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 ***Outlaw Heroes as Liminal Figures of Film and Television* by
Rebecca A. Umland (review)**

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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It is an old-said saw that 'all comparisons are odious.' So Rebecca Umland has waded into somewhat dangerous waters as she seeks to compare *Casablanca*'s Rick Blaine, *Shane*, *Dirty Harry*, and *Batman*, among others, to the medieval knight errant in general and to Malory's Lancelot in particular.

In *Outlaw Heroes as Liminal Figures of Film and Television*, Umland traces the origin of the heroic loner in Hollywood films about cops, vigilantes, and action heroes back to cinematic and television westerns (including the 'disguised western' *Casablanca*), and ultimately to medieval romance and the figure of the knight, principally Malory's Lancelot. The book is organized into three sections. The Introduction and Part I begin by establishing the typology of the literary knight first in the Middle Ages and then as reinterpreted primarily in the Victorian Age. Umland then traces the lone knight errant as reincarnated on film in *Casablanca* and *Shane* and on television in *The Lone Ranger* and *Have Gun—Will Travel*.

Part II treats two Hollywood franchises that begin in the 1970s, the maverick cop *Dirty Harry* series and the vigilante *Death Wish* series. Umland refers to these as 'urban westerns.' Part III explores two more franchises featuring action heroes that combine aspects of both the cop and the vigilante into the 'elite warrior': *Rambo* and *Batman* (in this case, appropriately, focusing on the *Batman* of the so-called *Dark Knight* series).

The connection between these real, disguised, and urban westerns and chivalric romance is unquestionable. Nor is it accidental. *Batman* is a 'dark knight'; the gunslinger/mercenary of *Have Gun—Will Travel* is named 'Paladin' and uses a chess knight on his business card. Through extensive research, Umland reveals less obvious connections, as well. In one episode of the *Lone Ranger* radio show, the voiceover says, 'there is a light that must have burned in the eyes of knights in armor' (p. 63).

Shane, the novel says, represents 'all that makes a man' (p. 43), a phrase from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. The final season of *Have Gun—Will Travel* opened with an 'origin story' in which viewers learn the hero was given the name 'Paladin' by a mentor who not only perceives the hero as a 'gentleman knight in shiny armor' (p. 74), but calls the villain of the story a dragon. **[End Page 81]**

Once Umland enters the deeper woods of medieval romance itself, however, the parallels become more tenuous. She finds three traits of the knight reflected in the liminal outlaw hero, characteristics that become a unifying theme throughout the book. First, they are loners, either wandering or in some self-imposed exile or isolation. Second, they are free from permanent domestic entanglements and, in the end, always remain in their loner state. And they act according to a private moral code, often a 'higher law' at odds with 'official' societal authority. These are the characteristics of the 'true knight' as gleaned from Umland's main source, Beverly Kennedy's classic *Knighthood in the 'Morte Darthur'*. One can see how Lancelot might illustrate all three traits. He often wanders on errantry; he cannot marry; and, most importantly, when Guenevere is condemned to the stake for adultery, Lancelot, according to Umland, puts his personal code of honor and love above the law, rescues her, and precipitates a civil war with the official authority, King Arthur.

Yet, upon closer examination of Lancelot's story in comparison to, say, Shane or Rick Blaine, cracks appear in the analogy. First, a knight errant is not a drifter. He is seeking whatever *aventure* God gives him to increase his worship at court, so errantry is socially sanctioned. Nor is he disillusioned or otherwise damaged, like Shane or Rick or even the Lone Ranger. The hero knight's moral code is not individualistic or at odds with official authority. The libertarian streak so prominent in the myth of the West is alien to medieval thinking. Even when Lancelot puts Guenevere's life above...

Reviews

REBECCA A. UMLAND, *Outlaw Heroes as Liminal Figures of Film and Television*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2016. Pp. 296. ISBN: 978-0-7864-7988-7. \$39.95.

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