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Medievalism, Fakelore, and the Commodification of Story-Telling in the Afterlives of Harry Potter

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In his last will and testament, Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore leaves Hermione Granger a book "in the hope that she might find it instructive and entertaining."[1] This book, one that the Muggle-born Hermione and Harry had never heard of, is *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* and it proves instrumental in their search for the Deathly Hallows and the final defeat of Voldemort.[2] After the end of the series in 2007, Harry Potter fans were holding their breath for yet another cinematic journey into their beloved universe of wizards, dragons, and monstrous villains. It is at this time, in the year 2008, that a little book appeared on bookstore shelves around the world. *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* came out right on the heels of the last book in the *Harry Potter* series as a supplement or clarification, of sorts: "*The Tales of Beedle the Bard* is really a distillation of the themes found in the Harry Potter books, and writing it has been the most wonderful way to say goodbye to a world I loved and lived in for seventeen years," says J. K. Rowling in an interview.[3] Although the author might have allegedly intended it to say goodbye to the Potter world, the collection actually served as yet another attempt to keep the door to the Potter universe open for just a little bit longer—and to keep the desire of the fans burning ever harder. *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* was followed by the (at the time) ongoing movie adaptations of the original heptalogy, as well as other numerous publications including *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*,[4] a theatrical play (production and script), theme parks, and all possible forms of merchandising. Intended to allow the Potter fans to have a close look at the book that plays such a crucial role in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, to bring to life the stories that Hermione reads yet are mentioned only briefly or in passing in the final volume of the heptalogy, *Beedle the Bard* presents the reader with the full text of five tales, each accompanied by a fictional commentary by nobody other than the famous (equally fictional) Albus Dumbledore himself.[5] However, the volume is not a mere write-up of the tales for the fans' enjoyment. The book is presented as an ancient, medieval manuscript, a "rediscovery" of pseudo-authentic ancient narratives from the fifteenth century, allegedly re-translated by Hermione herself, annotated and edited by Dumbledore, whose work J. K. Rowling, the *Harry Potter* series

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[1] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 2007), 126.
[2] J. K. Rowling, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* (New York: Lumos, 2008).
[3] Vilma Anusaite, "'Beedle the Bard' Goes Under the Hammer: A Handwritten Book by JK Rowling, Mentioned in 'Harry Potter,' Is for Sale," ABC News, February 19, 2009; accessed October 14, 2022, https://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=3978033&page=1.
[4] J. K. Rowling, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (New York: Arthur Levine Books, 2017).
[5] Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 135.

author, now edits and annotates. This multilayered approach creates a sense of authenticity and pseudo-realism, and its medievalism amplifies the enjoyment of the text for the *Harry Potter* fan audience.

The intersections of *Harry Potter* and medievalism have been studied extensively. As Renée Ward puts it, the series "participates extensively in medievalisms" in its existence "as part of a fully-fledged multimedia and material culture."[6] Thus a seemingly endless proliferation of artifacts and experiences is perpetuated: from books to films to theme parks, from college club Quidditch teams to the newest Lego or Playmobil sets. As the Harry Potter universe expands, "so do the ways in which it interacts with all things medieval."[7] Drawing on Stephanie Trigg, Ward argues that *Harry Potter* offers us the "best example" of contemporary medievalism as convergence culture. It is precisely this convergence of multiple modes (the academic, the creative, and the popular) of thinking about the Middle Ages that makes Rowling's work both fascinatingly complex and problematic.[8]

The *Harry Potter* books reveal both Rowling's engagement with a wide range of literary traditions and her reformulation of them.[9] The generic aspects of the *Harry Potter* cycle are truly complex: it is an amalgam of a wainscot narrative, a *bildungsroman*, and a fairy tale.[10] Each individual novel as well as the large story arc of the entire heptalogy about the Boy Who Lived is in itself a fairy tale. However, Rowling's engagement with the fairy tale genre seems to be particularly problematic in the context of current discussions regarding medievalism and authenticity. The question about the essence and legitimacy of medievalism, which continues to occupy a central place in medievalism studies, exposes the inherent tension between accuracy and poetic license, authenticity and fantasy, historical truth and imagination. With the proliferation of medievalisms in modern literature, cinema, television, and gaming, and particularly in the times when misinformation spreads with incredible ease, while the appreciation of and respect for intellectualism is ever diminishing, the questions about the delicate balance between imagination and authenticity seem to acquire new importance.

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[6] Renée Ward, "Harry Potter and Medievalism" in *Medieval Afterlives in Contemporary Culture,* ed. Gail Ashton (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 263–274, 263.

[7] Ward, "Harry Potter and Medievalism," 263.

[8] Stephanie Trigg, "Medievalism and Convergence Culture: Researching the Middle Ages for Fiction and Film," *Parergon*, 25, no. 2 (2008): 99–118, 99, as cited in Ward, 263.

[9] Tison Pugh has recently called Rowling's impact "unparalleled." See Tison Pugh, *Harry Potter and Beyond: On J. K. Rowling's Fantasies and Other Fictions* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2020), 1.

[10] Kerrie Anne Le Lievre, "Wizards and Wainscots: Generic Structures and Genre Themes in the Harry Potter Series," *Mythlore* 24, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 25–36.

In this article, we examine the balance of imagination and authenticity in Rowling's medievalism through the productive and counterproductive ways in which the author makes use of fairy tales to augment her Potter universe in the later ancillaries, such as *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. As we compare fairy tale elements in an expansion like *Beedle the Bard* with the approach found in the original heptalogy, we witness a process similar to other ways in which medievalisms are exploited by market forces. Certainly, the market exerts positive creative momentum. Even though Rowling's popularity may have waned somewhat recently, she remains a powerful force in popular culture. The Potter universe now extends far beyond the original books and films: virtually in the web portal the Wizarding World (www.wizardingworld.com), formerly known under the telling title "Potter*more*" (emphasis ours); and experientially in The Wizarding World of Harry Potter Universal Studios theme parks at multiple locations (Orlando and Hollywood in America, and Osaka in Japan). Henry Jenkins writes about the positive impact of fan activism that we can see in the evolution of the group formerly known as the Harry Potter Alliance.[11] Examining fan culture and desire for immersive experience, Abby Waysdorf and Stijn Reijnders note that fans "create the sense that the Wizarding World of Harry Potter is a lively and living space, much as the locations are in the series. It becomes a place to 'hang out' rather than a place to pass through."[12] Of course, the market was ready to exploit Rowling's ability to entertain and to make the ordinary extraordinary and vice versa; this was part of her initial popularity in which magic-hungry and enthusiastic audiences then and now still want to participate.[13] While the authorial expansion of the fictional universe is to be expected and should not be viewed negatively, Rowling's way of approaching it, as well as the underlying motivation behind it and the consequent repercussions of her worldbuilding are all predicated upon creation of what we see as "fakelore." When one looks at how fairy tales are used in Rowling's story-making, it

[11] Henry Jenkins, "'Cultural Acupuncture:' Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance" in "Transformative Works and Fan Activism," ed. Henry Jenkins and Sangita Shresthova, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures,*10 (2012). https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0305. The arc of this development can be seen in the evolution of the Harry Potter Alliance over 15 years. As the current website states: "The Harry Potter Alliance was founded with a simple idea: what if fans used their passion and creativity to make the world a more loving, equitable place?" After over a decade, the HPA has become a group called "Fandom Forward" (fandomforward.org)—branching further out into real-life activist causes.

[12] Abby Waysdorf and Stijn Reijnders, "Immersion, Authenticity and the Theme Park as Social Space: Experiencing the Wizarding World of Harry Potter," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2018): 173–188, 183. Waysdorf and Reijnders would not necessarily agree with Umberto Eco's description of Disneyland as "a place of total passivity" in *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1986), 48. Jane Lovell talks about an addition to Eco´s 10 Little Middle Ages "…if an eleventh were added today, it may be entitled: 'The fairytale-neomedieval tourist destination'" in "Fairytale Authenticity: Historic City Tourism, Harry Potter, Medievalism and the Magical Gaze," *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 14, no. 5-6 (2019): 448–465, 453.

[13] See Roni Natov, "Harry Potter and the Extraordinariness of the Ordinary," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 25, no. 2 (2001): 310–327.

becomes ever more apparent how slippery the convergence of Potter medievalisms is. The author continues to create (back)stories and myths to prop up her fantasy world on foundations that are more precarious and perhaps more treacherous than they might first appear.[14] Before turning to the fairy tale elements in detail, it is, however, necessary to define fakelore further.

From Folk Lore to Fake Lore to Fakelore: Rowling's Use of Fairy Tales

"Fakelore" is an older term that takes on new meaning in 2023. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it was coined by the folklorist R. M. Dorson as a pejorative term to describe stories that he perceived to be specious folklore presented to an unsuspecting audience as genuine.[15] In this, Dorson targeted popularizing trends in the contemporaneous American folklore studies and expressed his frustration with amateur folklorists, whom he saw as degrading the discipline with their inauthentic and unprofessional "research." In his 1950 article "Folklore and Fake Lore," Dorson emphasized that "folklore needs to be gathered and interpreted with insight, integrity, and some sense of social meanings."[16] Fakelore, on the other hand, is presented as a "deliberately contrived product" that "casts a warm, nostalgic glow over the folk," it "grins coyly at their fun, and drips tears over their tragedies."[17] As Dorson discusses in a later publication for the *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, fakelore is "the presentation of spurious and synthetic writings under the claim that they are genuine folklore."[18] The term is intended "as a rallying cry against the distortion of a serious subject," particularly in the United States, "where popularization, commercialization, and the mass media engulf the culture."[19]

We can see that what really drives Dorson's concerns as early as in the 1950s is the familiar preoccupation with the existing tension between disciplinary integrity/authenticity and market considerations. Of course, Dorson's definition would treat much medievalist fantasy fiction—from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* to much of what we read and love today — as fakelore, to say nothing of most work done presently in medievalism studies. We acknowledge, together with Stephanie

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[14] The pseudo-medieval structure of Rowling's tales in *Beedle the Bard*, for example, undercuts her otherwise appropriate critique of social and educational hierarchies.

[15] "Fakelore," n. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, http://www.oed.com.

[16] R. M. Dorson, "Folklore and Fake Lore," *American Mercury* 70 (March 1950): 335–43, 343.

[17] R. M. Dorson, "Review of *Wisconsin Is My Doorstep* by Robert E. Gard," *The Journal of American Folklore*, 62, no. 244 (1949): 201.

[18] R. M. Dorson, "Fakelore," *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 65 (1969): 56–64, 60, Accessed October 14, 2022, https://www.digi-hub.de/viewer/image/DE-11-001938266/76/#topDocAnchor.

[19] Dorson, "Fakelore," 64. "These rewriters of folklore tailored their writings to their market," Dorson complains (60), thus they taint the purity and the integrity of actual folklore. This results finally in "the ideological manipulation of folklore" which is "a more insidious kind of fakelore" (64).

Trigg, that "ownership of expertise about the medieval past is no longer the preserve of the academy" and concede that any world-building presupposes rich background and contextualization and is done in a way that makes both all things medieval and folklore more widely available to the 'general reader' than ever before."[20] Nevertheless, one should not ignore that part of "the project of medievalism" is also to explore "the dynamics and the implications of [this] broad dissemination of the 'medieval' in contemporary culture."[21] The author of *Harry Potter* takes her folklore creation a step too far. Her work overall, but also more narrowly with respect to fairy tales, is, undoubtedly, a part of the project of medievalism, but her so-called folklore also shows some serious cracks in its magic mirror as it drives the dissemination of medievalism in contemporary culture. Rowling ends up creating a type of fakelore that unwittingly promotes the kind of anti-intellectualism pervading more toxic medievalisms today.

As mentioned earlier, the heptalogy itself can be viewed as a fairy tale: the series overall, just like each individual volume, conforms to the genre of the fairy tale in narrative structure, overall message, functions, and character development. It adheres to a number of the generic conventions: in its use of the triadic structures, of the dualism, and the frequent use of magic numbers such as 3, 6, 7, 9, 12, and 13.[22] Among other fairy tale markers are the use of a rather formulaic opening in at least several books, which, begin with the retelling of the main protagonist's prehistory; as well as the presence of a sharp and unambivalent conflict and the ample use of formulaic, alliterative names that convey the nature of their owners. Finally, the narrative is autobiographical in nature and features the familiar parentless and forsaken underdog-protagonist on his complex path of growth from good to better, while his opposite, the main villain, declines in a typical continuous straight-line way, from bad to worse.[23]

And, of course, as in all fairy tales, there is magic and lots of it. Most importantly, this is the kind of magic that corresponds perfectly to J. R. R. Tolkien's definition in his seminal essay "On Fairy-Stories": magic which is "neither laughed at nor explained away" and "is

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[20] Trigg, "Medievalism and Convergence Culture," 118.

[21] Trigg goes on to say that this popularization or even (daresay) democratization "will surely affect the way our scholarly work is perceived—and perhaps, funded—beyond the academy. Whether we deplore or embrace these developments, and whether we seek to influence their future course or not, there is much to do…" ("Medievalism and Convergence Culture," 118).

[22] As expected, the most typical triads are "lack—quest—discovery" and "departure—journey—return." The common dualism found in fairy tales, also present in *Harry Potter* are good vs. evil, protagonist vs. antagonist, this world vs. other world. Importantly, the contrast of this world with the other world has several layers in *Harry Potter*: it consists of both the juxtaposition of the Muggle world vs. Wizarding world and of life vs. afterlife.

[23] There is much extensive scholarship on fairy tales as a genre. See, for example, Bernd Wollenweber, "Thesen zum Märchen" in *Arbeitstexte zum Unterricht: Märchenanalysen,* ed. Siefgried Schodel (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977), 62–70.

not an end in itself, [but whose] virtue is in its operations: among these the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires."[24] Predictably, just like so many fairy tales before it, the *Harry Potter* cycle expresses most ardently the primordial desire to overcome death. The words on the monument to Lily and James Potter in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* openly proclaim: "And the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death."[25] One can argue, of course, about the layers of meaning behind these words, and much ink has been spilled by now on dissecting the grand message of the *Harry Potter* cycle, its religious subtext, its correspondence to or divergence from, or even threat to, the Christian eschatology. All of this is beyond the scope of this paper. And yet, anybody who has ever read the Potter cycle cannot but admit that overcoming death is its major preoccupation, expressed both openly and overtly. After all, the fairy tale is, as Tolkien himself acknowledges, "'escapist' literature," best expressed by the German term *Wunschdichtung*.[26] The term "escapist" should not be taken negatively, for as Tolkien so poignantly observes: "Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?"[27] One may call fairy tales utopian fiction, the one that bespeaks the fears of its tellers and reveals their most deeply hidden hopes and dreams, their vision of a better and fairer society, and provides them with a coping mechanism through an illusion of a reward or fairness. And there is no greater fear in human hearts than the fear of the ultimate unknown and no more desperate desire than that of overcoming death. That is why the apple falls out of Snow White's throat, Sleeping Beauty wakes up, Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother jump out of the wolf's belly unscathed, or ravens bring the vials of the Water of Death and the Water of Life in Russian fairy tales to reassemble and resuscitate the chopped-up corpse of Ivan Tsarevitch.[28]

At first, Rowling seems to work against this fairy tale convention, by insisting on the inevitability of death in her cycle. And yet she actually rearticulates it. On the one hand, by showing how numerous attempts and ways to circumvent death continually prove futile, she appears to emphasize the imperative to *embrace* one's mortality. Even though the ghosts, the loved ones in the Mirror of Erised, or the people on the Hogwarts' portraits are moving and sentient, they are not the deceased brought back to life; rather, they are mere echoes of the departed. The magical substances such as the Philosopher's Stone and unicorn blood extend one's life but do not grant true immortality. As the reader finds out at the end of Book 7, the three Deathly Hallows (the Invisibility Cloak, the Resurrection

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[24] J. R. R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories: Expanded Edition, with Commentary and Notes*, ed. Verlynn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (HarperCollins, 2008), 27-84, 33 and 34.

[25] Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 328. Here Rowling quotes directly from 1 Cor. 15:26.

[26] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 69.

[27] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, 69.

[28] See Alexander Afanasyev, *The Tale of Tsarevich Ivan, the Firebird, and the Grey Wolf (Illustrated)*, trans. Post Wheeler (The Planet, 2012).

Stone, and the Elder Wand) are meant not to conquer death literally, but rather to allow their true owners to extend their lives just enough to be able to accept death graciously in the long run. Despite all this, however, Rowling's overt attempts to undercut the convention actually reinforce it. Her treatment of life and death in the whole cycle, and particularly, her untiring attempts to show the folly of Voldemort's attempts to overcome his mortality, unwittingly reveal the same preoccupation with and fear of dying that is much easier to detect in simpler folk tales, such as *Snow White*. The ultimate proof of this is that the main protagonist, Harry literally *does* return from the dead to finish off Voldemort and save the world. Despite all the complexities, *Harry Potter* indeed faithfully adheres to the conventions of the fairy tale genre.

The situation is quite different for the later derivatives, such as *Tales of Beedle the Bard*. In Rowling's understandable desire to keep the fans' interest alive, the Potter universe has been enriched by innumerable offshoots and iterations of the main story, including the eight *Harry Potter* films, the printed texts, among which are Jim Kay's beautifully illustrated editions, various so-called Hogwarts "textbooks," and Rowling's own later literary spin-offs, including a theater play.[29]

If Rowling/Kay's books, the Lego sets, and the films can be seen as examples of the Potter merchandising, the last three books (*The Cursed Child,* Beedle's tales, and *Fantastic Beasts*) and the cinematic offshoots of *Fantastic Beasts* are Rowling's attempts to create more layers, to engage in world-building. In this, Rowling seems to be following in the steps of other fantasy writers; and one has to admit that she appears to be very successful at that, at least if one interprets success in commercial terms. The Harry Potter world started with a brilliant, moving, and engaging wainscot narrative about the parallel worlds of Muggles and Wizards, who managed to escape prosecution by hiding in the plain site of the non-Wizard folk. With its gripping story, the heptalogy had a huge appeal to young and not-so-young audiences alike, culminating in the films, which made the world of the Boy Who Lived feel real. Responding to the fans' appetite for Potter

[29] See J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone: The Illustrated Edition*, illustr. Jim Kay (New York: Scholastic, 2015); *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets: The Illustrated Edition*, illusr. Jim Kay (New York: Scholastic, 2016); *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban: The Illustrated Edition*, illustr. Jim Kay (New York: Scholastic, 2017); *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire: The Illustrated Edition*, illustr. Jim Kay (New York: Scholastic, 2019); and *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix: The Illustrated Edition*, illustr. Jim Kay with Neil Packer (New York: Scholastic, 2022). Also see the collection of memorable excerpts from all seven books: J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter: The Magical Year*, illustr. Jim Kay (New York: Scholastic, 2021). For the so-called Hogwarts Library books see J. K. Rowling, *Hogwarts Library: The Illustrated Collection*, illustr. Olivia Lomenech-Gill, Emily Gravett, and Lisbeth Zwerger (New York: Scholastic, 2020). The collection includes the theater play by J. K. Rowling, John Tiffany and Jack Thorne, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child: Parts One and Two* (New York: Arthur Levine Books, 2016), as well as the collections *Tales of Beedle the Bard* (New York: Arthur Levine Books, 2008) and *Fantastic Beasts & Where to Find Them* (New York: Arthur Levine Books, 2001, new edition 2017).

experiences, through merchandising, toys, clothing, and further editions of the original text, Rowling attempts to imbue her Secondary World with more complexity, meaning, and coherence than what was conceived in the original books. To the delight of her audiences, this Secondary World has history, books, "school books," science (especially zoology), music, popular culture, and even folklore in the form of superstitions, riddles, proverbs, and tales.

Rowling's world-building ultimately falls short, if one takes a look at the substance, the skill, and the quality of her later creations. She continues to feed the thirst of the fandom by pumping up the Potter universe in what appears to be a rather casual and superficial way. While very conscious of the genres she is tackling, she cavalierly disregards its conventions, creating fakelore, in the sense that folklorist Alan Dundes applies Dorson's earlier term to characterize the Grimm Brothers' mishandling of the tales in the nineteenth century. Dundes criticizes the Grimms' inability "to resist succumbing to the temptation of combining elements from different versions of the same tale (type)," their creation of "*composite* texts" [sic] that "were in fact never actually related by any one informant, although individual motifs or portions of a particular conflated text might have been."[30] In a sense, Rowling is doing something similar with respect to fairy tales and folklore. Her materials seem multi-layered and complex—and the results of her composite activity achieve commercial and (to an extent) literary success in the *Harry Potter* cycle. Folklore is, after all, both tradition and innovation. It thrives on adaptation over time. But Rowling's written world beyond the original seven books, with its witty but ultimately self-referential story frames shows a medievalizing tendency that gives her fakelore a rather worrisome twist when viewed from a post-Trump vantage point in the year 2023—because Rowling's fakelore is not grounded in a world that coheres in its innermost core.

The Tales of Beedle the Bard provide compelling illustration of this lack of coherence in the Wizarding World's "fakelore." As noted earlier, this book is said to be that very same old children's book that Dumbledore bequeaths Hermione and from which Harry (like the reader) learns the story of the three brothers and the so-called Deathly Hallows. These are the three magical objects given by the Death himself, purportedly to let their owners escape or defeat death: the unbeatable Elder Wand, the Resurrection Stone, and the Cloak of Invisibility. Together with Hogwarts school books, *Beedle the Bard* is one of several books mentioned in the series that Rowling then publishes separately. By its very concept, *Beedle the Bard* is consciously an imitation of fairytale collections, conceived of as the magic community's equivalent of Muggle folklore. In her introduction to Beedle's tales, Rowling dates it back to the fifteenth century and attributes it to a specific person, the so-called Beedle the Bard, whose life is, unsurprisingly, "shrouded in mystery" and

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[30] Alan Dundes, "The Psychoanalytic Study of the Grimms' Tales with the Special Reference to 'The Maiden Without Hands' (AT 706)," *The Germanic Review* 62, no. 2 (1987): 50–65, 52.

whose likeness has survived in just one single woodcut.[31] The text is presented to us as an ancient collection, as a pseudo-medieval text, which has been edited and annotated by an imaginary modern scholar, Albus Dumbledore himself, whose notes in their turn have been edited and annotated by Rowling herself, mimicking a manuscript/book with layers and layers of marginalia. *Beedle the Bard* is also clearly a parody of the modern scholarly reception of premodern works. Indeed, the style in which Dumbledore and Rowling herself write is highly ironic, as it mimics and simultaneously mocks academic writing.[32] It is not surprising that she would specifically pick the Middle Ages as the time for her supposedly ancient fairy tale collection. As we know, most popular Western European fairy tales are dated back to the late Middle Ages, with some of the earliest versions going back to the fourteenth-century romances.[33] In addition, in the popular imagination, there exist certain persistent myths about the Middle Ages and the early modernity, as Amy Kaufman and Paul Sturtevant point out: these historical epochs are commonly associated with hardship, witch hunts, and brutality, thus making them perfectly suited to give credence to the separation of the Muggle and the Wizarding worlds due to prosecution of the latter.[34]

On the one hand, Rowling's fakelore consciously imitates fairy tales. The introduction to *Beedle the Bard* draws clear parallels to the so-called Muggle fairy tales. Beedle's stories are said to be as popular with the wizard children as "Cinderella" or "Sleeping Beauty" are with the Muggles.[35] Rowling plays with the basic generic conventions, pointing to children as the collection's intended audience ("popular bedtime reading [for children] for centuries"[36]) and their educational purpose ("virtue rewarded, wickedness punished"[37]).

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[31] Rowling*,* *Beedle the Bard*, ix.

[32] Indeed, the transmission of the text becomes even more convoluted because the text that Rowling publishes is not the book that Hermione reads in the seventh book but rather some text allegedly translated later by Hermione from ancient runes. The subsequent history of the Beedle collection that Rowling presents in her imitative scholarly introduction to the volume seems at odds with the way the book is treated in the seventh volume of the Harry Potter series, where it is clearly the English-language *original* that Hermione fluently reads out loud. See Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 406.

[33] See, for example, Jack Zipes' discussion of the origins of the *Sleeping Beauty* story in Jack Zipes, "Fairy Tale as Myth / Myth as Fairy Tale: The Immortality of Sleeping Beauty and Storytelling" in Jack Zipes, *Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to Modern World* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 207–229.

[34] As Kaufman and Sturtevant say in their introductory chapter of *the Devil's Historians*: "It's hard to find a version of the Middle Ages in popular culture where the knights aren't rusty brutes, the peasants aren't covered in mud, and the landscape isn't ravaged by war," *The Devil's Historians. How Modern Extremists Abuse the Medieval Past* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 12. David D. Day similarly comments on modern assumptions of the Middle Ages by modern audiences in his analysis of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* in "*Monty Python and the Holy Grail:* Madness with a Method" in *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays,* ed. Kevin Harty (Jefferson: McFarland, 2002), 127–135.

[35] Rowling, *Beedle the Bard*, vii.

[36] Rowling, *Beedle the Bard*, vii.

[37] Rowling, *Beedle the Bard*, vii.

She does reveal more than just a basic consumer knowledge of the genre she is manipulating. When Rowling writes that her "heroes and heroines [. . .] can perform magic themselves, and yet find it just as hard to solve their problems as we do,"[38] she channels psychological approaches to fairy tales, approaching these stories as a mechanism for problem-solving, both intra- and extra-textually.[39]

And yet, while seemingly imitating folklore, Rowling also breaks with the basic conventions of the genre she pretends to be working in. Despite the parallel to Muggle fairy tales, what she produces is nothing like them, as is supported by her careless use of terminology: Beedle's stories as a whole are referred to as "tales," "stories," "legends," and "fables."[40] This carelessness is also evident in the fake, pseudo-archaic language in which Rowling writes the tales and which has nothing to do with the fifteenth-century Middle English that Beedle the Bard might have used, nor of any earlier forms. The language of the tales offers a somewhat haphazard concoction of the twentieth-century English, generously intermingled with archaisms, many of them borrowed from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This linguistic hodgepodge makes for an amusing presentation, enhanced by the fact that the book Dumbledore left Hermione was written in ancient runes, which Hermione should have ostensibly been able to read and translate fluently and poetically right on the spot in Chapter 21 "Tale of Three Brothers" in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.*[41] These inconsistencies only highlight the shortcomings of the product Rowling is trying to expand for an eager market. In her heptalogy Rowling depicts the world where one must embrace death rather than dream of conquering it or living happily ever after. As a result, the tales created for such a world cannot be escapist, cannot offer hope of forever more. They can teach kindness to neighbors ("The Wizard and the Hopping Pot"), warn against stupidity and arrogance ("Babbity Rabbity"), condemn cruelty, fear of loving, and misuse of magic ("The Warlock's Hairy Heart"), or kill in the bud all dreams of happily ever after ("Tale of Three Brothers"). Having herself written a fairy tale in seven volumes for the Primary World, Rowling essentially denies her Secondary World the pleasure and hope of fairy tales. One may ask if fairy tales are even possible in her Wizarding World. In short, though the expressed desire is to provide fairy tales like the ones the Muggles know, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* fit very awkwardly as fairy tales into the world of *Harry Potter.* What the *Tales* truly are in terms of genre is a

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[38] Rowling, *Beedle the Bard*, viii.

[39] Rowling goes even further in revealing her knowledge of the fairy tale genre by alluding to such things as the feminist critique of fairytales, the nineteenth-century reception of fairy tales, particularly in Britain (the so-called "*saccharine tales*," which she openly parodies herself), and the intended audience of oral tales (adult*) (Beedle the Bard*, 18–19).

[40] E.g. "fable," Rowing, *Beedle the Bard*, viii and 11; "stories" ibid. vii (among many others); "legend" ibid. 95; "tales" ibid. 39 (among others); "old kid's stories" and "children's stories," Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 135; a "children's tale told to amuse rather than to instruct" ibid. 409.

[41] Rowing, *Deathly Hallows*, 405; see also note 31.

collection of didactic stories or *exempla*, whose moralizing message is only enhanced by Dumbledore's supposed annotations and Rowling's own further clarifications.

Conclusion

In their epilogue to *The Devil's Historians,* Kaufman and Sturtevant emphasize the benefits of "playing in the Middle Ages": a playful approach to the Middle Ages "can be one of the most positive ways to transform our relationship to the past and to imagine other possibilities for the future."[42] Rowling' approach is definitely playful. In this she walks in the footsteps of Terry Gilliam, John Cleese, and the rest of the Monty Python troupe, famous for their playing with mockery, anachronism, and irony, as they turn the audience's expectations and conventions upside down in their feature *Monty Python and the Holy Grail.* In "*Monty Python and the Holy Grail:* Madness with a Method," David D. Day notes the importance of intention and authenticity in Gilliam's film. Well familiar with the medieval period, the Pythons knew their traditions well enough to parody them consciously and authentically.[43]

Rowling, on the other hand, does not ultimately create anachronisms as authentically as Terry Gilliam et al. Her world-building is not deep or self-reflective enough to hold the anachronisms consistently juxtaposed with their medieval origins and keep the whole world coherent. Rowling is concerned with creating a kind of an alternate present that would coexist with the familiar everyday of her readers; and therefore, one could say, that she is not fundamentally interested in any of the periods she relies on to build the world she is writing, whether the medieval and early modern periods or even the Victorian era with its own imaginings of the premodern past. Rowling merely uses these eras to enhance the story she tells. As medievalists, we are aware of the fact that in saying this, we run the risk of critiquing the author of *Harry Potter* for the kind of medievalism that we ourselves would wish to see but that she might not have been able to produce or did not necessarily intend. However, the further the Harry Potter world expands, the more problematic Rowling's medievalism becomes. As fairy tale fakelore, the *Tales of Beedle the Bard* reveal her inconsistent approach, because they misrepresent the genre she claims (fairy tales). In *Beedle the Bard,* Rowling is "publishing" pseudo-authentic ancient stories from the fifteenth century, re-translated by Hermione Granger, annotated and edited by Albus Dumbledore, whose work the modern author now herself edits and annotates. Rowling uses Harry Potter's personal history as a fairy tale to engage contemporary issues. The threat of the second Wizarding War grows throughout Harry´s years at school, so the return of Voldemort eerily parallels the political developments of the early 2000s, prefiguring and simultaneously echoing the rise of authoritarian leaders

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[42] Kaufman and Sturtevant, *Devil's Historians*, 153.
[43] Day, "*Monty Python*," 127–128.

in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This multilayered approach definitely adds to the medievalism, or the ostensible pseudo-realism, of the text and therefore its enjoyment for the *Harry Potter* fan audience. Nevertheless, as Rowling's ancillary works demonstrate, the potential for play becomes stunted as Rowling's work ultimately ends up commodifying the Middle Ages, trapping a medievalized past in a commercialized present. "Safe as William Morris wallpaper," to use Tom Shippey's apt phrase, these Middle Ages are both utilitarian and entertaining, as well as aesthetically pleasing and perhaps profitable.[44] It all seems harmless enough: we can enjoy the story without needing to confront it and can revel in the play without working too hard.

For audiences who play in a perpetually entertaining present, this alternate world with a superficially authentic medieval past encourages a non-historical complacency that facilitates the acceptance of fakelore. Play has purpose; yet it also obscures the many liberties that Rowling is taking in creating her fakelore. These liberties reflect a careless, even sloppy, approach toward imagination and authenticity that can potentially play a role in facilitating the more dangerous medievalism that Shippey sees "still at work in the world."[45] He insists that scholars today have a responsibility to confront the lingering dangers of a medievalism cultivated by ubiquitous contemporary media that can fan the flames of old nationalisms—visible in films like *Braveheart*—rooted in nineteenth-century medievalist and philologic endeavors like those of Jacob Grimm, for example. The latter, of course, produced the fairy tales whose reception also continues to provide a key access point at which contemporary audiences engage with reception of the Middle Ages.

The concept of fakelore has acquired much sharper edges and more serious implications than Dorson imagined when he coined the term in the 1950s. In a twenty-first century post-Trump environment, fakelore exacerbates a decidedly anti-academic and anti-intellectual undercurrent that reverberates negatively in our twenty-first-century echo chamber of fake news. Since the publication of the very first *Harry Potter* book, the desire of millions of fans around the world has remained the same: to see no end to the magic of the Potter universe. For us, as we explore the reception of the Germanic Middle Ages with modern students, Rowling's medievalism slips into a danger zone now where we might not have noticed this before the proliferation of fake news and the incessant denunciation of authority and expertise since 2016. Rowling's medievalism misses the opportunity for transformation that Kaufman and Sturtevant see in playing the Middle Ages, where an oscillating tension between past and future can cultivate a dialogue between them. Instead, Rowling produces a fakelore that thrives on naive complacency and that seems compromised by the desire for commercial success. At the end of the

[44] Tom Shippey, "Medievalisms and Why They Matter," *Studies in Medievalism XVII: Defining Medievalism(s)* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 45–54, 52.
[45] Shippey, "Medievalisms," 50.

day, the secret of the Mirror of Erised lies in revealing not merely the onlooker's face, but the most secret and desperate desires of the person's heart. In a way, the world of Harry Potter has become our mirror. In our desire to see no end of the magic, we become willing and easily exploited consumers of anything that smacks of Harry Potter. In his seminal 1995 essay, Jack Zipes attempted to "break the Disney spell" by showing how the magic of Disney conceals the hard truths about capitalism and commercialism in the seemingly innocent fairy-tale retellings.[46] To some extent, our essay offers a similar look at the equally magical Harry Potter universe. While the fans' continuing desire for magic or Rowling's eagerness to satisfy and profit from this craving are understandable, her later works seem to suggest that, to paraphrase Zipes, the Rowling spell also may be broken. More is not always better.

[46] Jack Zipes, "Breaking the Disney Spell" in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Bell (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 21–42.