewomen, as commoners enjoy more freedom, especially concerning

the choice of a partner. The noblewomen are all literate, and the majority are portrayed as particularly accomplished in typically feminine pursuits; particularly interesting is the fact that one female protagonist occupies her free time illuminating a manuscript of chivalric tales.

Another aspect that is particular to Alice Coldbreath's novels is the characters' preoccupation with cleanliness so that the men and women are frequently shown to be washing and bathing, the word *ablutions* frequently used, along with the stereotypical image of tipping the dirty washing water out of the window. Additionally, the author does not shy away from depicting the reality of relieving one's self in the field while camped out for a rural tournament.

While the features presented above are easily recognized by the reader as typically "medieval", the fictional universe of Karadok does not subscribe to the Christian paradigm associated with the Middle Ages. There is a religious presence throughout the novels, but it is minimal. At the level of the clergy, it bears semblance to Christianity, with people holding positions and titles such as *priest, monk, Abbot, Father, Bishop, and Mother Superior*, and places of worship such as *cathedral, church, chapel, shrine, abbey, nunnery, cloister and convent*, activities such as praying, holding ecclesiastical courts, and of course, performing wedding ceremonies. However, the religion is sketched as polytheistic, with invocations of *gods* and the mentioning of a goddess of the hearth as a recipient of prayers, as well as a god of mischief. Various fictional saints are mentioned throughout the novels, with associated feast days. Magic does not feature in this universe, but there are the stereotypical old women who are called 'witches' for dealing with the preparation of herbal remedies, and for claiming to have the ability to tell fortune, and some characters are depicted as being superstitious, particularly in the countryside and in the North.

The aforementioned appropriation of fragments of the medieval past to create a pseudo-medieval universe is an excellent example of neomedievalism, as the author does not forgo mixing and matching iconic historical elements from different periods (as well as different

geographical locations) of the Middle Ages, as is the case with women's attire, nor does she avoid using stereotypical images that draw on the experience of daily life, such as dirty water thrown over the window, or stereotypical characters, such as a crone having the second sight or an impudent jester, amounting to silliness rather than verisimilitude. Yet, that is the purpose of popular romance fiction, to entertain the reader, and one of the most entertaining and carefully constructed parts of the Karadok universe is the tournament.

3.2 Knights and Tournaments

As previously mentioned, the novels take place in a time of peace in the fictional kingdom of Karadok, allowing for tournaments to take place as a spectator sport, in which knights compete and demonstrate their prowess in battle. Chivalry is central to Alice Coldbreath's universe, and it acts as a framework for love and the romantic relationship between the protagonists. While not all her medieval novels feature tournaments, all male protagonists are, first and foremost, knights, the majority are war veterans, guided by a strong sense of honour and duty, although they do not always follow the same chivalric code. The existence of such a code is established in the first novel, *Her Baseborn Groom*, where the heroine is depicted as illuminating a manuscript of the fictional *Tales of Sir Maurency of Jorde*, in which Sir Maurency performs acts of chivalry and valour, and further expanded upon throughout the series, in conversations between the protagonists regarding what behaviour is considered chivalrous, heroic or honourable. Unfortunately, the author does not expand upon the topic of feats of valour and chivalry beyond the tournaments.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify tournament-related terminology, as Coldbreath recreates the event in her vision, appropriating the historical reality with a highly satisfying and evocative result. In the Prologue to *Tournaments* (1989), Richard Barber and Juliet Baker use the term 'tournament' to describe the whole occasion, but they proceed to explain that the technical meaning of the

word referred to the specific event known as a 'mêlée', in which two teams met in combat as if in an open field, with the object of capturing and ransoming the opposing knights; a 'joust' is single combat between two mounted opponents carrying 'lances', long wooded shafted weapons; 'bohort' is a chivalric game fought between esquires or knights in training; the 'lists' were the enclosed area destined for tournaments or jousts. Furthermore, the authors point out that the "social function [of the tournament] changes from that of a game with military overtones to a purely sporting occasion with little practical application" (Barber, Baker 1989: 4). The authors identify the element of play as a distinguishing mark of the tournament, as well as the fact that tournaments provided the opportunity to settle old scores under the guise of the chivalric sport. Throughout its history, the tournament shifted from illegality to legality, and the ban imposed by the Church had little effect on the phenomenon. The tournament, as an elaborate social occasion, was closely bound to chivalric romances, as well as to knightly status, as participation was normally restricted to knights only. As the quest for individual fame led to the development of personal coats of arms, heralds and personal heraldry aided the spectators to recognize individual knights. The enthusiastic spectators were involved in ceremonials, banquets, and dances, which preceded or followed the tournaments, and, amongst the spectators, ladies were also present.

Noteworthy is the symbiotic relationship between tournaments and the form of courtly literature known as romances, as the heroes of romances were portrayed winning their ladies' affection, proving their prowess, and displaying their strength and valour. Richard Barber and Juliet Baker state that the romances of Chrétien de Troyes established the tournament as central to chivalry: "not only was such an event the highpoint of each romance, but it was also the arena where all the values of chivalry were on public show" (1989: 139). The rules of the tournament were complex, but the essential rule was to never kill the opponents, nor to injure them, and in the lists, there were areas where knights (and their horses) could rest or repair their armour. As the object

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was to unhorse and capture the opponents, the captured knights forfeited their horses and had to pay a ransom; once the payment was promised, they could not be held prisoner. In addition to horses and ransoms, there were prizes awarded to the champions, which enabled knights to make their fortune.

These rules and history outlined in *Tournaments* (1989) are instantly recognizable in Alice Coldbreath's novels, however compressed and pieced together her representation might be. There are added details such as a difference between royal tournaments, which involve more pageantry and clearer rules, and rural tournaments, which are rougher and more chaotic, and commentary on their frequency, with fixed annual tournaments, and others organized in a more impromptu manner. Usually, the tournaments have two main events, the *mêlée* and the joust, with an additional event called 'challenge to arms', and an occasional bohort.

The author provides a detailed description of knightly practices, including details such as the maintenance of armour and weapons, the care of their chargers, the time spent on the tournament circuit, traveling from one event to the other, and participation in pageantry. One crucial ritual is that of crowning the Tournament Queen, a moment which takes place at the end of the jousting event when the winner extends the tournament crown – a flower garland balanced on the tip of the lance – to the most beautiful lady in attendance. That this special moment is sometimes weaponized against the competition goes to show that Coldbreath's knights occasionally have a skewed sense of honour.

Indeed, not all knights share the iconic preoccupation with chivalric deeds of valour and honour; rather, the knights of Karadok have a more business-like reason to attend the tournaments – building their fortune. The author embraces the reality of bruising, sweaty, muscular work done with sword and lance, and her depictions of the tournament events are highly dynamic, full of action in the lists, potent combinations of visual and auditory images associated with combat, such as the clash of armour and weapons, thundering hooves, the

splintering of lances, and reaction in the stands, where the crowd cheers, boos, groans or applauds the victories or failures of their favourites.

Alice Coldbreath spends no energy in attempting to portray an idealised version of a knight who exhibits virtues such as courtesy, piety, or courtly love (Kaeuper 1999), focusing almost exclusively on the virtue of prowess, which is represented in the novels as demonstrating aptitude with arms, courage, restraint, strategy, and pragmatism. The highly competitive knights find the practice of violence fulfilling and exhilarating, but they show restraint when they actively avoid inflicting serious damage on their opponents, or mortal wounds. Coldbreath's protagonists are all highly skilled, the elite knights of the kingdom, but each has one particular strong suit, and each acknowledges the prowess of the others. The collective dimension of chivalry is obvious in the interactions between the knights, in the lists, and outside them. While each knight has an individual identity, part of that identity is belonging to an entire class, so one's loyalty to the other knights, and to chivalry itself, is shown to be ingrained. The virtue of honour is manifested in many ways, including by considering losses as honourable when the opponent proved to be the superior combatant on a given occasion.

The protagonists are all described as exceptional specimens of manhood: tall, muscular, with broad shoulders, powerful arms, and strong legs, handsome if not downright beautiful, and every single hero is virile and well-endowed. Despite the uniformity of physical perfection, the knights are frequently described as brawling brutes, boorish and arrogant; they have idiosyncrasies, mannerisms, and faults which help to create individuals capable of growth and character development, especially as partners in their marriages. They prove themselves to be skilled and attentive lovers, devoted and protective husbands, and willing to compromise and change to earn the love of their wives.

If chivalric texts feature idealized women, Alice Coldbreath chooses to dispose of with such a practice when it comes to her heroines: they are all imperfect in one way or another, but they do show

exceptional resilience, a highly adaptive nature, and a capacity to make the best out of difficult situations. The women are fascinating and attractive to the knights as they are, and they feel no pressure from their partners to change or become something else.

Marriage to knights on the tournament circuit means that the courtship plot is masculinized, by removing the female from her familiar universe and immersing her in an utterly masculine domain. As the wives travel alongside their husbands, frequently in the early days of their marriage, they experience tension, discomfort, and uncertainty. However, learning tournament etiquette, witnessing the prowess of their husbands in the lists, as well as honourable losses, becomes an occasion for admiration; tending the men's bruised bodies after combat turns into an opportunity for bonding; sharing the intimate moments of everyday life while camped in a pavilion in the middle of a field allows for a swift loss of inhibition around the other. Despite the masculinization of the courtship plot, once the feelings of mutual love are acknowledged, the couple meets as equals. It could be argued that the power balance shifts towards the female as the loyalty of the knight is transferred completely to his wife. The knight unabashedly acknowledges and openly declares his love and worshipping devotion to the lady, without idealising her or placing her on a pedestal, in complete opposition to any misogynistic mentality the fictional medieval society of Karadok might have.

3.3. Fangirls

The concept of fandom is closely tied to popular culture, particularly in the case of popular romance fiction. Being a woman and an enthusiastic fan of a cultural product is negatively perceived, as we have seen in the definitions for the term *fangirl*, and enjoying popular romance fiction continues to be something that not many women declare openly. The female-centric genre is often frowned upon and dismissed by some academics for lacking literary value, yet there is a growing body of scholarship on the topic, proving that academic

interest is pertinent. Diamond (2015) affirmed that medieval romances joined two oppositely-gendered strands of popular culture, female-centric romance novels, and the masculine-centric medieval period. While this statement seems to have merit, a great number of historical romances feature masculine-centric narratives with women subjected to male authority, regardless of the use of more recent historical periods. The masculinization of the courtship narrative is not dependent on the historical period used as a setting for the love story, and the use of the Middle Ages is not a premise for the portrayal of women as helpless and passive under male authority, rather they are simply a matter of authorial choice.

The informal term *fangirl* is defined as a noun “a girl or young woman who is a fan of someone or something such as an actor, a type of music, a piece of technology, etc.” (Cambridge Dictionary) and “(fandom slang) [a] female fan who is obsessive about a particular subject (especially, someone or something in popular entertainment media)” (Wiktionary); it is also used as a verb meaning “to be a very enthusiastic female fan of a band, actor, type of entertainment, product etc.” (Macmillan Dictionary). As the definitions demonstrate, it is associated with obsessive behaviour and excessive enthusiasm, and while the contemporary term may not have a place in a medieval universe, the fact remains that tournament spectators were enthusiastic, and ladies were present at such events (Barber, Baker 1989); not only that, but Richard Kaeuper asserts that “medieval women simply could not get enough of combat and war” (1999: 32). This attitude can be observed in Alice Coldbreath’s medieval universe, as the tournament is a spectator sport enjoyed by commoners and nobles alike, including women. The knights themselves believe that they display their best in combat, an infallible way to earn the love and admiration of their brides.

The brides of Karadok may not all be fangirls of tournaments or knights from the outset, but they all become fangirls of their husbands, cheering and supporting them from the audience. However, several heroines (and a secondary character who is to be the protagonist of the

tenth novel) demonstrate the typical behaviour of fangirls: they enjoy attending tournaments, they know all the heraldic devices of the competitors and the tournament rules which they are able to explain to the ignorant (an excellent way for the author to convey such complex information to the reader), they learn and share trivia about the competitors, they are capable of expressing informed preferences for one event or another, and they are enthusiastic members of the audience. Furthermore, one heroine is so enthusiastic as to wear a particoloured gown in her husband's heraldic colours, while another is known to scold her husband's opponents at banquets.

Additionally, the Queen of Karadok could be considered a fangirl of romance, as she is preoccupied with all aspects related to courtly love and thinks of herself as an expert on the topic. She is eager to get involved in the marriages of her subjects, and holds the belief that she is responsible for the happiness of her subjects, while the other characters believe that she reads too many romances. The Queen takes exceptional pride in supervising an artistic project involving the creation of tapestries depicting crucial moments in the marriages of her subjects, further emphasizing her extreme preoccupation with courtly love.

Conclusions

In analysing Alice Coldbreath's medieval corpus, we discovered a valuable sample of neomedievalism, characterised by the playful nature and bricolage of iconic medieval detail and stereotypes, including the use of the knight/lady dichotomy. The author's choice to write characters that are variations on the knight archetype and her detailed and dynamic descriptions of tournaments provide the chivalric narrative framework for a masculinized courtship plot. The examination of the medieval-like society of Karadok has revealed that misogynistic attitudes are present, but the relationship between knight and lady is that of mutual love and respect, and the knight is not an oppressive male authority figure to his lady. Additionally, the

misogynistic society of Karadok serves the purpose of highlighting the exceptionality of the relationship between the knight and the lady.

The male protagonists are portrayed as extraordinary specimens of masculinity, which can be considered justifiable, as they belong to the class of elite noble warriors. Whether the knight's exceptional physical attractiveness is for the benefit of the reader, or simply part of the author's fantasy, is up for discussion. The female protagonists are less extraordinary – in several cases, the author emphasizes the fact that the women are either plain, plump, or socially awkward, but they have more valuable qualities (such as wit, resilience and courage) and they show character growth. The medieval heroines do not enjoy the independence of their contemporary counterparts, and their agency is limited, but that is to be expected given the medieval universe in which they move. To what extent are the women portrayed as passive or in need of rescuing is a particular theme worth exploring in detail, in a separate paper.

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