



Otherworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature

Aisling Byrne

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This book offers a new perspective on the "otherworlds" of medieval literature. These fantastical realms are among the most memorable places in medieval writing, by turns beautiful and monstrous, alluring and terrifying. Passing over a river or sea, or entering into a hollow hill, heroes come upon strange and magical realms. These places are often very beautiful, filled with sweet music, and adorned with precious stones and rich materials. There is often no darkness, time may pass at a different pace, and the people who dwell there are usually supernatural. Sometimes such a place is exactly what it appears to be--the land of heart's desire--but, the otherworld can also have a sinister side, trapping humans and keeping them there against their will.

Otherworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature takes a fresh look at how medieval writers understood these places and why they found them so compelling. It focuses on texts from England, but places this material in the broader context of literary production in medieval Britain and Ireland. The narratives examined in this book tell a rather surprising story about medieval notions of these fantastical places. Otherworlds are actually a lot less "other" than they might initially seem. Authors often use the idea of the otherworld to comment on very serious topics. It is not unusual for otherworld depictions to address political issues in the historical world. Most intriguing of all are those texts where locations in the real world are re-imagined as otherworlds. The regions on which this book focuses, Britain, Ireland, and the surrounding islands, prove particularly susceptible to this characterization.

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