



Volume 35.36 (2020-2021)

Edited by Valerie Johnson & Renée Ward

The author retains copyright and has agreed that this essay in *The Year's Work in Medievalism* will be made available under the following [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#). This means that readers/users must: attribute the essay, may not use the essay for commercial purposes, and may not alter, transform, or build upon the essay.



Sister Warriors: Medievalism and Tropes of Women’s Empowerment in Netflix’s *Warrior Nun*

Yvonne Seale
SUNY Geneseo

Many fantasy-drama television shows draw on the distant past as a source of inspiration, although their degree of relative historical accuracy or authenticity does not necessarily have any bearing on either their quality or their success.¹ One recent addition to this genre, the Netflix show *Warrior Nun*, was successful enough to be renewed for a second season shortly after its first ten episodes aired in 2020 despite little concern with either—indeed, with little apparent aspiration to be more than undemanding pulp entertainment.² However, like many similar fantasy-drama shows—such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) or *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020), which are set in the present day and aimed at a young adult demographic—*Warrior Nun* makes repeated use of popular conceptions of medieval history or medievalizing aesthetics. Equally, like *Buffy* and *Sabrina*, *Warrior Nun* pairs a female lead with stock tropes of women’s empowerment in order to appeal to its desired audience. Its showrunner explicitly pitches it as “the best feminist Catholic superhero show about sisterhood you’ve never seen.”³

Warrior Nun centers on an orphaned, quadriplegic teenager, Ava Silva, who revives in a Spanish morgue to find herself suddenly in possession of superpowers and of the ability to walk thanks to a sacred artifact implanted in her back. This makes her the “Halo Bearer,” the leading figure of a shadowy order of nuns charged with fighting demonic forces.⁴ Yet while *Warrior Nun*’s writers—or at least its marketers—are clearly aware of an audience for media which positions itself as woman-centered and feminist, and

¹ Andrew B. R. Elliott has distinguished between historical accuracy in film/media as an adherence to verifiable historical facts, and historical authenticity as a mode of presenting plausible-seeming historical worlds or narratives; see Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages: The Methods of Cinema and History in Portraying the Medieval World* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2011), 192-205.

² Netflix rarely releases ratings for its original programming, making it difficult to precisely assess the show’s popularity, but the renewal implies that it at least met the company’s expectations, per Will Thorne, “Warrior Nun’ Renewed for Season 2 at Netflix,” *Variety*, August 19, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/warrior-nun-renewed-season-2-netflix-1234739928>.

³ Nicole Hill, “How Warrior Nun Takes Its Viewers to Church,” *Den of Geek*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.denofgeek.com/tv/warrior-nun-netflix-simon-barry-comic-inspiration/>.

⁴ While Ava is referred to as “the Warrior Nun” because of her status as a Halo Bearer, she never takes any religious vows or enters anything which could plausibly be described as a novitiate. For simplicity’s sake, however, I will refer to her as a “Warrior Nun” without qualification. Equally, while there is a long-standing distinction made between a nun (a vowed woman religious who lives a cloistered life of contemplation) and a religious sister (a vowed woman religious who pursues an active apostolate which takes her outside of the cloister), *Warrior Nun* uses the terms interchangeably when referring to members of the Order of the Cruciform Sword.

although the show brings up issues of faith, feminism, sexuality, scientific ethics, and the historical treatment of women, it makes little real attempt to grapple seriously with these issues. Like the fantasy-drama *Charmed* (1998-2006), *Warrior Nun* uses familiar popular tropes about an imagined Middle Ages to drive its narrative: to be both a font of disruption and a possible source of resolution and catharsis. Yet the show's pairing of a secularized, romantic medievalism with run-of-the-mill Girl Power tropes says more about what the showrunners think will attract viewers of a certain demographic than it comments on the characters or the worlds which they inhabit.⁵ Indeed, while it does not indulge in many of that genre's more lurid tropes, *Warrior Nun* has more in common with the horror sub-genre known as "nunsplotation" than it does with more serious feminist considerations of medieval history or women's roles and status within organized religion.⁶ The "nun" Ava and her coterie of warrior sisters are framed as a group of physically strong, active female bodies who are nevertheless caught in the crossfire of a bigger conflict between forces of demonic evil and an oppressive, patriarchal institutional church, and suffer because of it.

Taken as a whole, *Warrior Nun* provides a neat example of how a certain genre of medievalizing media trades on the promise of engagement with contemporary issues such as feminism, while in reality using assumptions about the Middle Ages to justify rather conservative story telling choices. By first exploring *Warrior Nun*'s origins as a comic book, and some of the changes made in adapting it for the screen, we can see these choices in action. Next, we will assess how the show uses a medievalizing aesthetic—primarily in costuming and set design—to create a veneer of historical authenticity, one thick enough to make the show seem legitimate but thin enough to avoid alienating the desired audience. Then we will look more closely at how the Crusades are used as a kind of *leitmotif* by the show's writers, one which elides both the historical complexity of those conflicts and ignores their equally complex contemporary resonances. Lastly, we will look at how *Warrior Nun*'s medievalizing aesthetic combines with a shallow understanding of history to create a show full of "kick-ass women" which is far less feminist than its marketing would have us believe. Like many fantasy heroines

⁵ Roderick W. McDonald, "What do we do? Hop on a bus to medieval times?": Medievalisms of *Robin of Sherwood* and *Charmed*," in *Neomedievalism in the Media: Essays on Film, Television and Electronic Games*, ed. Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012), 119-47, 135-136.

⁶ "Nunsplotation" movies have existed since the age of silent film. *Häxan* (1922), about an outbreak of Satanic hysteria at a convent, is full of "images of female masturbation, lesbianism, the unrolling of stockings, nude floggings, and conspicuously sexual torture." James Newton, "Nunsplotation: The Forgotten Cycle", *Offscreen* 18, no. 6-7 (July 2014), <https://offscreen.com/view/nunsplotation>. *Häxan* and its many successors drew on a set of tropes—often anti-Catholic, sensational, and voyeuristic—which themselves had a long literary history. See for instance Susan Griffin, "Awful Disclosures: Women's Evidence in the Escaped Nun's Tale," *PMLA* 111, no. 1 (1996): 93-107; Susan Casteras, "Virgin Vows: The Early Victorian Artists' Portrayal of Nuns and Novices," *Victorian Studies* 24, no. 2 (1981): 157-84.

in medievalizing media, Ava and her fellow nuns can make only an “imperfect and incomplete escape” from patriarchy.⁷

From Comic Book to Netflix Original Series

In adapting *Warrior Nun Arealia* (a manga-style American comic which first appeared in the mid-1990s) into a streaming show in the 2020s, the show runners made changes which highlight shifting popular expectations in the framing of women lead characters. The “power woman” media trend of the 1990s—in which a female lead was depicted as physically strong but intensely sexualized, was frequently in both physical and emotional peril, and was reliant on a powerful male figure—is increasingly out of fashion, and *Warrior Nun* has reworked its source material accordingly.⁸ In *Warrior Nun Arealia*, the eponymous main character is not the teenage Ava Silva, but an older vowed religious, Sr. Shannon Masters. Like Ava, Sr. Shannon is an American orphan; unlike her, she was raised from a young age to become a member of the fictional Catholic religious Order of the Cruciform Sword (OCS), the purpose of which is to battle demons and other forces of evil. Sr. Shannon acquires superpowers—or more perhaps more precisely supernatural powers—which transform her into the Warrior Nun Arealia, an avatar of the original eleventh-century Arealia. Initially, like many comic book superheroes, Sr. Shannon has a home territory which she patrols: in her case, part of New York City. The comic’s creator, Ben Dunn, has stated that his main motivation in creating the comic was to produce a superhero character with an identifiable religious faith and a strong moral code.⁹

The comic series was controversial from its inception. This was not primarily because of the central conceit of a “warrior nun”—there is a longstanding popular fascination with the image of women religious on the battlefield, one which stretches back to at least the seventeenth century—but rather because of how *Warrior Nun Arealia* depicted these battling sisters.¹⁰ Particularly in the comic’s early issues, Sr. Shannon and her fellow

⁷ Jane Tolmie, “Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 145-58, 146.

⁸ Michael W. George, “Television’s Male Gaze: *The Male Perspective* in TNT’s *Mists of Avalon*,” in *The Middle Ages on Television: Critical Essays*, ed. Meriem Pagès and Karolyn Kinane (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, 2015), 141-57, 141-142.

⁹ Leslie Miller, “Super Sister Fights Evil,” *USA Today*, May 5, 1997,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200922020305/http://www.smallbytes.net/~bobkat/nun.html/>.

¹⁰ The memoirs of the Spanish-born Catalina de Erauso (1585/92-1650) who fled a monastery rather than take religious vows, went on to a military career, and who has since been variously read as a lesbian or a transgender man, were widely read in the early modern period. Catalina de Erauso, *Lieutenant Nun: Memoirs of a Basque Transvestite in the New World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Sherry Velasco, *The Lieutenant Nun: Transgenderism, Lesbian Desire, and Catalina de Erauso* (University of Texas Press, 2000). *Warrior Nun Arealia* is not the only comic book to feature a woman who wields supernatural powers in defence of the Catholic Church. For instance, The Magdalena, a recurring character in the *Witchblade*

warrior nuns were depicted in clothing which is revealing and decidedly sexualized. While she wears a simplified version of a Benedictine habit with a white wimple and black veil, Sr. Shannon's habit was split up to the crotch and down to the navel, with her nipples frequently visible through the material (Fig. 1). Such a sexualization of an avowedly religious character made several commentators in the 1990s uneasy—a spokeswoman for the U.S. Catholic Conference described Sr. Shannon's costume as “offensive; the habit is something sacred”—but this kind of depiction is part of a long tradition of male artists portraying nuns as attractive, athletic, and eroticized.¹¹



Figure 1: The cover of *Warrior Nun Arealia: Series 1, no. 1* (Antarctic Press: Dec. 1994).

comic series, is the title adopted by a series of women who, while not nuns, derive supernatural abilities from their descent from Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene and have been employed by the Inquisition since the Middle Ages. “The Magdalena”, *Witchblade Wiki*, https://witchblade.fandom.com/wiki/The_Magdalena.

¹¹ Leslie Miller, “Super Sister Fights Evil;” Elizabeth A. Woock, “Nuns in Action: A Graphic Investigation into a Graphic Issue,” *The Comics Grid: A Journal of Comics Scholarship* 10, no. 1, item 10 (2020): 1-21.

The Netflix show avoids the original comic's more overtly sexualized camp. In this, its replacement of Sr. Shannon with a new, younger lead, and its location shift from the United States to Spain, *Warrior Nun* makes clear that it is aimed at a young, global, contemporary streaming audience. It is at least superficially in tune with a changing popular understanding of what makes for an admirable woman lead character, and attempting to meet a growing popular demand for shows which feature women characters prominently, particularly in medieval- and medievalist-themed media.¹² This is unsurprising: Netflix is a profit-driven company which is well known for using "big data" to predict the kinds of shows that its viewers will want to watch, while also trying to attract the largest possible audiences.¹³ It is therefore logical that Netflix would undertake its adaptation of *Warrior Nun Areala* with an eye to what Megan Garber, in her analysis of the *Game of Thrones* character Lyanna Mormont, dubbed "tagline-friendly feminism:" a way of framing a show so that the very presence of prominent women characters within it is intended to be widely "discussed, and slogan-ed, and memed," thus increasing its success and profitability.¹⁴

Donning a Veil: The Medieval as Aesthetic

The visual program of *Warrior Nun*—across places, clothing, and other material objects—is rooted in both a sense of historicism and a nostalgic attachment to an idealized Middle Ages. This is achieved through filming on location in actual medieval or early modern buildings in Spain, but also through the use of costumes and props which are medievalizing and largely used by or associated with the show's women characters.

Clothing Makes the Nun

Just as the central figure changed from Sr. Shannon to Ava in the course of adapting the comic book into a television show, so too was there a shift in the visual language. In *Warrior Nun*, the sisters' clothing pairs a medievalizing aesthetic with more modern sensibilities, working to underscore the antiquity of the OCS without alienating contemporary viewers who might find more authentic medieval clothing or religious habits

¹² A fuller assessment of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, but see Virginia Blanton, Martha M. Johnson-Olin, and Charlene Miller Avrich, eds., *Medieval Women in Film: An Annotated Handlist and Reference Guide, with Essays on Teaching the Sorceress*, Medieval Feminist Forum Subsidia Series 1, 2nd ed. (Iowa City: The University of Iowa Libraries, 2014), particularly the introductory remarks.

¹³ Shalini Ramachandran and Joe Flint, "At Netflix, Who Wins When It's Hollywood vs. the Algorithm?," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 10, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/at-netflix-who-wins-when-its-hollywood-vs-the-algorithm-1541826015>.

¹⁴ Megan Garber, "Lyanna Mormont and the Slogan Feminism of *Game of Thrones*," *The Atlantic*, July 30, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/07/game-of-thrones-season-7-feminism/535110/>.

strange or unattractive.¹⁵ While, as we have seen above, the *Warrior Nun Arealia* comics depict the sisters of the OCS with full curves, exaggerated musculature, and often skimpy habits, the television series instead clothes the nuns in monochrome, ankle-length habits which are streamlined and form-fitting but also quite conservative, revealing little more than their heads and hands¹⁶ (Fig. 2). The sisters are sometimes shown wearing a short, dark veil which somewhat resembles a sixteenth-century French hood, but never wear a wimple or guimpe, the more traditional head coverings for Christian women religious. When in combat training or in battle, the OCS sisters don a kind of black balaclava which covers their hair, ears, and neck. The similarity in clothing is used to evoke in the viewer ideas of solidarity and fellowship among the women. Their attire also clearly sets them apart from the other young women whom Ava encounters in the series, who are determinedly secular in dress and attitude. In the season's climactic episodes, "2 Corinthians 10:4" and "Revelation 2:10," when Ava overcomes her reluctance and fully accepts the role of the Warrior Nun—albeit without taking any religious vows—the outfit she adopts bears a strong resemblance to the nuns' habits. Shotgun Mary, a character whose status is rather vaguely established as a member of the Order who is also not a vowed religious—and who is the show's only prominent Black character—similarly favors monochrome, leather-heavy outfits, though she wears trousers and a top with a cowl neck rather than a habit. Overall, the show's costume design very consciously eschews the "nunsploration" aesthetic of the comic books, although the fact that the nuns' battle habits feature leather cuffs, mail, and many buckled straps of dubious utility still nod to that genre.

¹⁵ This is quite a widespread approach. For a fuller discussion of how medievalist fantasy films and TV shows mix time periods, aesthetics, and anachronism in order to better immerse the audience in an imagined world, see Avery Lafortune, "Clothed in History: Costume and Medievalism in Fantasy Film and Television" (master's thesis, The University of Western Ontario, 2020), <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/7198/>.

¹⁶ The concept art for the show's costuming shows a great deal of consistency in this approach. Joshua Cairos, "Warrior Nun Costume Design," *Artstation*, July 2020, <https://www.artstation.com/artwork/3dEwLE>.



Figure 2: Sr. Camila, Shotgun Mary, Ava, Sr. Lilith, Sr. Beatrice (L-R). *Warrior Nun*, 2020.

Equally, the sleek lines of the nuns' habits and the molded leather cuirasses they wear strongly resemble the kinds of uniforms that women superheroes like Black Widow don in a Marvel movie: designed to create an impression of capability and strength, but not so much that these characters defy normative expectations for attractiveness or femininity. In a fight scene in the fourth episode, "Ecclesiasticus 26:9-10," Sr. Beatrice—a woman of color whose queer identity is strongly implied but never unambiguously stated—takes on a group of security guards. She lowers a full-face veil made of mail before engaging with the men and defeating them all. In the center of the veil, roughly where her mouth is, is a piece of metalwork in the shape of a shortened ringed cross (Fig. 3). This makes for an arresting visual (albeit one which inspires some immediate questions about the practicality of obscuring one's field of vision during combat). One reaction to Sr. Beatrice's attire during this scene is illustrative of the impact this scene had on viewers:

Did you know Sister Beatrice invented couture chainmail? That's right. Eat your heart out, Givenchy, because not only did our petite nun say "And? What about it?" to dressing up her habit with leather, steel, and hidden knives like some BDSM-loving Mother Mary, she also easily dispatched a gang of trained guards without spilling even a drop of sweat in the show's fourth episode.¹⁷

¹⁷ Jessica Toomer, "Warrior Nun Has Delivered Us a New Queer Icon: Sister Beatrice," *SyFy Wire*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/warrior-nun-netflix-sister-beatrice-queer-icon>.

Sr. Beatrice may kick ass, but she does not do so in a way that unsettles common notions about the appropriate boundaries for women's bodies: she takes up little space ("petite"), conceals her weaponry, and does not perspire.¹⁸ Her habit inspires references to traditionally feminine attire ("Givenchy") as much as it does non-normative sexual practices ("BDSM-loving"); its design gives more thought to first impressions than it does to practicality. Much as her dialogue does her queerness, Sr. Beatrice's clothing implies her empowerment while never actually confirming it.

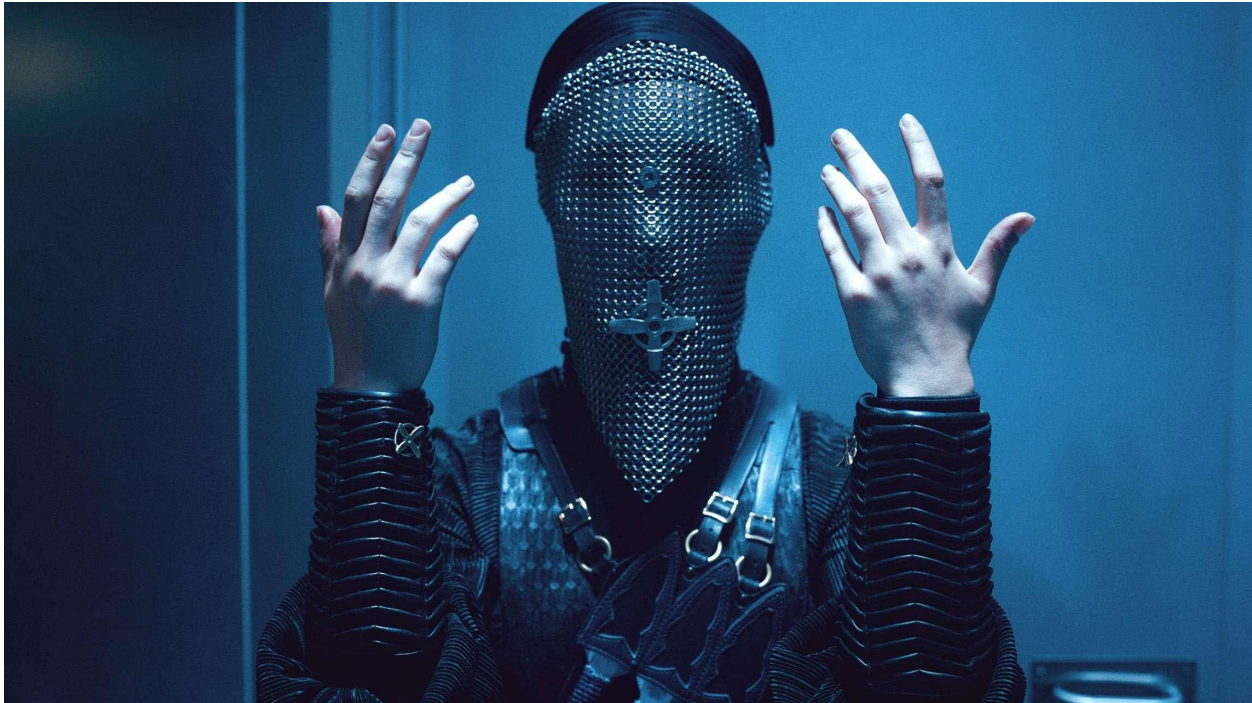


Figure 3: Sr. Beatrice before battle. *Warrior Nun*, 2020.

Inside the Cat's Cradle

The locations and sets of *Warrior Nun* are frequently medieval, and often consciously medievalizing as well. The show was filmed on location in southern Spain and makes ample use of surviving medieval and early modern structures, particularly churches and castles, in the region around Antequera, Marbella, Ronda, Málaga, and Seville. Churches and castles are probably the two types of building most readily associated with the Middle Ages in the popular imagination. Many of the interior shots of the OCS's headquarters—referred to by the sisters by the nickname “the Cat's Cradle”—and some of the exterior

¹⁸ Film studies scholar Kathleen Rowe has argued that women's bodies which defy social norms in some way—such as weight or height—are considered “unruly,” and that “Femininity is gauged by how little space women take up; women who are too fat or move too loosely appropriate too much space, obtruding on proper boundaries,” *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 63.

ones were filmed at the Real Colegiata de Santa María la Mayor in Antequera. This transitional late Gothic collegiate church was built 1514-1550 by the bishop of Málaga.¹⁹ Its interior is the part of the Cat's Cradle shown most often, and it is laid out as a multipurpose space. The church is evidently consecrated ground: there is an altar, pews, and a memorial service takes place there. However, at various times the nuns are also shown within the church running through martial arts drills, studying, and eating. One of the side chapels is home to the nuns' armory, which contains several semi-automatic weapons and a full suit of plate armor. These are obviously not uses to which nuns would put a church in reality. However, centering the world of these nuns so forcefully on this authentic late medieval sacred space is an efficient way of providing the viewer with a visual shorthand for the antiquity of the institution of which these women are members. This impression is reinforced by the murals depicting the Order's history which cover the walls of much of the church's interior. They imitate a variety of artistic styles, all of which pre-date the Real Colegiata by some two to three centuries. In trying to make an actual sixteenth-century building seem even older through the use of these medievalizing murals, and in using the paintings as the accompaniment to a recounting of the life of Areala of Córdoba, the makers of *Warrior Nun* are clearly drawing on medieval-like spaces to provide a sense of authenticity to a season-long story arc the origins of which stretch back centuries.

The Sisterhood of the Book

Several props in *Warrior Nun* also contribute to this visual, medievalizing shorthand. In the seventh episode, "Ephesians 4:22-24," Ava finds a leather-bound, hand-written book which contains a history of the Halo Bearers dating back to the beginning of the OCS. Ava and a group of the sisters gather around it while Sr. Beatrice begins to sight-translate a passage about the order's history from Latin.²⁰ As Sr. Beatrice opens the manuscript, however, we see that the first few folios contain the signatures of several past Warrior Nuns, written in a variety of hands that resemble medieval or early modern scripts.²¹ The book's front cover contains an attempt at a Latin title along the top and bottom, *Sororis ad Sororem* (together with the even less persuasive row of letters *B C D E F G H* running

¹⁹ Jesús Romero Benítez, "La Real Colegiata de Santa María la Mayor de Antequera," *Andalucía en la Historia* 4 (2004), 100-3. Today the church is deconsecrated and used as a cultural space. Other exterior shots, principally of the nuns training, were shot in the courtyard of the fourteenth-century fortress the Alcazaba in Antequera.

²⁰ However, Sr. Beatrice's words do not accord with the Latin text shown on screen, which is at least in part a copy of twelfth-century nun Hildegard of Bingen's "O dulcissime amator." "O dulcissime amator," *International Society of Hildegard of Bingen Studies*, <http://www.hildegard-society.org/2017/05/o-dulcissime-amator-symphonia-virginum.html>.

²¹ Their names, including Qion Rong Ying, Isabelle Roget, and Erin O'Shaughnessy, suggest ethnic diversity among the past Warrior Nuns. However, their signatures are all written in Latin script (and all appear to have been either printed or written with a decidedly modern ballpoint pen).

vertically along the middle of the cover). While not especially convincing to a historian of the book, its materiality and Latinity are clearly intended to lend authority to the account being read from the manuscript.

The Warrior Nuns' outfits, property, and home setting are therefore some of the key visual cues which help the viewers to understand both the women's identity and the Order's past and present, all on terms that are both distinctive, immediately comprehensible, and yet not alienating to the target audience. Their spaces and material objects are stock "medieval". The outfits are obviously not everyday attire, yet they are not so very different from lay clothing as to be distracting for the audience: the Warrior Nuns are not shown wearing cilices or cornettes, which might read as disturbing or comical respectively to modern eyes. The sisters of the OCS inhabit a past which is not so foreign a country from our own.

The Crusades as a Grounding Shorthand

As we have seen, *Warrior Nun* relies on medievalizing historical references to support its characterization and worldbuilding, relying on the audience's pre-existing store of "historical capital" to make for more efficient storytelling.²² In particular, several flashbacks scattered over the course of the first season recount the origins of the OCS and the life of the first Warrior Nun, Areala of Córdoba. Areala is shown as a participant in the First Crusade (1096-1099), and references to Areala as a Crusader and to the Crusades more generally are used in the show to situate the OCS within a convincingly venerable lineage.

We are told that Areala was a "fierce warrior" from eleventh-century Iberia who "wasn't born a believer"—whether this is indeed an implication that she was of Muslim or Jewish heritage is never clarified—but who "found her purpose" when she "found Him." Battle scenes set during the First Crusade show Areala in mail armor and on horseback, facing off against enemy forces who are clad in a mishmash of medievalizing armor.²³ However, she suffered a "defeat at the hands of the barbarians." She then decided to found a new religious order for women, the OCS, "at the Lord's urging." This origin story for Areala differs substantially from the original comics, in which she was a Valkyrie who converted to Christianity from paganism.

²² For the concept of historical capital, see Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, *Cinematic Illuminations: The Middle Ages on Film* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 36.

²³ The battle scenes were shot at the Castillo de Almodóvar del Río, not far from Córdoba. The castle has its origins in the 8th century, but much of the surviving structure dates to the later Middle Ages. It may be familiar to viewers as a filming location for another medievalist television series, *Game of Thrones*. "Game of Thrones Guided Tours," *Castillo de Almodovar*, 2018, <https://castillodealmodovar.com/en/visits/games-of-thrones/>.

This shift, from Viking-era Scandinavia to eleventh-century Iberia, apparently emerged from the writers' belief that the show needed "a sense of Christian history," and that references to Christian beliefs amid so many fantastical elements would help to ground the show, to make "the setting feel a little bit more real and not new."²⁴ Indeed, the Crusades function as something of a *leitmotif* in the show. The Crusades loom large in many medievalist narratives, as one of the few events of the Middle Ages that most people have heard of, even if in a very reductive manner.²⁵ Here the conflicts provide motivational impulses for several the show's characters through to the present day. Lilith, a sister with a cut-glass English accent, is initially an antagonist towards Ava. This is due to her feeling of entitlement to the position of Halo Bearer, since we are told that her family "has contributed six Halo Bearers over three centuries," and "has worked for the church since the time of the First Crusade." Other characters are keen to locate an artefact associated with the angel Adriel, a shield made of a mystical metal which is unearthed during an archaeological dig in Morocco. We are told that "it's been lost from the Church since the Third Crusade," with the implication that it had been used by church forces in battles during the Crusades.

While the latter part of the season reveals that Ava and the other sisters have been wildly misled about the early history of the OCS and its mission, there is no attempt to similarly complicate the show's use of the Crusades. These conflicts serve instead as a suitably sweeping historical moment on which to hang the actions of the show: gesturing to a vaguely sketched Middle Ages to provide authority and depth to *Warrior Nun*, to give it a "sense of Christian history" which tacitly accepts a culturally Christian worldview as a default even as it attempts to critique the male-dominated hierarchy of the Catholic Church. This is perhaps why showrunner Simon Barry stated that *Warrior Nun*'s costume designer, Cristina Sopeña, "was given complete freedom to design modern Crusader Knights for women, female Crusader Knights," with no apparent awareness that the image of the Crusader knight is anything other than a neutral or even positive ones.²⁶ Yet that image has been frequently used, and indeed weaponized, by modern far right and

²⁴ There is of course a clear assumption here about the religious/cultural backgrounds and competencies of those watching the show. Sam Stone, "Simon Barry on Adapting Warrior Nun for Netflix," *CBR*, July 5, 2020, <https://www.cbr.com/simon-barry-adapting-warrior-nun-netflix/>.

²⁵ The literature on medievalism and the Crusades is substantial. See for example Amy S. Kaufman and Paul B. Sturtevant, "Extended Bibliography: Islamophobia and the Crusades," *The Devil's Historians*, 2020, <https://www.devilshistorians.com/bib-islamophobia/>.

²⁶ Xandra Harbet, "Warrior Nun Showrunner on the Netflix Series and its Future," *Looper*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.looper.com/230923/warrior-nun-showrunner-on-the-netflix-series-and-its-future-exclusive-interview/>.

fascist movements.²⁷ These associations are not erased by swapping male knights for female ones.

White women have a long history of complicity with white supremacist and patriarchal endeavors, and of drawing on medievalist tropes in so doing. For instance, in the 1920s, members of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan believed that “voices like unto those that commanded Joan of Arc” urged them to defend white supremacist institutions, while today, far-right white women liken themselves to medieval “shield maidens and Valkyries” helping to preserve “white civilization.”²⁸ The sisters of the OCS cannot be fashioned in the image of “modern Crusader Knights for women” and remain historically innocent.

Modern Women’s Agency, Medieval Women’s Oppression

The events of *Warrior Nun* take place in the present day, and most of the sisters shown on screen appear to be in their late teens or early twenties. They are not implied to be entirely naïve or disconnected from the world around them, despite their membership of a religious order: an uncommon choice for women their age in the early twenty-first century. For example, we see one sister publicly mourn another by performing a rendition of R&B singer Frank Ocean’s 2016 song, “Pink + White.” However, just like the building in which they live, the institution of which the sisters are part is frozen in a medievalizing state. The nuns accordingly straddle the line between contemporary stereotypes of “medieval” (submissive to male authority) and “modern” (inevitably involving the words “empowered,” “strong,” or “kickass”) women.²⁹ In this, they are comparable to women characters in many medievalizing fantasy-drama series, all of which have been the focus of much study in recent years.³⁰

²⁷ Nicholas L. Paul, “Modern Intolerance and the Medieval Crusades,” in *Whose Middle Ages?: Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, ed. Andrew Albin, Mary C. Erler, Thomas O’Donnell, Nicholas L. Paul, and Nina Rowe (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 34–43.

²⁸ Anne Llewellyn Barstow, “She Gets Inside Your Head: Joan of Arc and Contemporary Women’s Spirituality,” in *Joan of Arc and Spirituality*, ed. Ann W. Astell and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 283–93, 283; Seyward Darby, “The Rise of the Valkyries,” *Harper’s Magazine*, September 2017, <https://harpers.org/archive/2017/09/the-rise-of-the-valkyries/>.

²⁹ Much scholarship by historians in recent decades has been devoted to dismantling the stereotype of medieval women as uniformly submissive and passive. See Heather Tanner, ed., *Medieval Elite Women and the Exercise of Power, 1100–1400: Moving beyond the Exceptionalist Debate* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). For an overview of medieval and medievalist considerations of gender, sexuality, and women’s roles, see Amy S. Kaufman and Paul Sturtevant, *The Devil’s Historians: How Modern Extremists Abuse the Medieval Past* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 103–125.

³⁰ The most prominent are probably *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *Game of Thrones*, all three now major franchises which span multiple media forms. For some introductory studies, see Leslie A. Donovan, “The Valkyrie Reflex in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*: Galadriel, Shelob, Eowyn and Arwen”, in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. Jane Chance (New York: Routledge, 2003), 106–132; Valerie E. Frankel, *Women in Game of Thrones: Power, Conformity and Resistance* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company,

Warrior Nun, however, is not particularly interested in more than a surface exploration of the intersections of feminism, faith, and institutional authority. It gestures towards feminist critiques of the Catholic Church, but more as a form of marketing strategy to appeal to young women viewers who have been told that “empowerment” is both something they should want and something that they can acquire for a price—what Jia Tolentino has termed “a particular brand of largely contentless feminism, a celebratory form divorced from material politics, which makes it palatable—maybe irresistible—to the business world.”³¹ For example, the OCS is under the direct supervision of a Cardinal Duretti, whom showrunner Simon Barry has characterized as “a self-serving patriarchal politician.” Duretti is also the head of a second faction of nuns, all failed former aspirants to join the OCS, who are dubiously moral and self-serving, if not outright sociopathic. They unquestioningly follow his orders. Duretti’s characterization, Barry stated, was one “that the audience would accept” but was “not necessarily [...] some structural political statement.” Barry further went on to say that

our show is about women primarily, and it’s about sisterhood, and it’s about nuns who exists [*sic*] in this pre-existing dynamic that people are aware of. It’s a church run by men and nuns are in a separate category and in a separate order and they don’t have the power that men have. That wasn’t something we needed to lay on heavily. It was implicit, but it allowed us to set it up and throw it away.³²

The show’s hesitancy about making a “structural political statement,” together with its throwaway evocation of the Catholic Church’s long history of institutionalized sexism, are grounded in a particular subset of medievalist tropes. There are of course many traditionalist, conservative Roman Catholics today who look to the Middle Ages as something of a Golden Age, a source of spiritual, cultural, and political inspiration. However, various strains of romantic medievalism which are still prominent today

2014); Elizabeth E. Heilman, “Blue Wizards and Pink Witches: Representations of Gender Identity and Power”, in *Harry Potter’s World: Multidisciplinary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth E. Heilman (New York: Routledge, 2003), 221-239; Ruthann Mayes-Elma, *Females and Harry Potter: Not all that Empowering* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); and Zita Eva Rohr and Lisa Benz, *Queenship and the Women of Westeros: Female Agency and Advice in Game of Thrones and A Song of Ice and Fire* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). For studies of an array of lesser known works, see Lori Campbell, *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2014).

³¹ Jia Tolentino, “How ‘Empowerment’ Became Something for Women to Buy,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 12, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/magazine/how-empowerment-became-something-for-women-to-buy.html>.

³² Amber Dowling, “‘Warrior Nun’ Creator on Ava and Beatrice’s Relationship and the ‘Sisterhood’ and Religion in the Adaptation,” *Variety*, July 14, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/tv/features/warrior-nun-simon-bary-ava-lgbtq-adaptation-interview-1234706645/>.

emerged from Victorian texts which were determinedly anti-Catholic, framing the medieval Church (and thus its contemporary descendant) as backwards, barbaric, and tyrannical, and the Protestant Reformation as a triumph of rationality and western civilization.³³ A whole genre of twentieth-century “neomedievalist feminist dystopias” uses a stylized, imagined Middle Ages to caution against the encroachment of a resurgent patriarchy.³⁴

While *Warrior Nun* is in sympathy with medieval aesthetics, it is also grounded in an apparent aversion towards the medieval Church, one which can see it only as a source of oppression for women. In the latter half of the season, it is revealed that the Warrior Nuns since Areala have been thoroughly misled both about the nature of their powers and of the battle that they have been fighting for centuries. The gendered medievalism of the show can thus be understood as the binary complement of what Amy S. Kaufman has termed “muscular medievalism,” from which point of view the past is imagined as “a man’s world in which masculinity was powerful, impenetrable, and uniquely privileged.”³⁵ In trying to liberate the present-day characters, *Warrior Nun* must frame their medieval foremothers as gullible dupes.

Elizabeth Woock has argued that *Warrior Nun Areala* and similar comics should be understood as feminist texts because they pass the Bechdel Test—that is, that they are feminist because they feature at least two named women who talk to each other about a topic other than a man.³⁶ However, for a given piece of media to pass the Bechdel Test is not proof of its feminist bona fides—the Test merely establishes that it has cleared the lowest bar possible for women’s presence in a work of fiction as discrete characters, and it does not consider race, sexual orientation, disability, or other potentially marginalized aspects of a woman’s identity.³⁷ Indeed, *Warrior Nun* has already attracted some popular

³³ See David Matthews, “Middle,” in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer Editions, 2014), 141-49.

³⁴ Daniel Lukes, “Neomedievalist Feminist Dystopia,” *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 5, no. 1 (2014): 44-56.

³⁵ Amy S. Kaufman, “Muscular Medievalism,” *The Year’s Work in Medievalism* 31 (2016): 56-66, 58, https://ywim.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/YWiM-31-2016_09_Kaufman.pdf.

³⁶ Elizabeth A. Woock, “Nuns Having Fun: Popular Graphic Representations of a Historical Issue,” in *Where Is History Today?: New Ways of Representing the Past*, ed. Marcel Arbeit and Ian Christie (Olomouc: Palacký University Olomouc, 2015), 159-70, 168. The Bechdel Test is named for cartoonist Alison Bechdel, whose 1985 comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* first articulated the test’s three criteria.

³⁷ The Bechdel Test is a litmus test whose best utility is not in quantifying a movie’s degree of feminism, but in demonstrating just how many Hollywood movies fail to clear even such a very low bar when it comes to women’s representation. See Monica Racic, “Do This Year’s Best Picture Oscar Nominees Pass the Bechdel Test?,” *The New Yorker*, March 3, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/do-this-years-best-picture-oscar-nominees-pass-the-bechdel-test>. For a further consideration of the test in relation

criticism for being part of the “pantheon [of shows about] white women who kick butt,” a genre which excludes non-white women and women who do not fit white beauty ideals.³⁸ The central figures in these shows may have become a popular shorthand for “strong female character” but, as Lucy Barnhouse has pointed out in her discussion of teaching movie medievalism in the college classroom, it is far from given that they will be complex characters with meaningful agency.³⁹

Netflix’s adaptation of *Warrior Nun* cannot be read as a straightforwardly feminist simply because it features many women characters who talk to one another, or who band together in the show’s finale to fight mostly male antagonists. While some scholars have seen “warrior woman” characters such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer as positive and feminist representations, providing “an open-image fantasy of female resistance to patriarchal authority,” others have questioned whether engaging in physical violence makes a woman character “‘worthy’—that is, a feminist role model?”⁴⁰ Moreover, it is possible for a woman in a medievalizing fantasy-drama to be physically highly skilled but still marginalized by the narrative. Lauren Rocha has pointed out that the teen drama series *Teen Wolf* (2011-2017) stresses the elite archery and combat skills of one of the lead women characters, Allison Argent, yet “her agency is largely limited in favor of spotlighting the dominance and agency of the male characters.”⁴¹ *Warrior Nun*’s hesitancy to make “some structural political statement,” coupled with its unwillingness or inability to explore the complexity, messiness, even complicity, of a woman’s participation in a patriarchal institution makes it a feminist show with nothing much to say about structures of power—and therefore not much of a feminist show at all.

to film, see Jennifer O’Meara, “What ‘The Bechdel Test’ Doesn’t Tell Us: Examining Women’s Verbal and Vocal (Dis)Empowerment in Cinema,” *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 6 (2016): 1120-1123.

³⁸ Melanie McFarland, “Enough Already with the White Warrior Woman Worship,” *Salon*, July 2, 2020, <https://www.salon.com/2020/07/02/warrior-nun-hanna-cursed-white-women-netflix-amazon/>.

³⁹ Lucy C. Barnhouse, “The Reality of Joan of Arc: Teaching Movie Medievalism,” *Perspectives on History* 58, no. 3 (2020): 18-20.

⁴⁰ Frances Early, “The Female Just Warrior Reimagined: From *Boudicca* to *Buffy*,” in *Athena’s Daughters: Television’s New Women Warriors*, ed. Frances Early and Kathleen Kennedy (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press), 55-65, 64; Simone Celine Marshall, “Wonder Woman and the *Nine Ladies Worthy*: The Male Gaze and What It Takes to Be a ‘Worthy Woman’,” in *Medievalism to Early-Modernism: Adapting the English Past*, ed. Marina Gerzic and Aidan Norrie (New York: Routledge, 2019), 21-35, 23.

⁴¹ Lauren Rocha, “Fighting and Feminist Expression: The Argent Family and the Limits of Female Agency in *Teen Wolf*,” in *Gender Warriors: Reading Contemporary Urban Fantasy*, ed. U. Melissa Anyiwo and Amanda Jo Hobson (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 71-84, 71.

Conclusion

“Pain is what made me a Sister Warrior,” one of the characters states in a voiceover in *Warrior Nun*’s official trailer, shortly before its climactic tagline: “Fucks Given? Nun.”⁴² In this glib slogan, its creators’ assertion that it is a “kick-ass feminist superhero show,” its often vague and amorphous statements about faith, gender, and power, and its use of stock medievalist tropes, Netflix’s *Warrior Nun* clearly aspires to tick all the boxes that an algorithm has decreed makes for a show that will attract clicks from a certain kind of audience demographic.⁴³ It is a show that insists on a feminist reading without providing a feminist text; on a Middle Ages which must be escaped even as it cannot be.

⁴² “Netflix’s *Warrior Nun*: Season 1 – Official Red Band Trailer,” IGN Channel, *YouTube*, June 17, 2020, https://youtu.be/g4yWWywix_s.

⁴³ Xandra Harbet, “*Warrior Nun* Showrunner.”