

**A QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS
OF MEDIEVAL MOTIFS IN SELECTED MOVIES
PRODUCED IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 1920-1945**

BY

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A QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF MEDIEVAL
MOTIFS IN SELECTED MOVIES PRODUCED IN THE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE 1920-1945

A Research Paper

Presented to
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

by
Sherry Meek Smith

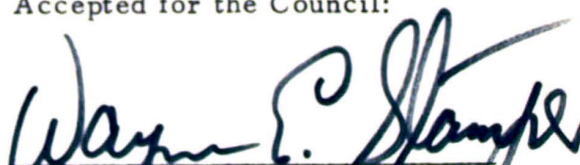
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Sherry Meek Smith entitled "A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of Medieval Motifs in Selected Movies Produced in the English Language 1920-1945." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in history.


Major Professor

Accepted for the Council:


Dean of the Graduate School

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Significance of the Study

A qualitative and quantitative analysis of medieval motifs in movies from 1920 to 1945 is being made for the following purposes: (1) to show the role of medieval themes in 20th century movies produced in the English language; (2) to determine whether a significant amount of movies with a medieval motif were produced from 1920 to 1945 to provide data for this research; (3) as a literary genre to show how mediievally based movies are an expression of ideas of modern times. Medieval motifs, representing the past, were relied on in some of the movies of this period to convey this expression of the present. (4) To show the writer's interest in medieval history and recent American history. This paper will show one type of relationship between these two histories.

Limitations of the Study

In organizing the data for this paper, several limitations exist:

- (1) Content of some of the movies is limited. (2) Because of the volume of films made in this period, not every film was investigated.
- (3) Since the writer has seen only a few of these films, the qualitative

analysis and evaluation is based on the critiques and judgments of secondary sources. (4) Illustrations are not provided.

Organization of the Study

The data presented in this paper is organized in the following way:

(1) The Review of Literature is divided into three chapters, one chapter for each decade. (2) The movies are organized first according to the decade in which they were produced. (3) Each chapter is subdivided into sections. (4) The sections are the general motifs used in that decade. (5) The movies selected are classified into the medieval motif they most dominantly portray. (6) Date and country of movie produced will be given for each movie. (7) Visual references will be made concerning certain scenes in the movies. (8) The Middle Ages will be referred to as the age of history between 476-1453.

Chapter II

MEDIEVAL MOTIFS IN MOVIES OF THE 1920'S

Themes and characteristics of the Middle Ages were found in forty-five movies selected from the silent film era of moviemaking.

I. SUPERSTITION

Witchcraft and Sorcery

Many writers have labeled the Middle Ages as an age of superstition. Superstition was the answer to many questions the medieval man had concerning his environment. Contributing to these beliefs were certain superstitious religious practices, or a belief in religious supernaturalism, which was coupled with a lack of scientific knowledge. Moviemaking in the 1920's reflected this characteristic in movies dealing with the practice of witchcraft and sorcery.

One of the most influential silent films was the controversial German movie, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, 1920.¹ Head of an insane asylum, Dr. Caligari was supposedly obsessed with the story

¹Benjamin de Casseres, "Our Domestic Movies and the Germans," The New York Times, March 26, 1922, Sec. III, p. 10, col. 1.

of a medieval sorcerer. The sorcerer had travelled around Europe with a somnambulist who committed murders for him. Before becoming head of the asylum Dr. Caligari supposedly had displayed a somnambulist in a fair booth in a town similar to the medieval town of the sorcerer. All this is implied by the term supposedly; the doctor, as it turned out, was not the one obsessed, but an inmate telling the story.² The movie was controversial because it introduced new elements into moviemaking. Elements of Gothic horror, darkness, the forces of good and evil in combat, terror and fantasy would emerge on the screen as elements of the "Teutonic psyche"³ of the Middle Ages. According to one critic of German films, Dr. Siegfried Kracauer, the post war films of Germany embodying these elements, led to the later formation of what he termed "Nazi lunacy."⁴ Caligari was the first of this type of film.

Witchcraft in the Middle Ages was one way of practicing medicine. Elixirs made of toad's urine, the eyeballs of snakes, and other such esoteric elements were used as specifics by witches and warlocks to

² Carlos Clarens, An Illustrated History of the Horror Film (New York: Capricorn Books, 1968), p. 16.

³ John Baxter, Hollywood in the Thirties (London: A. Zwemmer Ltd., 1968), p. 70.

⁴ Bosley Crowther, The Great Films (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), p. 21.

alleviate pain or cure people or animals. Medicines were concocted to produce love or an absence of it. But after the Great Schism of 1378,⁵ witchcraft often took the form of satanism or devil worship.

In the 1920's three films on witchcraft came from Sweden. The Witch, 1920, told of witchcraft in medieval times and ended by relating it to modern superstitions and neuroses.⁶ A medieval story of a woman's ordeal in a trial by fire was the theme of Love's Crucible, 1921.⁷ Witches and sorcerers were punished by being burned at the stake in medieval times. In Witchcraft Through the Ages, 1922, witchcraft was traced from the Middle Ages to modern times through scenes of Black Masses and nudity which caused this film to be censored in several countries.⁸ As a reason for the dominant Swedish productions of witchcraft themes, the theme of satanism was still too liberal to be used by more conservative countries such as the United States. Implicit in some of these productions was satanism. Satanism involved perverse ceremonies which would call for scenes of nudity and sacrilegious parodies of church rites.⁹

⁵Morris Bishop, The Middle Ages (New York: American Heritage Press, 1970), p. 340.

⁶Liam O'Leary, The Silent Cinema (London: Studio Vista Ltd., 1970), p. 85.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Clarens, op. cit., pp. 57-58.

⁹Jules Michelet, Satanism and Witchcraft, trans. A. R. Allinson (New York: The Citadel Press, 1939), pp. 98-108.

Vampirism

The belief in vampires was a medieval superstition which had its origins in the early days of the Dark Ages when a person, usually a sorcerer, left its grave to feed upon the blood of the living. During the Middle Ages, vampires were believed to live in Hungary and Serbia. To be destroyed a vampire's body had to be exhumed from the grave and a stake driven through its heart.¹⁰ In Bram Stoker's 1897 novel Dracula, all the superstitions concerning vampirism are written in story about the leader of all vampires, Count Dracula of Transylvania. The first adaptation of his book into a movie was the German film of 1921, Dracula.¹¹ In 1927 in the United States Bela Lugosi became famous as Count Dracula in Dracula¹² and Lon Chaney starred as Dracula in London After Midnight.¹³

Lycanthropy

"Whosoever shall believe that a man or woman may be changed into the shape of a wolf or other beast shall be condemned" was the decree of the Bishop of Exeter in the late 12th century in an effort to

¹⁰Cora L. Daniels and C. M. Stevans, eds. Encyclopedia of Superstition, Folklore, and the Occult Sciences of the World, III (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1971), p. 1373.

¹¹Clarens, op. cit., p. 21.

¹²Ibid., p. 61

¹³Joe Franklin, Classics of the Silent Screen (New York: The Citadel Press, 1959), p. 141.

stamp out superstition in his diocese.¹⁴ In the Slavic and Teutonic countries wizards were believed capable of changing themselves into wolves by magic sayings, rubbing the body with a magic ointment, and by wearing a special belt.¹⁵ The result was a human who ran on all fours and howled like a wolf. In 1920, John Barrymore starred in the United States production of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,¹⁶ the well-known story of the forces of good and evil at work in the human soul. The Jekyll-Hyde theme was based on the werewolf transformation as the doctor changed into the mad beast. According to medieval superstition, this change could occur involuntarily, as shown by the Jekyll-Hyde story. In 1926 Germany produced a variation of the Jekyll-Hyde theme in Janus Faced.¹⁷

II. LEGEND

The Golem

The Golem legend, which was popularized more in the United States in the movies of the 1930's and 1940's had its start in the

¹⁴G. G. Coulton, A Medieval Garner (London: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1910), p. 116.

¹⁵Biren Bonnerjea, A Dictionary of Superstitions and Mythology (London: Folk Press Limited, 1927), p. 286.

¹⁶Franklin, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁷O'Leary, op. cit., p. 69.

1920's in the 1920 German film The Golem.¹⁸ The legend, which originated in the ghetto of medieval Prague, told of a clay monster which was built to protect the Jews from persecution.¹⁹ In the film The Golem (meaning strength), a rabbi built a clay monster who was to protect the Jews from the persecution of the chancellor of Emperor Rudolph II. But the monster went mad, had its "shem" (life) removed, and put to rest in the attic of the synagogue.²⁰ (A French film picked up the story here in a movie of the 1930's.)

Homunculus as a theme was very popular with the German audiences. It was a challenge to the audience to watch the struggle on the screen of man's creation of man. Not until the 1930's and 1940's was this theme received well in the United States when it was presented in the series of Frankenstein movies. Two films in the United States which experimented with the homunculus theme was The Monster, 1925, in which Lon Chaney portrayed a mad doctor attempting to create a female monster,²¹ and The Magician, 1926. In The Magician a mad doctor lived in an old castle and experimented

¹⁸John Baxter, Science Fiction in the Cinema (New York: Paperback Library, 1970), p. 31.

¹⁹"Concerning the Golem Legend," The New York Times, March 21, 1937, Sec. XI, p. 4, col. 6.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Franklin, op. cit., p. 142.

with the secret of the homunculus believing that the blood of maidens brought life into dead bodies.²²

Faustian

Variations of the Faust legend occurred in four selected movies of the 1920's. The story of the medieval magician who made a deal with Satan to gain eternal life, was represented by the French in 1922 in Don Juan and Faust in an imaginary meeting between the two figures.²³ In 1925 the United States presented a modern version of Faust in The Sorrows of Satan, in which a struggling young author was led astray by Mephistopheles disguised as a prince.²⁴ The most famous of the Faust movies was the German Student of Prague in 1926. Trading his mirror image for a profitable marriage, the student went through tragic adventures trying to rid himself of this devil. In the end he committed suicide in an attempt to shoot the devil he saw in the mirror.²⁵ Lighting and shading techniques were used experimentally to emphasize the medieval atmosphere of the

²²Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," rev. of The Magician, The New York Times, October 25, 1926, p. 15, col. 1.

²³Ivan Butler, Religion in the Cinema (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1969), p. 159.

²⁴Clarens, op. cit., p. 44.

²⁵Siegfried Kracauer, From Caligari to Hitler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 29.

town where Satan lived in disguise in a German filming of Faust made in 1926.²⁶

Nibelungen Saga

A two part film produced by Germany 1922-24 was based on the Nibelungen Saga, a legend of the Middle Ages. The legend told of Siegfried, son of King Sigmund, who defeated a race of dwarfs and killed the dragon Fafner. Part I of the movie Siegfried, 1922-23, told how this legendary hero received magical powers from a race of dwarfs, the Nibelungs. He was then able to kill the dragon whose blood in which he bathed made him invulnerable to death. One part of his body was not covered but only his sweetheart, Krimhild, knew the secret. By treachery Siegfried's secret is made known and he is killed.

In the second part, Krimhild's Revenge, 1923-24, Krimhild avenged Siegfried's death.²⁷

This was the only film made 1920 - 1945 on this subject. The movie was not very popular in the United States because of its lengthy

²⁶Paul Rotha and Richard Griffith, The Film Till Now (London: Spring Books, 1967), p. 280.

²⁷Clarens, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

and boring plot. When it was shown in Berlin in 1924 the ending of Krimhild's Revenge was never seen. The film was stopped as a result of the protesting uproar in the audience against the portrayal of Krimhild as a cold blooded murderess.²⁸

Arabian Nights

Some of the most delightful movies to come out of the 1920's have been made on the theme of the Arabian Nights Entertainment, a collection of stories from medieval literature. Unlike the Gothic elements of the Middle Ages found in some of the German movies of the 1920's, the United States movies based on the Arabian Nights provided a world of pleasurable fantasy.

According to the legend, the princess Schéhérazade was a prisoner of Haroun-Al-Raschid, an Arabian sheik. She was to be killed but was allowed to live as long as she could entertain Raschid with stories. The stories she told were supposedly the stories now known as the Arabian Nights. Many of the tales were told without an ending so that the princess could continue the stories the next day, thus sparing her life longer.²⁹ She made the stories exciting and

²⁸T. R. Ybarra, "'Die Nibelungen' meets Disaster in Berlin," The New York Times, April 29, 1924, p. 2, col. 2.

²⁹John A. Haywood, "Thousand and One Nights," Encyclopedia Britannica (1972), XXI, 1083-84.

vivid with all kinds of magical occurrences such as flying carpets and horses. The movies based on these stories recreated settings and characters that must have taken place in the magical world of Schéhérazade's tales.

In 1920 Otis Skinner starred in Kismet, a story of Bagdad 1,000 years ago.³⁰ The content of this film will be discussed further in the movies of the 1930's and 1940's since it was produced again in both decades. Rudolph Valentino starred in The Sheik in 1921³¹ and Son of the Sheik in 1926.³² The setting of these films was probably in medieval Arabia.

One of the most popular movies in this category was The Thief of Bagdad in 1924. Based on a combination of several Arabian Nights tales, Douglas Fairbanks portrayed a mischievous rogue who fell in love with the Caliph's daughter while stealing from the Caliph's treasure. To win her hand he had to journey to the "Valley of the Monsters" and "Citadel of the Moon" of the Arabian Nights to get magic treasures for the Caliph. Of course his adventures were

³⁰"The Screen," rev. of Kismet, The New York Times, November 15, 1920, p. 12, col. 2.

³¹O'Leary, op. cit., p. 134.

³²Franklin, op. cit., p. 75.

successful and the movie ended as the Princess and the rogue flew away on a magic carpet.³³ The reader who may wish to see some scenes from this movie is referred to Crowther's The Great Films, pages 35-38. An example of trick photography used in the 1920's is especially interesting on page 38.

Two other United States movies made in this period were Tales of 1,001 Nights in 1927,³⁴ and Two Arabian Nights which won an Oscar for best direction in 1927.³⁵

The German versions of the Arabian Nights did not share the happy endings of the American films. Destiny, 1921, was a tragic story of two lovers separated by death. Death appeared in the form of a person who promised to reunite the lovers if the heroine performed three duties. She had to go back into three moments of history to save her lover. One of the scenes was the Bagdad of the Arabian Nights. In each instance she failed and was killed in the end. Thus she was reunited with her lover, but in death.³⁶

³³Crowther, op. cit., pp. 35-38.

³⁴Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," rev. of Tales of 1,001 Nights, The New York Times, January 24, 1927, p. 14, col. 1.

³⁵David Robinson, Hollywood in the Twenties (London: A. Zwemmer Limited, 1968), p. 117.

³⁶Clarens, op. cit., p. 26.

In One Arabian Night, 1921, a hunchback clown fell in love with a beautiful dancer of the circus who was bought by a sheik for his harem. The dancer was later murdered by the sheik, and the movie ended with the sad clown having to continue to make people laugh.³⁷

Three wax figures in a showmen's tent provided the story for Waxworks, 1924. One of the figures was Haroun-Al-Raschid, the evil sheik of the Arabian Nights.³⁸

Romantic Heroes

Ballads have sung and told of three of the most popular legendary heroes of the Middle Ages, King Arthur, Robin Hood, and William Tell. During the 1920's the United States produced three movies relating to the adventures of these medieval heroes.

The first was the comedy A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, 1922,³⁹ based on Mark Twain's book of the same title, which told of a man in modern times who went back to the days of the Round Table. Twain wrote the book in jest in an effort to show the realism in medieval customs as opposed to the romantic ideas often surrounding

³⁷Herman G. Weinberg, The Lubitsch Touch (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1968), pp. 35-36.

³⁸Rotha and Griffith, op. cit., p. 286.

³⁹"The Screen," rev. of A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, The New York Times, March 15, 1921, p. 14, col. 3.

the era of castles and knights. In the movie a modern man was knocked out and awoke in 6th century England where he began a series of comic adventures, which led to his being knighted "Sir Boss" and given magician status. To the 6th century medieval man, a magician was the symbol of power. Usually these magicians were smarter than the common man and just took advantage of the latter's ignorance. Twain made fun of this ignorance by showing how easy it was for his modern man, Hank, to become more powerful than Merlin, Arthur's magician. Thus when Hank lit matches for his pipe, creating fire, he impressed the court with his "magic." He "invented" all kinds of 1920 devices unheard of in 528. For example, in one of the battles, the knights fought from motorcycles and with pistols. When the movie was remade in 1931, the knights, armed with machine guns, fought from cars and planes, and crossed the moats in tanks.⁴⁰

The greenwood was a familiar setting for medieval romantic legends. In dark, thick forests, on shaded paths, one could not travel long before meeting some enchanted hosts of the greenwood; a black knight, a dwarf, a fairy or the adventurous one of all, Robin Hood. In 1922 Douglas Fairbanks portrayed Robin Hood, in a romantic

⁴⁰"Will Rogers and King Arthur," The New York Times, March 29, 1931, Sec. VIII, p. 7, col. 1.

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setting of castles and greenwood. The movie began with Robin as the Earl of Huntingdon, a favorite of King Richard. (The reader is referred to Maurice Keen's The Outlaws of Medieval Legend for a discussion on the existence of a real Robin Hood.) According to one theory, Robin was the Earl of Huntingdon who lived in the late 12th and early 13th Century, the same time as the Third Crusade of Richard the Lion Hearted.⁴¹

The movie began when Richard left for the Crusades. Robin took to the woods to escape from the rule of Prince John. He robbed the rich nobles and prelates who were John's supporters. Little John, Friar Tuck and others joined Robin in a series of small attacks on the wealthy, unsuspecting travelers through the forests. Robin became the hero of the poor and the oppressed. A letter written to the New York Times in 1922 concerning the film, stated, "No period in the history of the world has been so sung in song and story, in verse, so glorified on canvas, as this glorious Age of Chivalry, the days of the Crusades, of the great Richard Coeur de Lion."⁴² (Wouldn't Mark Twain have scorned this letter?)

⁴¹Maurice Keen, The Outlaws of Medieval Legend (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), p. 178.

⁴²"The Screen - Points of View," The New York Times, November 12, 1922, Sec. VIII, p. 2, col. 1.

Filmed in Switzerland in 1925, William Tell recounted the legend of the 14th century Swiss hero who, for not bowing to the governor, was forced to shoot an apple off his son's head. Given a poor review, William Tell was criticized because it failed to relate to the 14th century in movie details. The dialogue, shown in the sub-titles, used too many 20th century slang terms.⁴³ A problem in making historical theme movies is making the language of the movies understandable, yet retaining enough so that the historical atmosphere is not lost. William Tell went to the extreme in modernizing the language. It was apparently too out of place against the 14th century setting.

III. FAIRY TALES

Literature from the Middle Ages is full of stories of elves, fairies, and dwarfs who were as much part of the medieval scene as the castles and greenwoods in which they lived. These "little people" were of two kinds: the good and the evil. The good were usually the elves and the fairies. They were a sign of good luck, helped and protected the medieval man and his family, and even knew of treasures to be found. An example of a good fairy is the familiar fairy godmother of Cinderella.

⁴³Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," rev. of William Tell, The New York Times, May 20, 1925, p. 26, col. 2.

The dwarf was usually the representative of evil and sometimes was known as the devil's helper. Dwarfs were feared as omens of bad luck and on some days it was even unsafe to go from the house for fear of meeting one.⁴⁴ Even though fairy tales as a theme were more popular in the late 1930's and early 1940's, two movies in the 1920's were based on the Cinderella story. Germany's Cinderella in 1923⁴⁵ and A Kiss for Cinderella by the United States in 1925⁴⁶ were modern versions of this fairy tale.

IV. SETTING

Two United States films of the 1920's, in which the city of Paris is the setting have been selected as examples of the medieval setting used as a motif in movies. Medieval Paris was the setting for The Hunchback of Notre Dame, 1923. In this movie, the medieval elements of Paris were seen in the street Festival of Fools.⁴⁷ The reader is referred to Franklin's Classics of the Silent Screen, pages 45-47 for scenes from this famous movie.

⁴⁴Frederick Harrison, Medieval Man (London: Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1947), p. 67.

⁴⁵O'Leary, op. cit., p. 81.

⁴⁶Franklin, op. cit., p. 73.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 45-47.

Under the ground of a Paris opera house, catacombs with secret passageways, bizarre scenery and torture chambers provided the setting for The Phantom of the Opera, 1925. Lon Chaney starred in both movies, and, as the Phantom, wore a mask to disguise his deformed and acid-scarred appearance.⁴⁸ Disguise was a favorite theme in medieval stories. The reader is again referred to Franklin's Classics of the Silent Screen. Scenes from Phantom are on pages 68-69. Both movies were indeed classics. They were so popular they were reproduced with sound in the following decades.

V. HISTORY

Eight films have been selected from the 1920's relating to medieval history. The movies will be discussed in chronological order historically.

In 1928, the United States produced The Viking, a movie based on the exploits of Leif the Lucky of 10th century Norway.⁴⁹ This was the only movie found between 1920-1945 based on this motif.

The Third Crusade (1189-1192) was the theme of the United States movie Richard the Lion Hearted in 1923. Richard was depicted more

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 68-69.

⁴⁹Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," rev. of The Viking, The New York Times, November 25, 1928, Sec. X, p. 7, col. 3.

as a villain than he was in Robin Hood and was seen as a relentless fighter in the battle against the Sultan Saladin.⁵⁰ Historically the Third Crusade was a joint English and French effort to gain the True Cross. It was fought against Saladin's Turks in an effort to take Jerusalem.

Guilds were a part of the economic system of the Middle Ages. Guilds however, were not popular as a topic for moviemaking as only two movies between 1920 and 1945 were found using this theme. In the 1920's Germany produced these two movies which were based on the Meistersinger guilds of the 14th and 15th centuries. The Meistersingers were German musicians and poets who claimed to be ancestors of twelve old masters who were skilled in the medieval arts and musical theories. As members of the guilds they were trained to sing in church and on other occasions.⁵¹ A meistersinger was the subject for The Master of Nurnburg in 1927.⁵² The Meistersingers in 1928 was a triangle love story about the daughter of a goldsmith, a village cobbler, and a nobleman.⁵³

⁵⁰"The Screen," rev. of Richard the Lion Hearted, The New York Times, October 22, 1923, p. 17, col. 1.

⁵¹John R. Wilkie, "Meistersingers," Encyclopedia Britannica (1972), XV, p. 118.

⁵²Kracauer, op. cit., p. 141.

⁵³Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," rev. of The Meistersingers, The New York Times, December 16, 1929, p. 34, col. 2.

St. Joan of Arc (1412-1431) has served as a popular subject for movies made 1920-1945. In the French version of 1928 the trial and execution was the main plot of The Passion of Joan of Arc. None of the actors wore make-up so that the facial expressions could portray the terror, pride and humility of the medieval church.⁵⁴ The reader is referred to Butler's Religion in the Cinema, pages 116-123 for scenes of the various actors who portrayed Joan in the years 1920-1945, and in later movies.

This theme continued to be popular after 1945. It was during the 1920's that France decided to make a series of historical films. The Passion of Joan of Arc was in this group. The theme intended to be portrayed was that Joan was condemned by a lack of being understood by her judges. She existed in a time when people were burned if they possessed the "evil eye." It was hard for her judges to accept the fact that a woman of the Middle Ages would rise from peasantry to leader of the French army simply through angelic voices.⁵⁵

The first of the French historical series was the 1924 movie Miracle of the Wolves filmed in the still preserved medieval town of Carcassonne, France. All 20th century devices were removed from

⁵⁴Butler, op. cit., pp. 115-118.

⁵⁵Comte de La Roziere, "Trial of Joan of Arc," The New York Times, April 1, 1928, Sec. IX, p. 5, col. 5.

the setting in order to recreate the siege of Beauvais in the Carcassonne setting. At this time, the 15th century, Charles the Bold of Burgundy and Louis XI were at war. The plot evolved around the battle between the Duke of Burgundy and Louis XI, in which the unity of France was at stake.⁵⁶ According to the French producers, this film was intended to portray France's history realistically, rather than romantically, as so many movies on the Middle Ages did. France realized Louis XI was not a good king and Miracle of the Wolves portrayed him realistically. The movie was praised as being one of the best films of the 1920's for its recreation of the Middle Ages on the screen.⁵⁷ For a picture of a scene from the movie the reader is referred to O'Leary's The Silent Screen, page 99, which can be compared to a picture of Carcassonne today in 1972 in Freemantle's Age of Faith, pages 80-81.

The story of Francois Villon, who lived at the same time portrayed in Miracle of the Wolves, became a subject for movies popular in the 1930's and 1940's. Villon, a medieval French poet, was the theme of one movie in the 1920's, the United States production

⁵⁶"Brings First French Historical Film," The New York Times, December 11, 1924, p. 29, col. 4.

⁵⁷"New French Historical Film Presented at the Paris Opera," The New York Times, December 21, 1924, Sec. VII, p. 6, col. 1.

The Beloved Rogue.⁵⁸ (Exact date of film could not be located.)

As the content of this film could not be found either, more mention of Villon's life as depicted by the later movies will be discussed in Chapter III.

VI. RELIGION

One of the strongest forces of the Middle Ages was the influence of the Church; that is the Catholic Church and the papacy as a whole. Two films have been selected from the 1920's to show the role of the medieval church. One was based on the Spanish Inquisition. Although the complete content of this film is unknown to the writer, there had to be a relationship of the Spanish Inquisition to the Middle Ages. In Denmark's 1920 Leaves From Satan's Book, Satan appeared on earth in four disguises during four different times of history. One was as an Inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition.⁵⁹ The first Inquisition was established in 1233 by the Dominican monks of Spain in an effort to stamp out heresy.⁶⁰

A view of the medieval conception of Hell was found in the 1924 United States movie Dante's Inferno⁶¹ whose title was used again for

⁵⁸Franklin, op. cit., p. 128.

⁵⁹Butler, op. cit., p. 159.

⁶⁰Bishop, op. cit., p. 185.

⁶¹Clarens, op. cit., p. 185.

a movie in 1935. In the writings of Dante are expressed one of the medieval conceptions of the fate of man on earth. The medieval mind, influenced by the church, held the world in contempt. To take pleasure in scorning the world was considered an artistic pleasure. One way to scorn the world was to enjoy the forms of literature that were filled with the horror and tragedy of Dante's *Inferno*. It was believed that this would lead to the spiritual elevation of man.⁶² This characteristic of the medieval ages was the basis for some of Shakespeare's plays, one which will be mentioned in the next section.

VII. THE MEDIEVALISM IN SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare used many sources for his plays, some of which were based on the Gothic outlook on life. This was the view of the world as violence and of the flesh as corruption. This outlook was expressed in two types of medieval literature. The medieval tragical narrative dealt with the fall of nobility into misery and death. The type of literature found in Dante, related all the horrors which could be done to man.⁶³ In Shakespeare's Othello, is an example of the

⁶²William Farnham, The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1956), p. 424.

⁶³Ibid., p. 41.

medieval tragical narrative. In 1922, the Germans produced Othello based on the Shakespearean play.⁶⁴

In 1926 a comedy of Shakespeare's was produced by the United States in the movie The Taming of the Shrew.⁶⁵ Unlike Othello, one of Shakespeare's sources for this play was a story from the Arabian Nights.⁶⁶

⁶⁴O'Leary, op. cit., p. 81.

⁶⁵Rotha and Griffith, op. cit., p. 172.

⁶⁶"The Medievalism in Shakespeare," The Reader's Encyclopedia of Shakespeare, eds. Oscar J. Campbell and Edward C. Quinn (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966), p. 844.

Chapter III

MEDIEVAL MOTIFS IN MOVIES OF THE 1930'S

Themes and characteristics of the Middle Ages were found in thirty-eight movies selected from the 1930's. This was the new era of sound movies.

I. SUPERSTITION

Vampirism

In the early thirties the vampire movies were some of the most popular movies on the screen. The Gothic elements of the German films were quite acceptable to the United States audiences. Based on Bram Stoker's novel, the American movie Dracula in 1931 conveyed the characteristics of this medieval superstition. Transylvania and Carfax Abbey in England were the setting. Maintaining the facts of the book as closely as possible, the movie told of Count Dracula's episodes as the human vampire. In the end, according to medieval superstition, a stake was driven through the Count's heart returning him to the dust from which he came.⁶⁷ Medieval aspects of setting

⁶⁷Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," rev. of Dracula, The New York Times, February 13, 1931, p. 21, col. 3.

were achieved in the scenes of the superstition-filled Transylvanian village and of Dracula's cobweb-festooned castle, with wolves howling in the background.

Released in the United States in 1932 under the name Castle of Doom, the French movie Vampyr was based on the story "Carmilla" from the book In A Glass Darkly. As a story of female vampires who fed upon the blood of young girls, Castle of Doom was not received well by American audiences who considered the overtones of lesbianism too unconventional.⁶⁸

Detectives in search for a mysterious killer was the theme of Vampire Bat in 1933,⁶⁹ a United States production followed by Mark of the Vampire in 1935⁷⁰ and Dracula's Daughter in 1936.⁷¹ Towards the end of the 1930's and the beginning of the 1940's, the reviews of the movies had become cynical. Vampirism as a motif had just about run its course and was no longer a novelty. Criticism, though sharp, was clever at times. Commenting on Dracula's Daughter, one screen

⁶⁸Clarens, op. cit., pp. 105-109.

⁶⁹Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," rev. of Vampire Bat, The New York Times, January 23, 1933, p. 9, col. 1.

⁷⁰Baxter, Hollywood in the Thirties, p. 75.

⁷¹"Cup Bearer to the Bloodthirsty," The New York Times, May 17, 1936, Sec. X, p. 3, col. 6.

writer of the New York Times wondered how all through the picture Miss Dracula kept such a beautiful appearance. Sleeping in coffins and never using a mirror (since vampires have no reflection) might pose a question in the minds of a bored audience as to how she kept her good looks.⁷²

Lycanthropy

In the films of the early thirties the werewolf was as popular a theme as Dracula. Both these superstitions are related since Dracula was able to turn into a wolf and control the packs at his will. According to the medieval belief, the threats of both could be thwarted by using certain remedies, notably the stake-in-heart routine. The werewolf theme was found in two United States movies of this period, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in 1932⁷³ and The Werewolf of London in 1935. In the Werewolf, the "mariphasa" flower of Bram Stoker's Dracula was used as a protection against the wolf.⁷⁴

⁷²Frank S. Nugent, "The Screen," rev. of Dracula's Daughter, The New York Times, May 18, 1936, p. 14, col. 2.

⁷³Baxter, Hollywood in the Thirties, p. 45.

⁷⁴Andre Sennwald, "The Screen," rev. of The Werewolf of London, May 10, 1935, p. 25, col. 2.

II. LEGEND

The Golem

The Golem theme of the twenties was expressed in some of the most popular movies of all time--the new series of movies based on the Frankenstein story. The original Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, was sub-titled The Modern Prometheus, after the mythological Prometheus who stole fire from the gods in order to maintain life. Like the Golem, the Frankenstein monster was made out of the four basic medieval elements; fire, water, earth, and air. These elements became the prime tools of the medieval alchemist in the quest for the secret of the homunculus.⁷⁵ Boris Karloff starred for the United States in Frankenstein, 1931, and in The Bride of Frankenstein, 1935.⁷⁶ There are few people who have never seen either of these movies which are now masterpieces of the old horror film. To remember them should bring to mind a picture of the medieval sorcerer laboring to attain the highest goal of science, the creation of a human being.

In Section II of the 1920's under Chapter II, the story in The Golem ended at a point which was the beginning point in a French

⁷⁵Clarens, p. 12.

⁷⁶Richard Griffith and Arthur Mayer, The Movies (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), pp. 265-266.

version. In 1936, the monster was revived in The Golem by a disciple of the dead rabbi, and became once again a symbol of protection to the Jews.⁷⁷ This was the only movie found in the thirties and early forties based on just the Golem. The Frankenstein movies had replaced the theme and continued to dominate the movies in the early forties.

Boris Karloff appeared on the screen again in 1939 in the United States production of Son of Frankenstein. The monster was brought back to life in Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory in the underground passages of a medieval type castle.⁷⁸

Faustian

A remake of the 1926 film, The Student of Prague was produced by Nazi Austria in 1936.⁷⁹ In reference to Section I of Chapter II, Dr. Kracauer's reasons for this remake was found in his theory regarding Germany's post World War I movies. The Student of Prague of 1926 and 1936 contained reflections of the medieval motif used as Nazi propaganda. Both films contained the dark morbidity and sadism that was to characterize the Nazi regime.⁸⁰

⁷⁷Frank S. Nugent, "The Screen," rev. of The Golem, The New York Times, March 22, 1937, p. 27, col. 2.

⁷⁸Baxter, Hollywood in the Thirties, p. 85.

⁷⁹Butler, p. 158.

⁸⁰Crowther, p. 21.

Arabian Nights

Movies based on the theme of the Arabian Nights continued to be popular in the thirties. The story of Hajj, the vagabond poet of Bagdad, was the theme of the again popular Kismet (United States) 1930.⁸¹ It was a musical with the happy ending of the typical Arabian Nights movies of the United States.

One of the most unusual movies ever to be made was produced by Germany in 1931. A romantic love story from the Arabian Nights was the theme of the Adventures of Prince Achmed, the first animated silhouette in movies as of 1931. The movie was three years in the making as each figure had to be cut from cardboard and posed in 300,000 individual scenes. The figures of Achmed, the sorcerer, Aladdin, the magic horse, the Sultan and the fairy were shown against shadowy backgrounds of domes and minarets.⁸²

The last film selected from the 1930's based on the Arabian Nights was the United States musical The Sheik of 1938.⁸³

⁸¹Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," rev. of Kismet, The New York Times, October 31, 1930, p. 20.

⁸²"A German Silhouette Production," The New York Times, October 31, 1930, p. 20.

⁸³Mayer and Griffith, p. 140.

Romantic Heroes

King Arthur's court was the theme of two United States movies produced in thirties. Based on Mark Twain's novel, A Connecticut Yankee, 1931, retold the story of the modern man who went back to the 6th century, in the land of Arthur.⁸⁴ The comedy, as typical of Twain, was cleverly done in an effort to laugh lightly at the Middle Age beliefs. The first person Hank met was a knight whose first words were "Up wretch, thou art captive of my lance." To which Hank replied, "Return to your circus!"⁸⁵ As in the 1920 version, Hank was taken prisoner but won the admiration of the court by his display of "magical powers." In the 1920 version, a match represented the magic. In 1931, it was a cigarette lighter that made the Yankee more worshipped than Merlin the Magician.⁸⁶ Again the idea of the ignorance of the medieval man for believing in sorcerers is shown in this movie. Hank won further approval by introducing to his medieval friends some 20th century inventions. The helicopter and tanks were to help them in battle; messengers were seen on roller skates; the Camelot Journal was read while in the Knights'

⁸⁴Mordaunt Hall, "An Arliss Sans Monacle," The New York Times, April 19, 1931, Sec. VIII, p. 5, col. 2.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid.

special shop--a shop for polishing and oiling suits of armor.⁸⁷

In 1936 a revival of this 1931 movie was produced by the United States as A Connecticut Yankee at the Court of King Arthur.⁸⁸

The portrayal of the Middle Ages in comedies such as these movies was what made this particular motif popular. It was a way of saying "Look at that funny age; we're so much better because we're smarter." Stories of the Round Table were produced in movies from 1920 to 1945 only as comedies based on Twain's book.

In 1936, a British version was released as When Knights Were Bold. It wasn't shown in the United States until 1942 when it was given a bad review. Set in a later period it was the story of an English baronet who dreamt he went back to 1400. As typical English, the humor was dry and was the reason it was not popular in the United States. For example, when the knight discovered the baronet and asked, "What's afoot?" Replied the Englishman, "Twelve inches, I think."⁸⁹ This was not very clever when compared to Twain's humorous concept of the Middle Ages.

⁸⁷Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," rev. of A Connecticut Yankee, The New York Times, April 11, 1930, p. 17, col. 4.

⁸⁸Frank S. Nugent, "The Screen," rev. of A Connecticut Yankee at the Court of King Arthur, The New York Times, May 4, 1936, p. 16, col. 1.

⁸⁹Bosley Crowther, "The Screen," rev. of When Knights Were Bold, The New York Times, March 31, 1942, p. 29, col. 2.

The Swiss hero William Tell was the subject of a United States movie The Legend of William Tell filmed in Switzerland in 1935.⁹⁰

This movie was much better received than the version in the 1920's. Perhaps the attitude the United States had regarding Switzerland as a country in possible danger by Germany was reflected in this movie. The story the movie told was the successful revolt against the 14th century Austrian ruler Gessler, whose death led to the birth of a free Swiss Confederacy.

Unlike the acrobatics of Douglas Fairbanks in the 1920's version Errol Flynn did not slide down as many tapestries or swing from as many trees in his portrayal of Robin Hood in The Adventures of Robin Hood in 1938.⁹¹ The United States movie brought to the screen again the adventures of the famous outlaw of the 12th century. One of the problems involved in the making of historical pictures was shown in an incident occurring after the film was first shown in New York. Sometimes what actually happened in history had to be altered slightly for logical sequence in a movie. This is known as taking the "dramatic license" in Hollywood. After the first showing of

⁹⁰Andre Sennwald, "The Screen," rev. of The Legend of William Tell, The New York Times, October 2, 1935, p. 27, col. 1.

⁹¹Douglas W. Churchill, "Hollywood's Tempest in an Inkpot," The New York Times, June 5, 1938, Sec. IX, p. 3, col. 8.

The Adventures of Robin Hood, many letters sent to the screen editor of The New York Times voiced the complaint that Richard and his men did not portray the correct wearing of the cross. In the movie, they returned from the Crusades wearing the crosses on front of their shirts. Historically they left for the Crusades wearing the crosses on front and returned with the crosses on back. The studio's explanation was their reason for taking dramatic license. When Richard returned and encountered Robin and his band, in order to be identified, he threw open his cloak to show the cross. According to the studio, an awkward scene would have resulted if Richard had to turn around and have his cloak lifted.⁹²

III. FAIRY TALES

A demand for fantasy characterized Hollywood of the late thirties but the fairy tale as a medieval motif was not used extensively outside the era of Walt Disney which is discussed in a later section of this chapter. Only one movie was found in the 1930's (other than Disney's) based on a fairy tale. In 1938, the United States produced Carlo Collodi's story based on an Italian fairy tale, Pinocchio, in which real actors wore masks to create the fantasy effect.⁹³

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Robert Joseph, "A Midget is Born," The New York Times, August 7, 1938, Sec. IX, p. 3, col. 8.

IV. SETTING

Two United States movies from the 1930's have been selected as illustrations of a creation of a medieval setting. The two movies in the section under SETTING in Chapter II were reproduced in the thirties. The 1925 Phantom of the Opera was converted to sound and released in 1930.⁹⁴ More famous and today a masterpiece, Charles Laughton starred in the 1939 production of The Hunchback of Notre Dame.⁹⁵ Perhaps no other movie of the thirties has been such a realistic portrayal of medieval life of the common man who lived in the growing cities of the Middle Ages. The Hunchback of Notre Dame was an excellent portrayal of life in the late medieval cities which were overcrowded with people from all walks of medieval life. A noisy atmosphere which was gloomy and confusing at times, lingered throughout the entire movie as scenes of the commonfolk showed the vulgarity and violence so characteristic of their class. The story revolved around the Festival of Fools at which Quasimodo, the hideous hunchback, was crowned "king." Among his subjects were crippled beggars, street tumblers, the men in charge of the whipping

⁹⁴Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," rev. of The Phantom of the Opera, The New York Times, February 10, 1930, p. 20, col. 5.

⁹⁵Baxter, Hollywood in the Thirties, pp. 68-69.

posts, thieves, derelicts and court jesters.⁹⁶ Elements of superstition, terror and horror pervaded as characteristics of medieval city life were unfolded on the screen. The significance of this movie being so famous is that a realistic portrayal of medieval life as a motif in movies could be as popular as Twain's comic portrayals.

V. HISTORY

Ten movies have been selected from the 1930's relating to medieval history and will be mentioned in chronological order historically.

Cecil B. DeMille, the great director of epic films, wanted to produce a movie about one of the greatest deeds in history, the Crusades. To DeMille this period had dramatic unity because it was the first time in history Christendom united in unselfish motives. As a result, the Third Crusade of the late 12th century, led by Richard the Lion Hearted against Saladin, was the story of DeMille's The Crusades, 1935. In some of the most exciting battles ever filmed, medieval methods of warfare were shown in the Christian assault on Acre outside Jerusalem. Flaming arrows, fireballs and torches, catapults, the cross-bow and the siege platform were the

⁹⁶ Andre Sennwald, "DeMille and the Crusades," The New York Times, August 25, 1935, Sec. X, p. 3, col. 1.

elements of war used in this film. Bodies floating in moats and vats of boiling oil poured on those scaling the walls of Acre expressed the type of battles fought during the Crusades.⁹⁷

During the 700th anniversary of the death of St. Francis of Assisi in 1226 and his canonization two years later, every theatre in Italy was showing the Italian film of 1933 The Passion of St. Francis. In New York the film was shown with English subtitles recounting the details of the Saint's poverty and his life from his youth to his early death.⁹⁸

The 13th century world traveller who left his home in Venice to go to the court of the Kublai Khan in China was the subject of the United States movie The Adventures of Marco Polo, 1937. Marco Polo wrote a book telling about his adventures which served as a basis for the movie. Polo went to China to conclude trade agreements and became involved in a battle with the Saracen Ahmed.⁹⁹ In Italy the movie was censored, but due to a shortage of movies, was reaccepted with changes. The movie became the adventures of

⁹⁷Andre Sennwald, "The Screen," rev. of The Crusades, The New York Times, August 22, 1935, p. 21, col. 3.

⁹⁸Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," rev. of The Passion of St. Francis, The New York Times, December 17, 1933, p. 22, col. 4.

⁹⁹Frank S. Nugent, "The Screen," rev. of The Adventures of Marco Polo, The New York Times, April 8, 1939, p. 17, col. 2.

a Scotsman named MacPool.¹⁰⁰

Movies of the thirties were characterized by portrayals of national heroes of the western world. Every country likes to have at least one part of its history expressed on the screen for the rest of the world to see. The late thirties was an age in which nationalism played an important role in the affairs of Europe. Medieval motifs were used to express this nationalism. Much symbolism was evident in the Russian production of Alexander Nevsky in 1938, the eve of World War II. Ordered by Stalin to direct this movie, Sergei Eisenstein began work on a story that told of the 13th century prince of Novgorod who defeated an invasion of Teutonic knights at the famous battle of Lake Peipus.¹⁰¹ Eisenstein's hatred of the Germans was shown in parallels of the movie to the 20th century attitudes of Russia. In the movie, during the invasion the crosses on the capes of the Teutonic knights appeared almost like swastikas. When the knights were lined up in preparation for battle, the bucket-shaped helmets behind the shields gave the allusion of tanks. The movie ended with Nevsky's speech to the knights sounding like a

¹⁰⁰ B. R. Crisler, "A Week of Not Unmixed Delights," The New York Times, June 11, 1939, Sec. IX, p. 3, col. 4.

¹⁰¹ Crowther, p. 174.

Russian message to the Germans in 1938. Nevsky told the knights to "Go home and tell all that Russia lives. If any one comes to us with the sword, he shall perish by the sword."¹⁰²

History of the medieval church was the theme of two movies about Joan of Arc. The British produced St. Joan the Maid in 1930, but in the German version of 1935 the patriotic, rather than the spiritual aspect was shown in Joan the Maid.¹⁰³ This would be expected of Germany if Dr. Kracauer's thesis regarding German movies is accepted. Germany, under the Nazi influence, would produce a movie with patriotism as a theme.

"Where are the dreams of yesterday?" wrote Francois Villon, the medieval poet of the 15th century, whose poem "If I Were King" was made the basis for two United States movies of the thirties.¹⁰⁴ Villon, who spent much of his life in jail as a result of his rebellious deeds, wrote poems which were representative of the end of the Middle Ages revolt against the nobility. In the musical comedy, The Vagabond King, 1930, Villon became a nobleman after his capture at

¹⁰²Harold Denny, "Two Soviet Notables Return to Favor," The New York Times, December 5, 1938, p. 14, col. 1.

¹⁰³Butler, p. 119.

¹⁰⁴Mordaunt Hall, "Pictures of Last Week," rev. of The Vagabond King, The New York Times, March 2, 1930, Sec. IX, p. 5, col. 1.

a battle with the Burgundians against Louis XI. None of the real lines of his poetry were used in the film. Instead Hollywood rewrote the 14th century poem so that it was more comical and easily understood. Thus on the way to prison, Villon was heard singing: "What France needs, / Is a King with a spine, / Not a weak, snorting swine, / Like Louie."¹⁰⁵ This movie was probably not popular with the French at all.

In 1938, Villon is heard again singing his poetry against the king of France in If I Were King. Like the first film, the romantic aspects of Villon's life were emphasized, omitting some of his truer villainous deeds in history. As a charming ladies' man he was depicted as a product of his age; a poor commoner caught up in the revolt against the nobility. In actual history, he was known to be a veritable rogue. What was not shown about his life was the incident when he stole money from the Church on Christmas Eve or his involvement in a murder in a Paris alley. Nor was he shown being tortured in the chambers of the palace.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Frank S. Nugent, "The Screen," rev. of If I Were King, The New York Times, September 29, 1938, p. 31, col. 1.

From English medieval history, the rise of Richard III to power in the 15th century was portrayed in the United States movie Tower of London, 1939. Much of the setting of the movie took place in the torture chamber of Richard's castle where nobles were mercilessly put to death.¹⁰⁷ Scenes of Gothic horror represented by the devices in the torture chamber, reflected the medieval outlook on the physical debasement of man.

The United States movie Alice in Wonderland, 1933, based on Lewis Carroll's book, expressed a medieval motif.¹⁰⁸ The whole book is based on the movement of pieces in a chess game. The pieces themselves are taken from medieval history. King, Queen, Knight, Bishop and Knave are the names of the chess pieces and were the characters in Carroll's story. During the Middle Ages, some chess games were actually played with human pieces on large fields.¹⁰⁹ It is thought that this delightful medieval practice may have influenced Carroll in the writing of Alice in Wonderland.

¹⁰⁷ Frank S. Nugent, "The Screen," rev. of Tower of London, The New York Times, December 12, 1939, p. 37, col. 2.

¹⁰⁸ Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," rev. of Alice in Wonderland, The New York Times, December 23, 1933, p. 19, col. 1.

¹⁰⁹ Lewis Carroll, The Annotated Alice, ed. Martin Gardner (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1960), p. 172.

VI. RELIGION

Late medieval history can be characterized as a revolt of the peasantry against the domination of the nobility and the Church. In the 14th century when the influence of the Church was weakened as a result of the Great Schism, the practice of Satanism was one expression of this revolt. In Satanism perverse reversals of the church services were performed in Black Masses. So perverse was this service that a woman's body was used as an altar. Punishment for these satanists was seen in the incident where Pope John XII in the 14th century had a bishop flayed alive on suspicion.¹¹⁰ Black Mass meetings held in the cellar of an old castle provided the setting for a United States movie in 1934. In The Black Cat the leader of the satanists was punished at the end by being flogged to death.¹¹¹

A medieval concept of Hell is portrayed in scenes from Dante's Inferno (United States) 1935. The reader is referred to scenes from the 1920 and 1930 versions in the fourteen plates of Clarens, An Illustrated History of the Horror Film. The movie was not about Dante's Divine Comedy but told the story of a carnival, in which "Dante's Inferno" was a booth or show similar to a "House of Horrors."

¹¹⁰Michelet, pp. 98-108.

¹¹¹Baxter, Hollywood in the Thirties, p. 79.

The man who ran the booth dreamt of hell as was depicted by the Divine Comedy which the scenes in Clarens' show.¹¹²

VII. THE MEDIEVALISM IN SHAKESPEARE

Two United States movies of the thirties based on Shakespeare, have been selected to illustrate the medieval motifs in Shakespeare.

A Midsummer's Night Dream, 1935, was based on Shakespeare's story of a world of fairies. In his play, the evil fairies of medieval superstition no longer existed. All fairies were good and helpers to man.¹¹³ This movie was not popular at all; audiences in the thirties did not flock to the theatres to see Shakespearean movies.

In 1936, Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet of early Renaissance Venice was the subject for the movie Romeo and Juliet. More acclaimed in the reviews than Midsummer, this movie drew larger audiences as a result of the story being more familiar.¹¹⁴

VII. THE MEDIEVALISM IN WALT DISNEY

The era of Walt Disney has made some of the greatest contributions to the world of Hollywood. In the late thirties and early

¹¹²Ibid., pp. 82-83.

¹¹³Editorial, "Midsummer's Night Dream," The New York Times, October 20, 1935, Sec. IV, p. 8, col. 3.

¹¹⁴Griffith and Mayer, p. 333.

forties, Disney realized a need in the fast paced world of the United States to escape into fantasy. Solving the world problems was not his aim; he wanted to provide in this escape a link with culture. He believed one way of attaining culture was by looking at the "fine and beautiful" in life. To Disney, the fairy tales of the medieval times represented one area of the "fine and beautiful" in life.¹¹⁵

In 1937, Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs became one of the most popular and prosperous movies in the decade. It was shown in forty-one countries outside the United States with surprising results by two countries. In England no one under sixteen could see the movie unless with a parent, yet in Quebec, Canada, an eleven year ban prohibiting sixteen year olds attending the movies was lifted.¹¹⁶

In the United States the economy prospered from the movie. The characters from the story were seen on clothing, dishes, toys, and made into dolls. In 1939, Snow White won an academy which was presented as one large Oscar for the studio, and seven little ones for each of the dwarfs.¹¹⁷ The dwarf of medieval superstition had become a symbol of good luck in 1939.

¹¹⁵Richard Schickel, The Disney Version (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), pp. 209-211.

¹¹⁶Thomas M. Pryor, "Snow White Sidelights," The New York Times, February 5, 1939, Sec. IX, p. 4, col. 1.

¹¹⁷Schickel, p. 231.

Chapter IV

MEDIEVAL MOTIFS IN THE MOVIES 1940-1945

Themes and characteristics of the Middle Ages were found in twenty movies selected from 1940-1945. To avoid repetition of content and medieval motifs cited previously in Chapters II and III, brief mention will be made only of some of the movies in the following sections. All of the movies but two were produced by the United States. These two will be so designated.

I. SUPERSTITION

Vampirism

In the early forties, the vampire movies were becoming less popular and so new variations of the theme were offered. Three movies have been selected to illustrate this medieval superstition. In 1943 Son of Dracula offered a unique change in that it was the story of Count Alucard instead of Count Dracula. (Alucard is Dracula spelled backwards.)¹¹⁸ In 1944, The Return of the Vampire added a religious theme. In the end the wolfman, converted to

¹¹⁸ Bosley Crowther, "The Screen in Review," rev. of Son of Dracula, The New York Times, November 6, 1943, p. 16, col. 4.

religion, killed Dracula with a crucifix.¹¹⁹ A scientific approach to the superstition was the theme of House of Dracula in 1945, when a doctor set out to cure the Count, (who had arisen of course since 1944) the Frankenstein monster, and the wolfman.¹²⁰ This was the most modern type of vampire movie made in the two and a half decades. In the Middle Ages, vampirism and lycanthropy were not cured scientifically. They were avoided by keeping such objects as a crucifix, wolf paw, or wolf thorn.

Lycanthropy

The werewolf theme had nearly run out of material during the early forties also. Like Dracula, it was in need of new variations. Of the three films in this period, only one has been selected as being unique in that Spencer Tracy in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in 1941 used no make-up but relied solely on facial expressions to make the transformation.¹²¹ The Wolfman was another product of 1941,¹²² and Cry of the Werewolf was produced in 1944.¹²³

¹¹⁹Bosley Crowther, "The Screen," rev. of The Return of the Vampire, The New York Times, January 29, 1944, p. 10, col. 1.

¹²⁰Baxter, Science Fiction in the Cinema, p. 47.

¹²¹Clarens, Illustrations.

¹²²Clarens, p. 78.

¹²³Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg, Hollywood in the Forties (London: A. Zwemmer Ltd., 1968), p. 64.

What had been popular themes in these movies in the thirties became less attractive in the early forties. Medieval motifs did not dominate in the films of the forties; movies were made reflecting the most important theme of the United States in the forties and that was the war.

II. LEGEND

The Golem

From the early forties came three Frankenstein movies based on the original movie from the thirties. In 1942, Ghost of Frankenstein¹²⁴ and Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman were released, followed by the House of Frankenstein in 1944.¹²⁵

Arabian Nights

Themes from the Arabian Nights remained a popular subject for movies in the early forties. With so many problems on the international scene this type of movie provided an escape. Beginning with the 1940 version of The Thief of Bagdad, the story of Ahmad, grandson of Haroun-Al-Raschid, is told with the usual flying carpets and magical elements of the medieval legend.¹²⁶ The New York Times

¹²⁴Clarens, p. 98.

¹²⁵Ibid., p. 78.

¹²⁶Higham and Greenberg, p. 52.

screen writer rated Thief as one of the best movies of the season.¹²⁷ A not so highly praised movie however was 1942's Arabian Nights which was criticized for its lack of the legendary characteristics. Two brothers of Bagdad who fell in love with the same dancing girl made this movie more of a love story which could have taken place in various settings. Haroun-Al-Raschid was one of the portrayals but that was one of the few characteristics it had in relation with the Arabian Nights tales.¹²⁸ In 1944, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves¹²⁹ and Kismet¹³⁰ were produced. In 1945 a plagiarism of Thief was made into a farcical comedy, A Thousand and One Nights.¹³¹

III. SETTING

Only one film has been selected from the early forties to show a medieval setting. During the Middle Ages, underground passage-ways and secret chambers were a part of every castle. A study of medieval castles would reveal the activities carried on in these "secret rooms" of a lord's domain. Most of these underground

¹²⁷Bosley Crowther, "The Screen," rev. of The Thief of Bagdad, The New York Times, December 6, 1940, p. 28, col. 1.

¹²⁸Bosley Crowther, "The Screen," rev. of Arabian Nights, The New York Times, December 26, 1942, p. 15, col. 1.

¹²⁹Bosley Crowther, "The Screen," rev. of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, The New York Times, March 16, 1944, p. 17, col. 3.

¹³⁰Bosley Crowther, "The Screen," rev. of Kismet, The New York Times, August 23, 1944, p. 16, col. 1.

scenes were filled with dungeons for prisoners and chambers for torture. Many of the movies 1920-1945 and today have relied on this setting as a background. In the 1943 remake of The Phantom of the Opera,¹³² a medieval setting was achieved. Underneath the Paris opera, were labyrinths of corridors where the action of the second part of the movie took place. Pictures of scenes from the 1925 movie showed narrow corridors sometimes ending in steep drops. In one scene a hand is seen reaching out of a dismal pool to draw a victim to his death.¹³³

IV. HISTORY

In 1943, Mexico produced St. Francis of Assisi, based on the life of the saint who lived in medieval history.¹³⁴ This was the second selected movie of this subject used in this paper. Both productions of St. Francis, the first in the thirties, have been from predominantly Catholic countries. (Italy in 1933.) This was the only film in this period 1941-1945 classified by the writer under history. Medieval history as a motif was not found in many movies of the forties.

¹³¹Higham and Greenberg, p. 53.

¹³²Clarens, p. 81.

¹³³Franklin, pp. 68-69.

¹³⁴Butler, p. 125.

V. THE MEDIEVALISM IN SHAKESPEARE

World War II did not prevent England from producing a film in 1944 that was to win best picture in the annual poll of the National Board of Review in 1946.¹³⁵

Based on the Shakespearean play Henry V (1387-1422) who became king of England in 1413,¹³⁶

Lawrence Olivier produced and starred in the movie Henry V.

The main events of the movie surrounded the battle of Agincourt in France.¹³⁷

Movies based on Shakespearean plays up to 1944 were not received well because they were too hard to understand.

Henry V was successful in that it related its story in terms and

a setting which appealed to the everyday movie goer. At the same

time it integrated a Shakespearean atmosphere as shown in the

first scenes. In its unusual opening the movie began in 1599 at

the Globe Theatre of Shakespeare's London. The events preceding

the actual battle were acted out on the stage. Then the story moved

to the English Channel on the way to Agincourt.¹³⁸ The reader may

¹³⁵"Henry V,' Olivier Wins Film Honors," The New York Times, December 19, 1946, p. 42, col. 4.

¹³⁶Campbell and Quinn, pp. 327-328.

¹³⁷Bosley Crowther, "The Screen," rev. of Henry V, The New York Times, June 18, 1946, p. 30, col. 2.

¹³⁸Ibid.

wish to see portrayals of medieval battles and is referred to Crowther's book, The Great Films, pages 165-168. The picture found most fascinating by the writer is the opening scene at the Globe Theatre on page 165. Henry V was praised for its close portrayal to the facts in medieval history; the costuming was especially considered an outstanding product of the movie. With England at war supplies were scant, except in the world of movies.

VI. THE MEDIEVALISM IN WALT DISNEY

From the fairyland world of Walt Disney came three films in the early forties. Fantasia in 1940 was an animated cartoon film starring Mickey Mouse and a host of other Disney characters who acted out scenes depicting the creation of the world and its progress through the ages. Music from famous composers provided the musical background. In the scenario "A Night on Bald Mountain," bats, gargoyles and devils of Gothic demonology participated in a black mass which ended with the coming of the Church represented as the coming of the dawn. This beautiful finish was symbolized in the singing of "Ave Maria."¹³⁹ Even though the movie was not popular at first, it became a masterpiece in musical and visual effects. Also produced in 1940 was the Disney version of Pinocchio,

¹³⁹Schickel, p. 242.

the fairy tale of the little puppet brought to life by the blue fairy.¹⁴⁰

The legendary St. George was the subject of 1941's The Reluctant Dragon based on Kenneth Grahame's story of the gentle but lazy dragon who did not like to fight and his counterpart, Sir Giles, who as a "reluctant knight" did not like fighting either.¹⁴¹ According to the late Middle Age book Golden Legend St. George was a knight who rescued a maiden from a dragon.¹⁴² In the movie, the dragon is very unmedieval because the only flame he ever breathes is a single little smoke ring. He was involved in a fight with the "reluctant knight"--St. George or Sir Giles--that wasn't a serious fight at all.¹⁴³ Certainly not typical of the medieval scene this movie, like A Connecticut Yankee made light humor of the Middle Ages rather than biting sarcasm.

Walt Disney saw in the fairy tale an escape into a world where the magical unrealities provided a break from the real world of sadness, misery, poverty, and disease. In every person, no matter how cold and stark one's realism, there is a need for the

¹⁴⁰Frank S. Nugent, "The Screen in Review," rev. of Pinocchio, The New York Times, February 8, 1940, p. 18, col. 2.

¹⁴¹Higham and Greenberg, p. 12.

¹⁴²Donald Attwater, The Penguin Dictionary of Saints (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 148.

¹⁴³"The Screen in Review," rev. of The Reluctant Dragon, The New York Times, July 25, 1941, p. 12, col. 2.

unreal and unworldly to appear. Joseph Campbell said of the world of Disney: "The fairytale **survives** because its world of magic is symptomatic of fevers deeply burning in the psyche" ¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Schickel, p. 226.

Chapter V

CONCLUSIONS

Looking at the period 1920-1945 as a whole, can one conclude that the period was strongly influenced by medieval motifs? On the contrary, there wasn't such a large number of films made with medieval motifs to classify a decade or even a short period of years to be known as the age or era of medievalism. Nor was the medieval theme ignored by the movie world. In certain movies, it appeared by chance; in others it was the prime motivation for the movie such as in DeMille's Crusades. So much was borrowed from the Middle Ages that this paper has not been able to cover every movie produced with a medieval motif. As stated in the introduction, one limitation of this paper was in the area of investigation. This paper has offered though examples of movies with medieval motifs which represent a fair sampling of how the theme occurred 1920-1945.

Of the many purposes the movies serve, one is that they have always been a mirror of the times in which they are made. The medieval motif was a significant factor in the movies 1920-1945 for it was used at times to fulfill this purpose of moviemaking. It was used as a reflection of the current affairs of the world as

in 1938's Alexander Nevsky, and in the German films of the 1920's and 1930's. The Middle Ages provided a setting for the unfolding of stories that could not have taken place successfully in any other location such as The Hunchback of Notre Dame. Some medieval based movies were so popular they were reproduced several times such as the Joan of Arc stories and Phantom of the Opera. Movies based on medieval superstitions became some of the most popular stories in moviemaking such as in the Dracula and Frankenstein stories.

Versatile themes were provided so that movies could be comedies or tragedies reflecting the same motif as in the United States versions of the Arabian Nights as compared with the German versions in the 1920's.

A medieval motif wasn't a guarantee of a "smash hit" nor did it signify a flop. William Tell in the 1920's failed yet Snow White won an academy in the 1940's.

The use of the medieval motif made possible famous forms of literature as found in Shakespeare. In the movie world Walt Disney made a fortune from his use of the medieval theme.

Some of today's classics of the screen are movies which are based on a medieval motif, especially the movies based on medieval history and legend such as Robin Hood and King Arthur movies.

Disney referred to culture as the "fine and beautiful." One way of attaining this quality was to go back to the fairy tale. In summing up this period as a whole, culture was attained in the movies 1920-1945 in which medieval motifs were found. These movies are today expressions of the fine and beautiful. They are generally a credit to Hollywood and the American film industry, although the number motivated by the Middle Ages is comparatively small in comparison with the industry's total output.

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