

Romanticism, the Gothic and the Middle Ages in Kentaro Miura's *Berserk*

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Abstract

Kentaro Miura's manga series *Berserk* (1989-present) is largely based on late medieval and Renaissance Europe, but its author relied on a much broader array of references, among which those related to Romanticism and the Gothic genre are of prime importance. Through published interviews with the author and comparisons between the manga's panels and works of fiction, poetry and the visual arts, we seek to investigate the persistence of the Romantic and the Gothic traditions in *Berserk*. We argue that their imprint on the manga may be discerned in five main aspects: *Berserk*'s borrowings from the Romantic visual arts; its employing of vastness, repetition and uniformity in order to attain sublime effects; its affinity with the Gothic genre, whose macabre subjects and whose treatment of religion, cruelty and sexuality make its way into the manga; the Gothic and Romantic elements in its mythology; and its Romantic sentiment for nature. Some similarities between the manga and historical works point to direct and deliberate borrowings, resulting from the author extensive knowledge on Western art and academic background, while other similarities point to intermediate sources, which act as conduits between Miura and works of older periods. We conclude that the Japanese continuing of the Romantic and the Gothic traditions, exemplified by *Berserk* and other works, indicate that these traditions have kept their power to fuel creativity in contemporary culture and to shape our perceptions of the Middle Ages.

Keywords: Kentaro Miura, *Berserk*, *Hellraiser*, Romanticism, Gothic.

Introduction

Since Osamu Tezuka's *Princess Knight*, first published from 1953 to 1956, the European Middle Ages have been a significant source for many Japanese artists and writers. Prominent among their works is Kentaro Miura's *Berserk*¹, a fantasy manga published serially in the *Monthly Animal House* (later *Young Animal*²) magazine from August 1989 to January 2021, a few months before its author passed away, leaving the work unfinished. Few manga, if any, have displayed such an extensive array of medieval references. Again and again, the manga adapts, in painstaking detail, elements such as the archivolt of Romanesque portals and the colonnade of Córdoba's Great Mosque. In an interview, the author has elaborated on his peculiar blend of medievalism:

"[...] the more sinister parts of my story are certainly from the Middle Ages, while the more brilliant features tend to be part of the period of Versailles. These are, therefore, several historical periods. I have practically created a new epoch in which traces from the beginning of the Middle Ages unite with features of its end. For example, the dance at the Midlands Court belongs to the late medieval age. But feudalism, on the other hand, comes from a much earlier section of this epoch. Witchcrafting also belongs to the Middle Ages. That is why it may seem a bit unusual for Europeans [...] I really wanted to let readers immerse themselves in the European Middle Ages. I collected mainly footage. Before I started with *Berserk* at all, I did not know exactly how to proceed: to create a historical comic by keeping close to the facts, or rather a fantasy story. Anyway,

¹Berserk Official Guidebook by Kentaro Miura | Dark Horse® (<https://www.darkhorse.com>). <https://www.darkhorse.com/Books/30-01-610/Berserk-Official-Guidebook-TPB>

²Young Animal magazine | Hokusensha® (<https://www.hokusensha.co.jp/en/>). <https://younganimal.com>

all my history research has now become very useful”³

But Miura’s approach to the Middle Ages has not been unmediated. Many of *Berserk*’s medieval-inspired elements bear the imprint of two other Western traditions: the Romantic and the Gothic, the traces of which we seek here to identify.

Before proceed into our analysis, a brief recap of the manga’s story may be useful. It takes place in an imaginary world largely based on medieval and Renaissance Europe, where a young man named Guts makes a living as a mercenary warrior. After unwillingly joining a mercenary army known as The Band of the Hawk, Guts ends up developing a genuine affection for his companions, especially for Griffith, the band’s leader, and Casca, its only female member. At the peak of its glory, however, the group is abandoned by Guts, bent on stepping out from Griffith’s shadow. A distressed Griffith, who had grown infatuated with Guts, tries to console himself by sleeping with the princess of Midland, the kingdom where most of the story takes place. The discovery of the affair by the king leads to Griffith’s imprisonment for treason and the relentlessly pursuing of the Band of the Hawk. After a year of fleeing, the group is again joined by Guts. Together they manage to rescue Griffith, but a year of torture in the king’s dungeons left him incapable of ever handling a weapon again. Unable to cope with this, or with the love relationship that has developed between Guts and Casca, Griffith flees and tries to kill himself by slicing his throat.

Destiny then intervenes. The Behelit – a mysterious egg-shaped pendant worn by Griffith since his youth, and lost by him after falling through a gully in his cell – finds its way into his hands yet again, brought by the waters into which Griffith’s blood had flown. The blood, together with an eclipse that occurs at this moment – hereafter known as the Eclipse –, triggers the Behelit’s supernatural powers: it invokes the God Hand, four all-powerful entities who offer to

Griffith whatever he may wish, provided he gives the up the Band of the Hawk as a sacrifice. As soon as Griffith agrees to the deal every one of his companions is branded with a mark and an onslaught takes place, at the end of which only Guts and Casca, surrounded by demons, remain alive. Griffith, now transformed into Femto, the fifth God Hand, punishes the pair by sexually assaulting Casca while forcing Guts to watch. He and Casca are then saved from certain death by Skullknight, an old enemy of the God Hand. After recovering from his wounds, a one-eyed, one-armed Guts leaves behind a mentally damaged Casca to search for revenge. He eventually learns that there’s a chance of curing her mind in a distant land, taking her there after many adventures and getting some companions along the way. Meanwhile, Griffith reincarnates in a human form and achieve his lifelong dream of getting himself a kingdom, whose capital, Falconia, becomes the last safe haven for humanity, as the rest of the world plunge into chaos. *Berserk*’s production was interrupted by Miura’s death in 2021; the series resumed in June 2022 under Miura’s former assistants and the supervision of his friend and fellow *mangaka* Kouji Mori, seemingly progressing towards a final confrontation between Guts and Griffith.

Berserk and Romantic art

Most evidence of direct Romantic influences in *Berserk* is related to the visual arts. Having studied in a fine arts college, Miura was knowledgeable in much of the canon of Western art. “[...] I think *Berserk* is strongly influenced by Western culture. I’m trying to create something from what I learned from the West.”⁴ The references to European artists range from very direct citations of paintings or engravings – such is the case with works by Escher⁵ and Bosch⁶ – to the careful study of the drawing style of a particular artist. “I appreciate both Bosch and Escher, of which I have also the collections of the works. Moreover I like the etchings of Pieter “the young” [sic] Bruegel⁷ and Gustave Doré⁸ while

³ Miura, interview included as an extra in the fourth volume of the 2002 North American DVD release of the 1997 *Berserk* series by Media Blasters. The European release of the 1997 *Berserk* series on DVD from October, 2010 also includes this interview. There is an English transcription of the interview posted in a fan website, available at http://www.thespectrum.net/berserk_info_creator.shtml

⁴ Idem.

⁵ Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898-1972), Dutch graphic artist, known for his geometrically inspired works.

⁶ Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516), Netherlandish artist, representative of the early Netherlandish painting school, whose works are particularly known for their fantastical imagery.

⁷ Pieter Brueghel, the Younger (1564-1638), Netherlandish painter and engraver, known for his copies of paintings by his father, Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525-1569), in addition to his original compositions.

⁸ Gustave Doré (1832-1883), French painter, illustrator, printmaker and sculptor, produced numerous illustrations for publications of literary works, from the Bible to great classics of literature to contemporary

among the illustrators I admire Frank Frazetta⁹ and Luis Morrison.”¹⁰

A probable reference from Romantic art may be discerned in the design of Falconia. Extending from the right to the left extremity of the city, a gargantuan rampart separates its lower part from the higher one, where Griffith's palace is located. A bridge connects the palace to Pandemonium, a massive hemispheric structure where Griffith's demon army lives. The whole seems a reminiscence of *Pandemonium* (Fig. 1)¹¹, a painting by English Romantic artist John Martin, which, just like Falconia, features both an oblong architectural structure and a gigantic cupola behind it, not to speak of the thematic parallels: the painting represents Satan haranguing his fellow demons in front of their city, from whose name the painting derives its title.

Sometimes the manga seems to draw not from one particular work, but rather, in a more diffuse manner, from the Romantic landscape tradition as a whole. *Berserk's* scenery abounds with the sort of places and weather we find in the works of Ernst Ferdinand Oehme or Caspar Friedrich: misty valleys, medieval ruins, desolate moors and bare trees extending ominously into the horizon. A significant number of *Berserk's* panels seems indebted to the work of Gustave Doré, to the point that individuals in *Berserk's* online community of fans have created entire albums dedicated to comparisons of Miura's and Doré's pieces¹².

It's no wonder that an artist such as Doré, who has taken the precision technique and expressive lighting possibilities of visually realistic black and white figurative art to its limits, would appeal to Miura. Doré's etchings, engravings and woodcuts constitute a major conduit between Romantic works of literature and *Berserk*, as the French artist published series based on texts such as Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and Poe's *The Raven*. Furthermore, Doré's pieces for editions of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Perrault's tales,

Milton's *Paradise Lost*, among others texts set the epic, fantastic and heroic imagery of stories whose themes resonate both with the Romantic spirit, as well as with the scope of *Berserk's* fantasy world.

The Sublime

The sweeping, sometimes terrifying vistas that abound in *Berserk* exemplify Miura's taste for a quintessential Romantic quality: the sublime. It first appeared in Western Aesthetics in Longinus' treatise *On The Sublime* (1st century AD), translated into French by Boileau during the 17th century. Boileau, thanks to whom the treatise was introduced to a wider modern audience, defines the sublime as “...that sort of extraordinary or marvellous which is particularly striking in a discourse, and makes a work moving, astonishing, stirring.”¹³. In Edmund Burke's influential *A philosophical inquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful*, the concept of the sublime retains some features of Longinus' and Boileau's, insofar as all of them include astonishment among its effects. His emphasis in the frightening effects of the sublime, however, sets Burke apart from his predecessors. “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime”¹⁴, says he, according to whom the very things that unpleasantly horrify us in life become, in representation, sources of the delightful terror that marks the sublime in its most potent form.

Vastness and power – both among the chief ways of producing the sublime, according to Burke – combine in particularly terrifying ways both in *Berserk* and in the Romantic imagination. The helpless multitude buried by crumbling mountains in John Martin's *The Great Day of His Wrath* may have inspired a similar scene in the top right of an Apocalyptic panel shown in Chapter 126 of *Berserk*. Repetition and uniformity, which according to Burke may also produce the

poetry. The influence of his drawing style in Miura has been repeatedly commented upon.

⁹ Frank Frazetta (1928-2010) American artist, known for his comic book illustration work, as well as for his paintings and posters of medieval-inspired heroic fantasy scenes, such as the series based on the world of *Conan the Barbarian*, created by Robert E. Howard (1906-1936).

¹⁰ Miura, interview with Davide Castellazzi.

¹¹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Martin_Le_Pandemonium_Louvre.JPG

¹² for instance: <http://imgur.com/a/T4DNM>

¹³ “[...] cet extraordinaire et ce merveilleux qui frappe dans le Discours, et qui fait qu'un ouvrage enlève, ravit, transporte.”. Boileau, *Œuvres diverses du sieur D avec le Traité du sublime ou du merveilleux dans le discours, traduit du grec de Longin*, 335.

¹⁴ Burke, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*, 13.

sublime, are employed in *Berserk* as well as in Romantic works. Vastness, again, plays an important role in both cases, since the repeating and uniform elements usually combine to form huge structures or landscapes. One of the most striking literary examples of that can be found when, in a scene of William Beckford's Gothic novel *Vathek*, the protagonist and his lover descend into Hell:

The Caliph and Nouronihar beheld each other with amazement, at finding themselves in a place, which, though roofed with a vaulted ceiling, was so spacious and lofty, that at first they took it for an immeasurable plain. But their eyes at length growing to the grandeur of the objects at hand, they extended their view to those at a distance, and discovered rows of columns and arcades, which gradually diminished, till they terminated in a point, radiant as the sun, when he darts his last beams athwart the ocean.¹⁵

In the visual arts, we can find a similar effect in the endless colonnades depicted by John Martin in such works as *Belshazzar's Feast* (1820) and *Satan on his Throne* (1824), as well as in the human-faced plain that appears during *Berserk's* Eclipse, dwarfing the members of the Band of the Walk who ride over it.

The Gothic genre

Guts's first targets after recovering from the Eclipse are the Apostles, the God Hands' main followers. Among them is the long toothed, cannibal ruler of the city where Guts arrives in *Berserk's* first volume. He sits alone at a long table in a medieval-inspired castle hall, thus readily recalling some traits of the European vampire lord as portrayed in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and its countless adaptations. Such model indeed echoes Miura's early plans for a historical manga, which would later develop into *Berserk*¹⁶. In this embryonic form, Guts would wander through 15th century Europe, meeting figures such as Joan of Arc and Vlad Dracul, the late medieval Wallachian ruler upon whom Stoker has partially based his vampire count¹⁷ (another of Miura's abandoned

plans was a manga centred on the historical Dracula¹⁸).

Together with the nightly, stormy setting, such a villain firmly sets *Berserk's* beginning within the Gothic genre. The term "Gothic", which has been used to describe such works as Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* and Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, emerged as a literary label in the 18th century, when it could mean, as Gothic writer Clara Reeve puts it, a genre whose stories pictured "Gothic times and manners"¹⁹, i. e., the times and manners of the Middle Ages. But it could also mean a genre marked by macabre, often supernatural subjects, by archaic settings and by the striving for sublime effects.

However, even though a Gothic setting seems to us very congenial to the Middle Ages, there's no evidence that anyone in the Middle Ages has ever heard of a vampire: the earliest accounts of the creature date from the late 17th century²⁰. It is from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's unfinished narrative poem *Christabel* (whose last extant part was written in 1800) that the connection between vampires and the Middle Ages seems to have stemmed. The poem centres on the eponymous character, a highborn young lady, and Geraldine, a mysterious and beautiful woman bent on possessing Christabel and corrupting her father, Sir Leonine. Though the poem never refers to Geraldine as a vampire, some of her traits (such as her inability to cross unharmed the threshold of Christabel's castle) strongly suggest that this is indeed the case.

The sombre tones which characterize much of Romantic medievalism, with its haunted castles and misty churchyards, made almost inevitable that the vampire, once turned into a common a literary subject, was regarded as something very akin to a medieval setting. Stoker's vampire lord stands then as a middle link of an almost unbroken chain, along which the association between the Middle Ages and macabre, non-medieval elements such as vampirism was carried on through literature and other media up to late 20th century mass culture.

Berserk's strong affinity with the Gothic genre is also evident in the manga's approach to religion. Gothic fiction from the 18th and 19th

¹⁵ Beckford, *Vathek*. 206.

¹⁶ Miura, interview by Planet Manga.

¹⁷ Idem.

¹⁸ Miura, Interview included as an extra in the fourth volume of the 2002 North American DVD release of the 1997 *Berserk* series by Media Blasters.

¹⁹ Reeve, *The Old English Baron: a Gothic story*, iii.

²⁰ Braga, *A polémica dos mortos-vivos na França moderna (1693-1751)*.

centuries have usually portrayed the Catholic religion as a crux of cruelty, fanaticism and sexual repression, a view that found its way into the manga. A later part *Berserk's* story, the Conviction Arc, deals with a persecution campaign by the Vatican – the chief religious authority in *Berserk's* Catholic-like religion – against the heretics that multiply in post-Eclipse Midland. According to Miura²¹, this arc was based on Jean-Jacques Annaud's *The Name of the Rose* (1986), a film which adapts Umberto Eco's eponymous novel. The novel, ironically presented as a transcription of a 19th century adaptation of a lost medieval text (a favourite Gothic device), has been described by one of its editors as a "gothic thriller"²², with one main character, a fanatical inquisitor, being compared by historian Edward Peters to the priestly villains of 19th century fiction²³. Such a comparison is also invited by the chief antagonist of the Conviction Arc, Midland's chief inquisitor Mozgus, said by Miura to represent "the worst side of religion"²⁴. Just as the inquisitors of Gothic literature, Mozgus and his bodyguards (first shown in Chapter 132) are meant to be terrifying. In *Berserk*, this is achieved not only by their actions, but also by their appearance: most of them are repulsive, and the only handsome bodyguard is attired almost in the same way as a Plague Doctor, a historical figure (albeit from the 17th century, not the Middle Ages) which readily evokes ideas of disease and death. Even Mozgus's placid face gets grotesquely agitated when his emotions are stirred.

Another prominent Gothic element in *Berserk's* portrayal of religion is the Gothic dungeon. In Gothic fiction and art it consists in an underground prison or torture chamber which is designed to evoke terror, usually with the help of one or more imaginative, unhistorical torture instruments, such as the spiked coffin known as the 'iron maiden', the swinging blade in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum*, and the spiked wheel seen at the bottom left corner of a French revolutionary etching (Fig. 2)²⁵.

In *Berserk*, a prime example of such a dungeon lies within St. Albion's Monastery, where the local heretics are tortured (Chapter 135). Among the un-historical instruments displayed herein is the infamous pear-shaped device known as the pear of anguish. According to a tradition that dates to the 19th century, it was inserted into orifices of the victim's body, causing much pain as it four lobes slowly opened by the means of a mechanism. And yet, as in the case of the 'iron maiden' – a device that also figures in the manga's torture chamber – there's no evidence that such an instrument was ever used in torture.²⁶

The connexion between cruelty, religion and sexuality, embodied in *Berserk's* 'pear of anguish', is an important component of the Gothic tradition.²⁷ A parallel may be traced between the monk Ambrosio, the protagonist of Matthew Lewis' Gothic novel *The Monk*, and the knight Farnese in *Berserk*. Ambrosio is a model of chastity and strictness, but when his repressed sexuality comes forth he descends into a frenzy of rape, incest and murder. Farnese, the leader of the Vatican's military force, is outwardly the ideal defender of the faith, a maid who shunned marriage to embrace her holy calling; as it's eventually shown, however, her embrace of religion stems, by a great extent, from sexual repression, which is shown, for instance, when she gets sexually aroused by thoughts of heretics being burned.

Romanticism and the Gothic in *Berserk's* mythology

Berserk's in-world mythology includes not only the God Hand but also the higher entity they serve: this godhead, called the Idea of Evil, has the shape of a gigantic black heart and is the force who controls the Vatican and indeed much of the world's events. Having been wished into existence by all the sufferers in the world, who desired a source of evil to blame for their misfortunes, the Idea of Evil was introduced in a

²¹ Miura, interview published in the Brazilian edition of the *Berserk* Official Guide.

²² Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781427259219>

²³ Peters, *Inquisition*, 307.

²⁴ Miura, interview published in the Brazilian edition of the *Berserk* Official Guide.

²⁵ Hardener, after Klooger, *A scene from inside the Bastille, 1789-92*. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6946874w.r=scene%20interieur%20de%20la%20bastille?rk=21459;2#>

²⁶ Bishop, *The 'pear of anguish': Truth, torture and dark medievalism*, 599.

²⁷ Commenting on Lewis's *The Monk*, Haggerty (2004-2005) states that "If the novel can be considered sensational, that is not because anyone objected to the portrayal of the characters themselves: oversexed and violent Catholic priests, victimizing and vindictive nuns, devil worship and self-abuse. These and other lurid sexual possibilities were common popular perceptions of conventual life in Mediterranean countries."

chapter which has afterwards been removed from Berserk's canon, as Miura judged it revealed too much too early of the manga's story.

Mythopoesis, or myth-making, is an art that distinguishes itself from traditional myth-writing – such as we have since Antiquity – insofar as it deals not with the presentation of already existing myths, but with the invention of new ones. Mythopoesis dates back to the works of William Blake (1757-1827), a major figure in Romantic poetry. Although there's no evidence of a direct influence of Blake on *Berserk*, it is certain that he influenced English writer Clive Barker (1952-)²⁸, whose *Hellraiser* universe is a patent influence of Miura's. Blake freely adapted Judeo-Christian concepts, symbols and narratives to achieve, in a series of poems collectively known as the Prophetic Books, a mythology that was distinctly his own. In a similar manner, Barker combined elements from Christian demonology with an array of other sources, which range from the works of H. P. Lovecraft to sadomasochist culture, in order to create his personal mythology of Hell.

The most famous of Barker's demons are the Cenobites, masochistic beings to whom there's no difference between pleasure and pain. The similarities in appearance, number (four, including one female member both in the manga and in the first two *Hellraiser* films), and role in the story (they are invoked by the means of a shapeshifting artifact in both universes) point to the influence of the *Hellraiser* franchise on *Berserk*. The place where the God Hand first appear, an architectural landscape indebted to the works of M. C. Escher (Chapter H-0), is possibly also indebted to a panoramic view of Hell in the second *Hellraiser* film, both exemplifying the previously discussed taste for sublime vastness. In the film, the sublime effect is enhanced by placing an object – the polygon-shaped god Leviathan – beyond the vanishing point of the massive landscape, implying Leviathan's almost inconceivable hugeness. Miura does something similar when he places, beyond the already gigantic architecture, the immense whirlpool of damned souls of whom *Berserk's* Hell consists. This largeness-beyond-largeness effect was a favourite of John Martin's, and, as we have seen, was employed elsewhere in *Berserk*.

There is in Blake's, Barker's and Miura's mythologies a strong Gothic tinge: an emphasis on "dark visions of torment"²⁹, on the terrible aspects of the gods and on the suffering of their victims – Slan, the female God Hand in *Berserk*, is aroused by it, and terms such as "woe", "pangs" and "despair" abound in Blake's Prophetic Books. The interest in the sublime effect of vastness we just discussed is also present in those books, as indicated by verses such as

His cold horrors silent, dark Urizen
 Prepar'd: his ten thousands of thunders
 Rang'd in gloom'd array stretch out across
 The dread world, & the rolling of wheels
 As of swelling seas ...³⁰

The Romantic sentiment for nature

At some point in the Conviction Arc, the knight Farnese loses her faith. Having decided that following Guts will help her to regain her sense of purpose, Farnese begins to find it again when she meets Schierke, a young witch sent by her master Flora, an enemy of the God Hand, in order to help Guts on his journey.

From the witches, Farnese learns that magic is not something to be reviled, dealing not with demons but with elementals – spirits who resonate with the elements of nature. The witches' knowledge turns out to be part of an ancient belief system, the vestiges of which can be discerned among Vatican beliefs. In the vicinity of a church we can see carved stones which resemble the ones many people associate with the Celts, even though the historical counterparts of such stones are actually pre-Celtic. In *Berserk*, these stones are implied to be remains of an old religion, close to Flora's and Schierke's beliefs. The winged fairy seen at the centre of a circular megalith in a panel of the manga reinforces the motif of a bygone culture attuned to magic as well as to nature, just as popular culture usually imagines the Celts to have been.

Just as Gothic imagery embody many of the negative motifs in *Berserk*, its positive motifs are frequently embodied by images that evoke nature and a harmonious connection to it. This contrast helps to give complexity and variety to

²⁸ Barker, *Art and the artist: an interview with Clive Barker*.

²⁹ Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, Prologue.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 5.

Berserk's world. Flora's idyllic tree-house (Chapter 199), for instance, is a refreshing counterpoint to the gloominess of St. Albion's monastery. The motif of closeness-to-nature and its embodying by tree-buildings reappear in Skellig island, the home of the elves (who in *Berserk's* world are tiny, winged humanoid creatures) and the centre of magic learning in *Berserk's* world. Skellige is portrayed as a land of harmony and merriment – a far cry from all the suffering and punishment that dominated the Conviction Arc.

The immediate sources of all these elements are probably of recent origin. Tree-architecture is not uncommon in 20th century fantasy works: Tracy Hickmann's and Margaret Weiss's *Dragonlance* novels feature a huge tree-inn, and a tree-harbour (for flying ships) appears in Neil Gaiman's novel *Stardust*. The films *Caravan of Courage: An Ewok Adventure* and *The Return of the Jedi* feature a village built on treetops, as does an episode of the *Dungeons & Dragons* animated series. All this architecture probably stems from a single source: the elven city of Caras Galadon in J. R. R. Tolkien's novel *The Lord of the Rings*. Flora's house seems particularly indebted to elven architecture as we see it in Peter Jackson's film adaptations of Tolkien's book. Finally, elves and winged fairies, as well as elemental spirits, have appeared during this and the last century in numerous products of popular culture, from games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Magic: The Gathering* to cartoons, anime and videogames.

However, all these 20th or 21st century sources point in turn to earlier material. Elemental spirits result from the reworking of the Classical genii by 16th century authors like Cornelius Agrippa and, more importantly, Paracelsus, in his 1591 treatise *A book on nymphs, pygmies, and salamanders, and the other spirits*. However, elemental spirits only became popular thanks to a Romantic work, Friedrich de La Motte-Fouqué's Romantic fairy tale *Undine*, whose title character is a water elemental. The insect wings of fairies or elves also descend from Classical models – in this case, depictions of Psyche (Cupid's wife), of the human soul and of some winged spirits – but the attribution of such wings to fairies (creatures unknown before the Middle Ages) only takes

place in the 18th century³¹, making its way into popular culture largely thanks to Romantic works such as George Cruikshank's illustrations of the brothers Grimm's tales and some of Henry Fuseli's Shakespearean paintings.

Tolkien's elven architecture seem to be the oldest source of *Berserk's* tree architecture, but the ideas embodied by and linked to Flora's house are older yet. Miura was knowledgeable on a variety of architectural styles and has employed them throughout the manga; his choice of Gothic (not in the literary, but in purely architectural sense) elements such as fan-vaults, pointed arches, traceries and round windows for the house's design seems therefore significant. It suggests that, for him, this was a style especially akin to nature, and as such particularly apt to embody the connexion with it. If this is the case, he was echoing an important Romantic idea, which played a major role on the Romantic's enthusiasm for Gothic architecture.³² Such an enthusiasm, along with Romantic notions on nature and architecture, is exemplified by the young Goethe's likening of the Strasbourg Cathedral's façade to a "far-spreading tree of God", with "a thousand branches, millions of twigs, and leaves like the sand of the sea"³³.

Moreover, the antithesis between Classical and Gothic architecture, as well as the championing of the latter by many of the Romantics, is paralleled by a similar antithesis and a similar valuation in *Berserk*, where the (architecturally) Gothic and positive tree architecture is pitted against the negative and Classical Falconia. Finally, the almost seamless blending of living and manmade structures in Flora's house evokes a longing for Utopian rusticity and for unity with nature, which, as Wordsworth verses suggest, were so dear to the Romantics:

The spot was made by Nature for herself:
The travellers know it not, and 'twill remain
Unknown to them; but it is beautiful,
And if a man should plant his cottage near,
Should sleep beneath the shelter of its trees,
And blend its waters with his daily meal,

³¹ De Souza, *A iconografia dos seres feéricos*, 201.

³² Lovejoy, *The First Gothic Revival and the Return to Nature*. 435-437.

³³ Goethe, *On German Architecture*, 7.

He would so love it that in his death-hour
Its image would survive among his thoughts
...³⁴

Conclusion

In 1973 Umberto Eco discussed “ten little Middle Ages”, meaning ten different ways by which modernity has envisaged that period³⁵. According to Eco, “the Middle Ages have always been messed up in order to meet the vital requirements of different periods”³⁶. Such is the case of what Eco called “[t]he Middle Ages of Romanticism, with their stormy castles and their ghosts.”³⁷ *Berserk* is a prime example of this take. Although Miura has indeed employed a large array of medieval elements at creating the series, the Romantic and the Gothic have, as we’ve seen, left a deep imprint in the manga. Some instances of it, like Falconia’s similarity to the demon city in Martin’s *Pandemonium*, point to direct and deliberate borrowings and to the author’s

extensive knowledge on Western art and academic background. Other similarities point to intermediate sources, which act as conduits between Miura and works of older periods: such, as we’ve seen, seems to be the case of Barker’s *Hellraiser* universe, whose mythology carries with it some aspects of Blake’s.

Berserk’s ongoing popularity suggests that the Romantic Middle Ages have lost none of their appeal since the 1980s, having reached beyond Western culture to become part of a non-Western discourse on the Middle Ages as well. For *Berserk* is by no means alone in Japan. Hidetaka Miyazaki’s medieval-inspired *Dark Souls* video game series, for instance, is littered with Gothic and Romantic reminiscences, such as an obvious borrowing from Caspar Friedrich’s *The Wanderer in the Sea of Fog* in *Dark Souls 3*. The Japanese continuing of the Romantic and the Gothic traditions suggest that their power to fuel creativity and to shape our perception of the Middle Ages is certainly not exhausted.

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³⁴ Wordsworth, *To M. W.*

³⁵ Eco, *Dreaming of the Middle Ages*, 68.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

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- Figure 1. John Martin, *Pandemonium*, 1841. Oil on canvas, 123 x 185 cm. Louvre, Paris. Photo by Stéphane Magnenat at Wikimedia Commons. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Martin_Le_Pandemonium_Louvre.JPG. Last accessed in March 31, 2023.
- Figure 2. Hardener, after Klooger, *A scene from inside the Bastille*, 1789-92. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6946874w.r=scene%20interieur%20de%20la%20bastille?rk=21459;2#>. Last accessed in March 31, 2023.
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