Ecomedievalism: Medievalism's Potential Futures in Ecocriticism and Ecomaterialism
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Medievalism superficially appears to be marked by what it is not, neither fully medieval nor entirely modern. This lack creates and normalizes medievalism as a field permanently subordinate to, even Othered by, traditional medieval studies. The exclusion is harmful: texts, products, and concepts which we are now beginning to define primarily by their medievalism have long been claimed by other fields and require extraction for consideration as artifacts of the medieval made modern.[1] This translation results in distortion, and medievalism is again subordinated, revealing a critical bias that privileges the old over the new. Yet the source of this bias is not reflected in the products of medievalism: "popular medievalisms," such as cinema or fantasy novels, relish "updating," "access," and "relevance." The language implies physicality, the presence of a body that can be updated, opened up, and made useful. This interest demonstrates a fundamental bifurcation between popular production and reception on the one side, and critical perception on the other; it also demonstrates the persistence of this reductive binary. The split opens medievalism to partnership with other critical approaches like feminism and post-colonialism.

Another collaboration is ecocriticism. Medievalists have long been active in developing and pushing ecocritical studies toward more comprehensive and inclusive world-views, and provide ecofeminism and ecosocialism with material to extend the chronology of their ideological and historical roots. Medieval studies are marked by a willingness to test theoretical movements within the crucible of medieval literature. These studies focus largely on traditional medieval material, using modern ecotheory to unpack neglected elements, encouraging medievalists to apply theory through a focus on the material and concrete, a methodology which gives material focus to complex theoretical reordering of our perceptions of reality.[2] Thus, if medievalism is often marked by a focus upon the age of the objects under study, then surely philosophical and theoretical approaches including object-oriented ontology, ecomaterialism, and ecocriticism should align with our studies. Yet medievalism seems to have found little place in ecocritical considerations.

This is shortsighted: including *Brave* and *Frozen*, animated films that prominently feature medieval environments are increasingly popular. The interest in Middle-Earth has returned with *The Hobbit* film trilogy, enhanced by public knowledge that the medievalist J.R.R. Tolkien would align with

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1 Films on traditionally medieval topics—Robin Hood, King Arthur, the Crusades, and the Black Death are all recent blockbusters—are considered first as cinema, second as modern texts, and only third as artifacts of medievalism. Medievalists follow this hierarchy in our insistence upon the fundamental differences between film and text, stressing film's modernity. When we do address modern use and reuse of the Middle Ages, we enforce a normative separation between the medieval and the modern: ironic, since medievalism offers the potential for amalgamation. Tendency becomes habit: we read modern medievalism through the "distorted" lens of popular medievalism.

2 "Green Chaucer" is one opportunity, though Vin Nardizzi notes in his literature review for *postmedieval* that "Chaucer has not come to overwhelm medieval ecocritism in the way that Shakespeare has featured in its Renaissance counterpart" (114).

modern environmentalism; George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* series is famously evoked by a phrase, "winter is coming," that has yet to be unpacked by ecocritics within medievalism's context. These products of medievalism are marked by pronounced efforts at world-building or imaginative subcreation. Mark Wolf's history of the topic demonstrates how this narrative technique extends beyond the limits of fiction.[3] World-building is inseparable from Tolkien's articulation of involuntary secondary belief within both narrative and reality, and what else are ecocritical readings of texts but literal acts of building a world through directed readings?[4] Logically, then, a review of ecocritical work in medievalism—ecocritical studies of post-medieval works utilizing medieval structures—should provoke an intimidating list but ecomedievalism appears, instead, to be awaiting its moment.

Environmentally-oriented studies of traditional medieval literature rarely break new ground, reseeding tired fields with fresh insights. Connie Scarborough's *Inscribing the Environment* (2013) offers perspectives that "read details about natural elements and give them credit for doing something more than just adding to an effect of verisimilitude" since "[a]s negotiators between that natural world and the cultural artifact of the literary work, these authors' depictions hold valuable clues as to how medieval artists perceived, interpreted, and inscribed their natural environments for their readers" (10).[5] Scarborough's understanding is developed from significant ecomedieval studies of space, ecology, and landscape, including those by Gillian Rudd, Alfred K. Siewers, and John Howe and Michael Wolfe.[6] What Scarborough offers to ecocritical scholarship in English is a Spanish perspective: since nature is inescapably intertwined with culture, the social and cultural trends of a particular country, language, political period, laws, etc., all impact the creation and reception of texts. Failure to recognize that culture and thus nature are not unified terms has created the need to move away from universalizing scholastic trends that neglect recognition or validation of legitimate difference.

Waste-studies, like ecocriticism, offers many opportunities for exploration. Eleanor Johnson's article, "The Poetics of Waste" (2012), insists on the interpenetration of waste and ecocritism. Johnson's project is directly concerned with historical context, and she notes early that the "idea of a 'liquid,' global ecosystem may sound decidedly contemporary, but … the concern with waste as a problem of collective resource use goes back to a moment in the late Middle Ages when the relation of individual energy use to collective material welfare was under active critical study. In particular, this essay historicizes waste by considering how land use and personal energy use have long been

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3 Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

4 Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories" is credited with originating the concept if not the terminology of world-building. For an excellent critical edition, see *Tolkien on Fairy-stories: Expanded Edition, with Commentary and Notes*, eds. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins, 2008).

5 Connie Scarborough, *Inscribing the Environment: Ecocritical Approaches to Medieval Spanish Literature* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013).

6 See Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007; reprinted 2010); Alfred K. Siewers, *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and John Howe and Michael Wolfe, eds. *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Senses of Place in Western Europe* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2009).

quietly at its core" (460).[7] Johnson argues the human becomes the ecological in *Wynnere and Wastoure* and *Piers Plowman* (primarily the C-Text), since in these texts "degeneracy is an ecosystemic problem, a problem of resource use and distribution, a problem of waste" (461). Johnson's work resonates with the materialist turn of medieval ecocriticism, since her operative definitions of waste utilize interconnections of ecosystems: physical objects and human behaviors are all "matter out of place." Johnson concludes that the history and literature of waste use each other in a continually referential pattern of development and understanding, and calls for recognition of "the inseparability of form from a historicized ecocritical ethos" (473). Implications for medievalism are clear: if form and function interpenetrate, then little ideological difference exists between the study of sixteenth-century medievalisms or twenty-first-century medievalisms.

The scope of medieval ecocritical studies expanded in *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 4.1, "Ecomaterialism." The series of eight essays, occasionally inter-referential and always attentive to object-oriented ontology, take as their inspiration Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter.*[8] The essays are brief, though the ideas they provoke are not; the special issue realizes ideas explored in conferences and discussions, as well as pushing beyond the boundaries of traditional medieval ecocriticism into ecomaterialism. The editors of the issue, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, best summarize their intentions in a statement published on the journal's website: "We focus upon the living elements earth, air, water, fire, and their medial instantiations: cloud, road, glacier, abyss. Rather than a traditional ecocritical mode that traces the interface of human with landscape, we are interested in reconceiving ecomaterial spaces and objects as a web of co-constitutive and hybrid actants."[9] Contributors Valerie Allen, Jeffrey Cohen, Lowell Duckert, Steve Mentz, Sharon O'Dair, Alfred K. Siewers, Karl Steel, Stephanie Trigg, and Julian Yates have produced an account that is simultaneously innately post-historical and yet inescapably rooted in the modern (historicist) mindset that has permitted the exploration. The project seeks to universalize the networks of interactions each element inspires, and while the effect verges on self-negation—human recognition of these non-human matters / materials permits the attempt to recognize non-human perspectives that exclude humans—it also opens opportunities for medievalism to engage in ecomaterialism. The *postmedieval* project takes a giant leap forward and speculates beyond the human, engaging Bennett in dialog via her response essay. The issue eases readers back into contemporary scholarship with Vin Nardizzi's excellent "Medieval Ecocritism," a survey of ecocritical literary criticism with an emphasis on the work done in medieval studies.[10] Medievalism offers fascinating new opportunities the applications of object-oriented ontology: consider the medievalism created by things, whether created artifacts (neo-gothic cathedrals, replicas of astrolabes), physical embodiments of stories

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7 Eleanor Johnson, "The Poetics of Waste: Medieval English Ecocriticism," *PMLA* 127 no.3 (2012): 460-76.
8 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
9 "Volume 4, issue 1: Ecomaterialism," http://www.palgrave-journals.com/pmed/archive/2013_issues.html#Issue-4.1.
10 Vin Nardizzi, "Book Review Essay: Medieval Ecocriticism," *postmedieval* 4 no.1 (2013): 112-23. Nardizzi's review is an excellent history of medieval ecocritical interventions and explorations. I have endeavored to avoid retreading on topics he has already covered, which limits the scope of my own review.

(novels, DVDs), items within stories themselves, etc. These considerations all require the interaction of human and non-human.

The "Ecomaterialism" issue is therefore primarily exploratory, taking up Bennett's call in *Vibrant Matter* to "explore the impress and agency of the nonhuman," by developing "a forum where matter obtains its complicated agency; where humans are not simply called upon to save, preserve, or conserve a lifeless material world (what hubris), but to recognize the life that already pulses within inorganic forces, manufactured and found objects, nature, and things" (Cohen and Duckert 3).[11]   A common critique of philosophies rooted in examining the agency of things, whether organic or non-organic, living or dead, fictional or non-fictional, is that by increasing the agency of the non-human, human responsibility is lessened dangerously. *Vibrant Matter* demonstrates that interactions between the agencies of humans and things falls more in favor of the human, as a constructed position of privilege; thus, *postmedieval*'s attempt to remove the human from the environment is an interesting thought-exercise that leads naturally to the ideas explored in Cohen's recent collection of essays, *Prismatic Ecology* (2014).[12]

Superficially, *Prismatic Ecology* does not offer much to medievalists or medievalism. Though Cohen is the volume's editor, his introduction to the collection deliberately and purposefully trans-historical: "Ecology's Rainbow" opens with an example of "prismatic composition," describing an illumination in MS British Library Royal 6EVI f.329 (James le Palmer''s *Omne Bonum*, an illustration within the C of the word COLOR), and then immediately supplying a second from 2012, and a third from the eighteenth century. The collection is arranged by the hue each scholar explores. Some essays, such as "Maroon" by Lowell Duckert, "Orange" by Julian Yates, "Chartreuse" by Allan Stoekl, "Greener" by Vin Nardizzi, and "Grey" by Cohen, reflect the authors' awareness of medieval literary history. For example, "Grey" focuses upon the modern zombie, drawing comparisons to *Grettir's Saga* to emphasize the consequences of a taste for monsters: if our creatures of horror are "no longer etheral and philosophical specters, but shambling, putrefying corpses" then "[w]hat is at stake in this material turn, this movement from cognition to consumption, from subjectivity to grey matter, from ectoplasm to ashen flesh, the human as yet another object in an object-filled world?" (273). Likewise, "Chartreuse" centers its discussion upon the associations between the color and the cordial, creating connections between the Carthusian order's rigid routines and sustainability tactics through the self-soothing practices of persons categorized within the autism spectrum, thus tying spiritual practice and natural ecologies together via human needs.

This careful awareness of the human element is what marks *Prismatic Ecology* as a very different reading and philosophical experience from "Ecomaterialism," despite the mutual focus upon materialism and object-oriented philosophical examinations. Essays like "Pink" by Robert McRuer

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11 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, "Howl," *postmedieval* 4 no. 1 (2013).
12 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed. *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*. Foreword by Lawrence Buell. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

and "Beige" by Will Stockton are notable for their interlocking examinations of gender, sexuality, and race; "Gold" by Graham Harman is a history, skillfully playing with the underlying materialism that the English word evokes; "Red" by Tobias Menely and Maragret Ronda addresses blood and fire in activist texts; "Brown" by Steve Mentz discusses waste and, together with "Violet-Black" by Stacy Alaimo, references animal studies; "Blue" by Eileen Joy provides oceanic meditations skillfully linked to discourses on depression. Taken individually or separately, the essays in *Prismatic Ecology* are fascinating examples of the exploratory function of ecotheory. Appropriately, the essays at the end of the (human) visible color spectrum, such as "Ultraviolet" by Ben Woodard, "Black" by Levi R. Bryant, and "X-Ray" by Timothy Morton, are the works which seek to explicitly push and expand the boundaries of object-oriented ontology and ecomaterialism. The final essay, "Onward: After Green Ecologies: Prismatic Visions" by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, considers the consequences of the works in the volume but also the movements which inspired the volume's creation: expanding the spectrum of ecotheory past green demonstrates that "the suggestions we get from the ecology of colors are that the green elements that have been read as emanatory of the predominant epistemological trends are now being disrupted, but also enhanced by the new discourse that is premised on being committed to the entire planetary palette," a move that recognizes "the complex social, environmental, and cultural dynamics that shape human perception and experience of naturecultures" (331). Here, then, is a near-articulation of the recognition that drives the study of medievalisms: the recognition that simplistic and artificial binaries between medieval and modern are the products of more than just time or culture or social desire. With the material turn and environmental perspective offered by the collections of ecomaterialism and ecocritism in *postmedieval* and *Prismatic Ecology*, medievalism is well-positioned to realize the complication that Bryant stresses in "Black": a "problem with the thesis that entities possess no separability from one another is that it paradoxically risks rendering us blind to relations," because "[w]e forget that many of our central political problems arise from the fact that people and other living beings are *not* related" (304). These connections must be continually remade, an apt summary of the problem of medievalism as much as a disruption of traditional "green-only" ideologies.