Manifestations of Medievalism in the Modern City

Lily Tedford, Class of 2022

My project focused on examining the use and misuse of medieval aesthetics and images in

various urban spaces: real or imagined, physically or descriptively. I looked at artwork and

images, read contemporary discussions about certain architectures, traced pop culture references,

attitudes behind the medieval-pastoral village landscapes of a “Tolkien-esque” fantasy tradition.

This ultimately led me to shift my central research focus in the second half of the summer, from

medieval aesthetics in architecture, urban experiences, and imagined environments, towards a

contrasting image in a newer (sub)genre of fantasy literature, urban fantasỳ̀

past, and positioned these urban fantasy texts directly in conversation with both their

predecessors in the genre and with scholars writing within the wider area of medieval studies. I

think my initial theory of the urban fantasy landscape standing in stark contrast and retaliation to

the traditional medieval fantasy setting actually held up a lot better than I expected it to when I

first began reading these texts, and my work since then has given me a much deeper

understanding of what defines the genre and why it’s so contemporary. There’s so much there

that can be explored further, and I’m particularly interested to see what scholarship turns up in

the coming years about urban fantasy being a literature of the unseen, because that

nearly-ubiquitous trope of the split/hidden city was absolutely fascinating and felt the most

of-our-time to me.

I feel incredibly lucky that I was able to find a research path that bridged my interests in the

medieval with my interest in urban studies and that led me to the honors project I have chosen to

pursue now— writing a collection of urban fantasy short stories set in my hometown of Portland,

Maine. And I’m excited to continue learning more about this engrossing niche going forward!

Faculty Mentor: Professor Jill Pearlman

Funded by the Surdna Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellowship Program