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## ***Pilgrim* on BBC Radio 4: Dark Fantasy, Public Service Broadcasting, and Transmedia Possibilities**

Leslie Grace McMurtry 

### **ABSTRACT**


While much scholarship has focused on BBC radio drama of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, very little to date has dealt seriously with the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Sebastian Baczkiewicz's *Pilgrim* debuted on BBC Radio 4 in 2008. This article argues that *Pilgrim* is emblematic of well-made, popular Radio 4 drama of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I argue that it achieves this through how it responds to current BBC public purposes and presents itself as culturally British (or English). Furthermore, its transmedia possibilities are enacted through the careful re-purposing of English folklore and the use of flexi-narrative.

### **Introduction**

Of all the tales told on these islands, few are as strange as that of William Palmer, cursed, apparently, on the road to Canterbury in the spring of 1185, for denying the presence of the Other World, by the King of the Greyfolk, or Faerie, himself. And compelled to walk, that day to this, between the worlds of magic and of men. And subsequently known, in all the strange and wonderful lore attributed to the mysterious William Palmer, as *Pilgrim*. (Baczkiewicz, 2008)

*Pilgrim* is a speculative fiction (fantasy/science fiction) British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Radio 4 series written by Sebastian Baczkiewicz that includes 33 episodes broadcast over a 12-year period (2008–2020). Each episode is roughly 45 minutes long, comprising standalone stories linked by the character introduced in the excerpt above, a litany that accompanies every episode of the drama. William Palmer, “*Pilgrim*,” cursed with eternal life and a go-between for the Greyfolk and our modern world, has been portrayed in each episode by the actor Paul Hilton. Each episode has been initially broadcast on the BBC’s long-running, popular, and prestigious

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national channel, Radio 4, and episodes are occasionally available on Sounds, the BBC's current podcasting and streaming platform, which is widely available internationally.

Given the series' unusual longevity, *Pilgrim* can claim to have achieved popularity with the Radio 4 audience. Additionally, the episode "Sookey Hill" won a 2012 Special Commendation Prix Europa, conferring upon the program critical acclaim that is unusual for a series and for a genre drama (European radio drama awards have generally been given to standalone, intellectually cerebral pieces). For this reason, there has been an observable disjunction between BBC Radio drama series/serials that proved undeniably popular to British listeners and those judged to be critically meaningful, through the mechanism of awards. For example, Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was quietly launched on an unassuming slot on Radio 4 in 1978 but quickly gained recognition and a considerable audience. It subsequently became a transmedia phenomenon, resulting in novels, LPs, stage shows, TV and film adaptations, and lasting fame for its creator, actors, and production team. Similarly, Sue Townsend's *Adrian Mole* began as a New Year's Day 1982 monologue and resulted in further transmedia proliferation, including a series of books and a stage adaptation. While the success of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and *Adrian Mole* were arguably due to the fact that the comedies were accessible, fast, and funny (McMurtry, 2019a, p. 166), *Pilgrim* surpasses them both due to its combination of critical acclaim and listener popularity. Similarly, as a genre series of standalone stories tied together loosely by its protagonist, it has the potential for transmedia proliferation, not yet achieved.

A relative wealth of scholarship exists on BBC radio (and radio drama) of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Chignell, 2019; Best, 2023; Crook, 1999; McWhinnie, 1959; Street, 2006; Whitehead, 1989). In comparison, little has been published to date on radio drama of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (cf. McMurtry, 2019a; Verma, 2018; Watts, 2023). This article works, therefore, on supplementing the existing modest wellspring of scholarship on 21<sup>st</sup> century radio drama, with *Pilgrim* as emblematic of well-made, popular BBC Radio 4 drama of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that nevertheless shares some qualities with and is a precursor to contemporary indie and podcast dramas and successful speculative fiction franchises. I argue that it achieves this through how it responds to current BBC public purposes, presents itself as culturally British (or English), and its radiogenic understanding of the medium. Furthermore, its transmedia possibilities are enacted through the careful conservation/re-purposing of English folklore and the use of flexi-narrative. *Pilgrim*, as a product of BBC public service broadcasting, sits in the tension between radio drama's overwhelming traditional anonymity and lucrative, popular speculative fiction franchises, with the potential for global access through transmedia.

## Methods

This article refers to literature to establish key concepts about BBC radio drama and folklore, as well as engaging critically with the BBC's public purposes. It also uses secondary interviews with Sebastian Baczkiewicz to better understand the aesthetic and production imperatives connected with *Pilgrim*. The full body of work of *Pilgrim* would provide ample latitude for a monograph; to keep the scope feasible, this article does not focus to a granular level on all seven series of *Pilgrim*. Instead, it relies on textual analysis/close listening to the first series (2008) and the two recent specials (2018, 2020) in order to explore the core aspects of the drama maintained across time as well as to chart key changes, especially as they may relate to changing BBC policies and audiences.

## Literature Review

### *BBC and Radio Drama*

To contextualize the cultural and production background of *Pilgrim*, this section will provide a brief overview of BBC radio drama. Radio drama in the UK predates the formation of the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1927 (McMurtry, 2019a, p.77). Indeed, at the beginning of the introduction of the new medium of radio, much drama was stage-derived. Val Gielgud, who was Head of Drama between 1922 and 1956, was much enthralled by radio adaptations of stage dramas, feeling they were both reliably accessible to the general public and of a high artistic standard. Despite Gielgud's prejudices and considerable institutional influence, experimentation and made-for-the-microphone drama also emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, by such dramatists as Lance Sieveking and Tyrone Guthrie. Nevertheless, the body of work of radio drama and comedy that emerges in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from the BBC demonstrates numerous features. These include a marked emphasis on adaptation (not only from stage but steadily from novels and short stories, as in the *Classic Serial*), and a mixture of serialized as well as single dramas (which included "ongoing serials" or soap operas, from the 1940s onwards). This body of work is demonstrably diverse in terms of genres (comedy, romance, historical, science fiction, mystery, etc.) and modes (children's drama, for example). Despite an initial lack of interest in audience research (Silvey, 1974), the BBC's unique position as public service broadcaster for Britain—and the nation's *only* legal radio network (until 1970)—saw its program-makers attempting to provide entertainment, information, and education via the airwaves. David Hendy has argued that this has resulted in the BBC's survival on a diet of "continuity and change" (2013, p. 3), which is reflected in its radio drama up to the present day.

BBC Radio 4 remains the network's home of varied speech programming, which includes news, current affairs, magazine programs, documentaries, religious programming, readings, and drama (BBC World Service and BBC Sounds also occasionally commission or co-produce drama). The rest of the BBC domestic channels are mainly music-based (with the exception of Radio 4 Extra, a network for re-broadcasting BBC radio drama and comedy, which in the past produced original drama). Radio 4 inherited the philosophical positioning of "four sides to everyone" (D'Arcy, 2007, p. 27) in 1967, when the existing networks (the Home Service, the Light Programme, and the Third Programme) were re-formed as Radio 1 (popular, youth-oriented music), Radio 2 (pop/light music for an older audience), Radio 3 (classical music), and Radio 4. According to RAJAR data, Radio 4's listenership was 10.48 million in the last quarter of 2021 (BBC, 2022); the BBC confirmed a similar listening figure in 2023 (Bakaya, 2023, p. 3). Radio 4's listeners tend to be 55 and older and female (McMurtry, 2019a, p.163). The network has also been considered politically and socially influential (Hendy, 2007, p. 117).

BBC radio drama has launched many creative careers, as evidenced by *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and *Adrian Mole*, and other examples too numerous to name here. However, it is fair to say that for every Radio 4 writer who went on to wider fame, there exist many more who remain relatively obscure. BBC Radio 4 is also notable for being one of the world's biggest producers of radio drama: in 2016, it committed to producing and broadcasting 500–600 hours of drama per year (BBC, 2016, p. 10; McMurtry, 2019a). BBC radio drama is indirectly funded through the license fee; listening to radio does not require a license in the UK, so the TV license fee funds are split between TV, radio, and the BBC's digital and educational services. Responding, however, to changing audience habits, economic and political pressure, the overall BBC budget has been cut, and its radio drama output will shrink by 50% in 2023 (Thorpe, 2022).

### **Sebastian Baczkiewicz**

Sebastian Baczkiewicz, creator and sole writer of *Pilgrim*, is in many ways typical of the kind of dramatist attracted to and broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Common qualities of a Radio 4 dramatist are that the writer works in multiple media (TV, film, stage) by necessity, demonstrating versatility<sup>1</sup>; furthermore, many of the BBC Radio 4 dramatists whose work is continually commissioned over time emerged as dramaturgs for stage. Baczkiewicz, indeed, was a stage actor-turned-playwright whose first radio drama was heard on Radio 4 in 1999 and has written over 40 broadcast radio dramas in the intervening two decades. Although Baczkiewicz has also contributed scripts for broadcast TV (serial/soap *Holby City*, BBC One, 1999–2022), somewhat unusually his main work has been in radio, something he has

mixed feelings about: “Because what happens is, you write a radio play for BBC, it goes out at 2:15 or 9:00 in the evening, and then it ends—and nothing happens in your life” (Bacziewicz cited in Willey, 2013). By this, Bacziewicz alludes to the fact that despite his considerable and long-standing involvement with BBC Radio, he is not a household name. Nevertheless, in radio, Bacziewicz has proved himself uncommonly versatile, with his work broadcast not only on Radio 4 but also Radio 3, working in a wide variety of genres including comedy, speculative fiction, historical fiction, musical drama, docudrama, and adaptations. Furthermore, he was one of the lead writers on Radio 4’s *Home Front* (2014–18), an ambitious entry in the BBC’s response to the centenary of the First World War. *Tommies* (2014–18) followed combat on the front lines of the First World War; *Home Front*, as suggested by the title, was a daily serial/soap focusing on a community in Folkestone experiencing the repercussions of the war as civilians. Both *Tommies* and *Home Front* broadcast events day-by-day, allowing listeners to hear what was happening exactly 100 years in the past (e.g. an episode broadcast on January 27, 2015, would recreate events from January 27, 1915).

An image of Bacziewicz from his website depicts him wearing a t-shirt that says “Made by Immigrants” (Bacziewicz, 2020), and Bacziewicz’s background is crucial to understanding his conception of English folklore and how he approaches its depiction in *Pilgrim*. Raised in West London, Bacziewicz is of Polish/Irish descent (Bacziewicz, 2020). Individual and collective history has preoccupied him; he has said that he is interested in “what makes people themselves, what’s the legacy that just comes out through who they are and develops from there, from inside out” (cited in Willey, 2013). Bacziewicz would complicate the conservative understanding of Britishness, because, despite being “Made by Immigrants,” his fascination has always been for British folklore (Willey, 2013), which he describes as an “intoxicating” cultural phenomenon (cited in Sci-Fi Bulletin, 2015).

## **Folklore**

It is worthwhile defining what exactly is meant by folklore to clarify how it can be understood and transmitted through the mode of radio drama. According to the Folklore Society, folklore “holds together a number of aspects of vernacular culture and cultural traditions,” an overarching concept that links artifacts as diverse as ballads, folk plays, games, seasonal events, calendar customs, folk arts and crafts, material culture, plantlore, and weather lore (among others) (Folklore Society, 2022). By these descriptions, folklore can be both material and intangible. The intangibility and orality of folklore makes it especially suited to transmission through radio. This is explicit in the *Pilgrim* opening litany, “of all the tales told on these

islands . . .”. The linking of the intangible (oral folktales) with the material (“these islands”) is key to *Pilgrim*’s nexus between (fictional) British locations and accompanying myths and legends.

Although Baczkiewicz is evidently aware of the wealth of genuine, existing folklore about Britain and draws upon it in a composite way, *Pilgrim* is not seeking to simply repeat existing myths and legends about actual locations.<sup>2</sup> As Baczkiewicz explains, “There are endless stories about spirits in pools, mines, people you don’t talk to. There’s always an element of either an event that has taken place in an ancient place, or a story associated with it” (cited in *Sci-Fi Bulletin*, 2015). This approach alludes to the study of folklore, but also a clear impetus toward invention. Folklore contributes to culture through the transmission of beliefs, “what and why beliefs persist, develop, are acted upon, or are reproduced in culture” (Rodgers, 2019, p. 136). The connection to place is important in *Pilgrim* through the tension between invention and authenticity through folklore that holds both individual and collective experience. “The true spirit” of England, argues Colls, “has always been ready to do its duty. Its people have been reckoned to enjoy an intimacy with their land and with each other not normally found in the harsher facts of national life” (2002, p. 204). This observation is appropriate in terms of *Pilgrim*, which ostensibly deals with the folklore of “the British Isles,” which include Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. However, the series in fact focuses mainly on *English* settings. Baczkiewicz explains this: “If you go to Ireland or Scotland or Wales, they get very well repeated but in England, it doesn’t happen as much, and they seem to be a little under the radar” (cited in *Sci-Fi Bulletin*, 2015).

### ***The BBC as Public Service Broadcaster and Values of National Identity***

David Hendy argues that modern Britain cannot be understood “without understanding the role of the BBC in the life of the nation” (2022, p. xi). During the Second World War, Kumar maintains that the BBC stood for Britain, “the most representative of national institutions” (2003, pp. 237–38). Furthermore, “[f]or all its snobbery and core Englishness (‘London Calling’), [the BBC] saw the British as a whole” (Colls, 2002, p. 61). As “the national broadcaster,” the BBC’s role as public service broadcaster is well known and important (Hendy, 2022, p. xii). Making sweeping pronouncements about the BBC’s core values is difficult and perhaps doomed to inaccuracy, given its complexity as an organization and its now century-long history. Nevertheless, the BBC is admired (particularly abroad) for its reputation for impartiality, quality, and accuracy in news. In terms of program-making in the storytelling realm of radio drama, it may be more useful to use Jean Seaton’s phrase: “trying to make programmes that people like and that also – not in a preachy way (well only occasionally in a preachy way) – do them

good” (2004, p.152). Informally, the BBC has been known for its intentions to make programming that informs, educates, and entertains.

More formally, one can turn to the BBC’s published statements on its public purposes, for which it is held accountable. The BBC receives license fee payments from the British public in order to provide a public good. For this reason, it must ensure that it delivers on this promise. It is not possible or indeed the intention of the BBC to imbue *all* of its current values and public purposes and Mission Statement in every piece of media that it produces. Nevertheless, I will argue that *Pilgrim* is emblematic of two areas named in the BBC’s current BBC values and public purposes. The Corporation pledges:

4. To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom’s nations and regions and, in doing so, support the creative economy across the United Kingdom (BBC, n.d.).

And it promises:

5. To reflect the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world (BBC, n.d.).

To further explicate what exactly is meant by these public purposes, the BBC provides more detail:

... the BBC should accurately and authentically represent and portray the lives of the people of the United Kingdom today, and raise awareness of the different cultures and alternative viewpoints that make up its society [...] The BBC should bring people together for shared experiences and help contribute to the social cohesion and wellbeing of the United Kingdom. (BBC, n.d.).

Furthermore, it “should ensure that it produces output and services which will be enjoyed by people in the United Kingdom and globally” (BBC, n.d.).

The rest of this article will be devoted to analyzing *Pilgrim*. How does it transmit and repurpose British folklore? How does it fulfil the BBC public purposes noted above? Specifically, *Pilgrim*’s potential for contributing to social cohesion and the wellbeing of the people of the United Kingdom will be explored. Furthermore, how does it manifest a program that can be enjoyed by people in the UK and globally? I will further investigate the tension of *Pilgrim* as a product of public service broadcasting commitments and more market-driven storytelling, specifically storytelling that is trans-media in scope and has been influenced by televisual flexi-narrative.

## Results

In its more than 30 hours of radio drama output, *Pilgrim* offers a re-writing of the British cultural myth and the creation of a new folktale for our era. *Pilgrim* is persistently described as “modern day fantasy” in BBC marketing materials; hero William Palmer is a timeless and mysterious mediator. In mediating between the timeless folkloric world of British legend epitomized



by the Greyfolk and contemporary Britain, Palmer himself demonstrates that he adapts. Seemingly immortal, Palmer has existed since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, yet, he seems remarkably comfortable with most aspects of living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Specific historical periods can be alienating for the general public due to their perceived distance from the mores and concerns of people living today. Palmer is tied to a timeless continuum that has a cyclical nature as much as it has a forward chronological trajectory (by focusing on the folkloric aspect of the seasons, Pilgrim's relationship with time can sometimes be non-linear). This allows listeners to inhabit the present and an indistinct past with him. As Baczkiewicz explains,

As a writer I'm always drawn to the sense that numerous realities can exist all the time, and the layers of our culture and our being are all around us in those places. What was a housing estate or a Tesco's [supermarket] might once have had a story, or have a depth to it, particularly in a country as old and as rich in story and those kind of traditions as this one. (cited in Willey, 2013)

This is evident from the very first episode, "He Who Would Valiant Be" (2008), in which the Faerie trickster Puck muses about an estate in the fictional town near Birmingham, Minton, "I remember when this was all forest, as far as the eye could see. And I was its meaning." Similarly, when Pilgrim meets the King of the Greyfolk's emissary Grevis in an empty church, Grevis seems surprised that the "hotbloods" (humans) have seemingly abandoned this ancient, holy space. In the episode "'Gainst All Disaster," (2008) we find out that Pilgrim's wife, Juliana, is buried on a site now occupied by a Tesco's near Bristol.

What Baczkiewicz alludes to in the quotation above has qualities of psychogeography—the emotional connection between locations and people, potentially across time. In this sense, in *Pilgrim*, Englishness/Britishness is often defined by linkage to the land. It's notable that Palmer seldom appears in urban settings. More rural settings—towns and villages—permit more of the likelihood of surviving folkloric traditions, usually transmitted orally, to survive in *Pilgrim*. These include Lambton Hill in County Durham (used in "He Who Would Valiant Be" to link with the real folklore surrounding the Lambton Worm); various earthworks in Yorkshire inhabited by "ghostly coaches and black dogs;" a remote beach in Dorset; and the fictional Timbermoor Woods. Seventy-one percent of the titles for *Pilgrim* stories are fictional locations in which the action of the story takes place, ranging from "Sookey Hill" to "Bleaker Mill" to "Bayldon Abbey." In fact, urban locations in *Pilgrim* tend to denote sinister traps, such as Haddonfield's bank in "No Foes Shall Stay His Might" (2008).

The situations in *Pilgrim* are contemporary and relatable, despite the folkloric quality brought by the machinations of the Greyfolk and other supernatural phenomena. Noreen Thurlow in "Then Fancies Flee Away"

(2008) is an older single woman who is verbally abused by youths in her village Spar, and her son Joey is nicknamed “Portable” because during his tour in Iraq, he was injured while erecting portable toilets and had to be flown home, ending his army career. Sylvie Makepeace has lived in the same flat on the fourteenth floor of a tower block for 47 years. In the most recent story, *The Timbermoor Imp* (2020), museum curator John Wayne and PC Amy Lister are processing their affair and the death of Wayne’s estranged wife while attempting to keep their local museum from closure. Wayne’s protégé “Rabbit” Owens is a vulnerable youth who has been ostracized by the town of Timbermoor for his involvement in deaths orchestrated by local drug dealer “Dingo” Vaughn and his mother, Ginger. Rabbit’s strong sense of social exclusion and injustice is magnified by the small size of the community. *Pilgrim* therefore permits the reasonably accurate and authentic depiction of contemporary British people’s lives, as per the BBC public purposes, though woven through with fantasy. One of the most dramatic examples is to return to Sylvie Makepeace in “‘Gainst All Disaster,” who has been unwittingly harboring Joseph of Arimathea<sup>3</sup> in her flat for decades. She is alerted to this fact by the visit of Malachi Stiler, who she at first thinks is “Joe’s” solicitor, but is in fact a fallen angel or demon who unfurls his wings in her flat. There are also clear elements of humor in *Pilgrim*’s collision between fantastic and mundane. In *The Winter Queen* (2018), a woman is found under the roots of a yew tree during construction and, though she is the powerful sister of the King of the Greyfolk, she names herself Mrs Bronson, after the bulldozer brand.

Enjoyment can be derived from experiencing the story events of the *Pilgrim* universe literally (to believe, as the stories are presented, that water spirits, ghosts, fairies, and dragons can exist in parallel with our world). Nevertheless, *Pilgrim* can also be enjoyed on a more metaphorical level: “ancient superstitions are a metaphor for our ever-present fears and dreams” (cited in Deacon, n.d.). Considered this way, the folklore presented in *Pilgrim* more clearly fulfills the BBC’s public purposes, such as the reasonably accurate and authentic depiction of contemporary British people’s lives. Palmer’s daughter, Doris, and Noreen Thurlow are both referred to by characters as “witches,” but both they and the more explicitly supernatural character Freya Williams, a werewolf, can be seen to be socially constructed in these categories as “Other.” This social categorization is particularly relevant in the case of the previously mentioned Rabbit Owens, whose eccentricity makes him not only an object of fear and disdain for most of Timbermoor’s residents but also a prodigy in some senses. This is presumably why the end of *The Timbermoor Imp* sees him leaving the town with Palmer—with the audience assumption he may become Palmer’s sidekick. The fundamental liminality of Palmer is deeply appealing to any listeners who have themselves felt a lack of belonging.

Another public purpose, to reflect, represent, and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations and regions, is fulfilled given the roving nature of Palmer's vagabond status. In the first series alone, regions include Yorkshire, the West Midlands, and near Bristol. Throughout the whole run of the series, there is hardly a region in England not explored. While *Pilgrim* may focus on a potentially limiting definition of English culture based on traditional English folklore, crucially, the shared sense of regional and national identity as well as local community doesn't necessarily have anything to do with national origins or ethnic background but characters' present roles in the community and how they participate (or don't) in folkloric traditions such as seasonal events, calendar customs, plantlore, and weather lore. The BBC public purposes state that BBC content should bring people together for shared experiences. This is reflected in the seasonal community tradition of the Timbermoor Dance in *The Timbermoor Imp*. This local rite takes place at the Sun Stone on the edge of the Timbermoor Woods on Halloween. John Wayne supposes that in previous times, there were bonfires and sacrifices; Palmer reflects that by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it's an opportunity for children to offer cakes and sweets to the stone. The ritual is clearly a focal point of the seasonal calendar in the community: Wayne tells Rabbit Owens, "It's more about the taking part [...] a lot of people love this tradition."

The scheduling of *Pilgrim* is also significant (see [Appendix](#)). Of seven series and two specials, only one series (Series 2) was transmitted in late summer/early autumn. The remaining series were broadcast in winter or early spring (November through March), with the latest special, *The Timbermoor Imp*, broadcast in late October 2020 (appropriate to the setting of the story, Halloween). This is perhaps explained by *Pilgrim* as "dark fantasy adventure" (the BBC's term for the genre), best heard in the darkest time of the year. Though not strictly ghost stories, *Pilgrim* can be understood as what Rodgers (2019) calls "wyrð" fiction, and the traditional telling of these tales in winter, particularly at Christmas, is prominent in British culture. This is unsurprising, given the fact that *Yule*, the Scandinavian and Germanic word for midwinter, was a time when death was frequent and "cruel, sudden and seemingly random and meaningless" (Hawkins, 2013, p. 13). Many of the *Pilgrim* series and one special (*The Winter Queen*, specifically set around midwinter) were transmitted in December and early January. The weeks between late December and early January are also points in the BBC Radio 4 schedule that are conventionally when listening figures peak, as many people are off work for Christmas holidays and able to listen to radio (or BBC Sounds). Understandably, then, this is the period when BBC Radio releases special or "event" programming.

BBC programming should "reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations." It could be argued that

*Pilgrim* provides a limited viewpoint on Englishness and Britishness, in terms of its production team and gender equity and ethnic backgrounds. For example, the writer and protagonist are white men, and the producers/directors, Jessica Dromgoole and the late Marc Beeby,<sup>4</sup> are/were also white. It is unknown to what extent, if any, *Pilgrim* was influenced by the BBC's 50:20:12 workforce targets, introduced in 2020, which pledge to employ 50% women, 20% Black, Asian, or "minority ethnic," and 12% disabled people (BBC, 2021). It may be of interest to note that the 2008 series, by accident or design, did not fall far short of 20% Black and Asian workforce target in terms of actors employed (4 actors of 23 = 17%), whereas only 39% of the actors were women (9 actors of 23). By 2018, the percentage of Black and Asian actors had risen (2 actors of 9, 22%), but the percentage of women had fallen (3 actors of 9, 33%). In 2020, in *The Timbermoor Imp*, exactly 50% of the actors were women (5 actors of 10), and the 20% of Black and Asian workforce target was achieved (2 actors of out 10, with the largest lead roles in the story after Palmer being played by Black British actors Louis Jay Jordan as Rabbit and Stefan Adegbola as John).

## Discussion

The 33 episodes of *Pilgrim* have been repeated frequently on BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 4 Extra, and are sometimes available on BBC Sounds. Their popularity is in part explained by an anonymous comment from a BBC message board: *Pilgrim* is "where everyday reality is spliced, and spiced, with the magic otherworld. The drama of history repeats itself in the present" (cited in Deacon, n.d.). Its metaphorical potential and exploration of darkness has seen *Pilgrim* compared to the works of Alan Garner and the novels *Dracula* and *Lord of the Rings* (Deacon, n.d.). "This is the dark, malevolent fantasy world of Arthur Machen and M.R. James, where spirits are not merely capricious but absolutely cruel" (Willey, 2013). *Dracula*, *Lord of the Rings*, and James have proven particularly popular for adaptation, though of course these are prose fiction that have been adapted across other media like television, radio, film, and stage.

As noted in the literature review, properties arising in radio very seldom see adaptation into other media and rarely achieve lasting success. Nevertheless, I argue that *Pilgrim* has these potentials due to its form and narrative strategies. It is also noteworthy that the broadcast of *Pilgrim* coincided with a period when BBC Three's *Torchwood* (2006–11) was being aired. *Torchwood*'s protagonist is Captain Jack Harkness, introduced in series 1 of new *Doctor Who* (1963–1989; 2005–), who spends the series attempting to reconcile himself to his immortality, while protecting the human race from alien threats. *Torchwood*'s science fiction was particularly

rooted in the British Isles, specifically Wales, and occasionally its episodes explored folkloric and dark fantasy themes.

*Pilgrim's* dark fantasy or wyrd fiction also suggests the works of Neil Gaiman, many of which had been made into highly popular adaptations by Radio 4 between the years of 2013 and 2021. While Gaiman's works on Radio 4 have more frequently dealt with mythologies from outside Britain, *Neverwhere* (2013), *How the Marquis Got His Coat Back* (2016) and *Anansi Boys* (2017) have focused on London as a setting, but a fantastic London where the mundane conceals the otherworldly, a theme also familiar to listeners of *Pilgrim*. This is not to attempt to establish patterns of influence but merely to reflect that a cross-pollination combining speculative fiction, psychogeography and folklore was present in popular media at this time. It is also possible to trace some generic similarities in the world of indie and network podcast drama. One of the catalyzing indie audio dramas, *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-) displays genre hybridity as science fiction, comedy, romance, and satire. *Wolf 359* (2014–2017) and *The Bright Sessions* (2015–2018) were also hugely popular indie audio dramas that could be considered to fit in the speculative fiction genre. However, Ella Watts suggests that in some ways, genre has been secondary to the sense of community and representation engendered in *Welcome to Night Vale* and other “second phase” and beyond podcast fiction, in that its “primarily teenage and young adult fans” are most enthusiastic about its “radical diversity” (2023, p. 438).

“Flexi-narrative” was coined by Robin Nelson (1997) to denote a kind of televisual storytelling that combined aspects of closed narrative and open-ended narrative, serialized stories from soaps and single-shot stories, with “many of the narrative strands” being “left open to be taken up in later episodes whilst others simply trailed off unresolved” (p.32). Initially associated with “quality” television, it is now a fairly common and accepted mode of televisual/streaming program storytelling. Flexi-narrative is not a concept often applied to radio drama, mainly due to the fact that most radio drama series are either serials or one-shots. Series with the number of episodes necessary for flexi-narrative are fewer than on television/subscription video on demand (SVOD) and undeniably have been paid far less critical attention than the former. As Baczkiewicz explains, “There was sort of a sea change at the BBC [for series] and I’d always wanted to do something using the folktales of the British Isles” (cited in Willey, 2013). This suggests that Radio 4 in the late Noughties was interested in commissioning series that neither fit into the anthology nor serial mold, with later series like *Tommies* and *Curious Beneath the Stars* and *Tumanbay* (2015–19) bearing out this formula. The flexi-narrative mode is often combined with the concept of “forensic fandom,” when “strategies of complexity” began to more regularly characterize television (Mittell, 2006).

The scheduling of *Pilgrim* is worth considering within the flexi-narrative mode. All series of *Pilgrim* were broadcast once a week in the *Afternoon Drama* slot on Radio 4 (2:15–3 pm). Stories were therefore designed to be understood by an audience for whom a week had elapsed since the previous story. For this reason, it can be assumed that the stories were not reflective of “forensic fandom” as defined above, but more characteristic of the Radio 4 audience, who might be moving between modes of listening that made the radio a primary and potentially secondary medium. Nevertheless, the stories were not purely episodic, as characters and events built into arcs across series. The exception was the seventh and final series, in which the episodes were heard across 5 days. Contrastingly, the two specials were two-part serials, more akin to the *Classic Serial* dissemination format. In 2012, a clear emphasis was placed on Radio 4 drama that had a contemporary, rather than historical setting; otherwise, the variation in genres was fairly marked (McMurtry, 2019a, p.158). This suggests why the first six series of *Pilgrim* were broadcast weekly as one of five dramas that could be heard across a week of listening on Radio 4, rather than as more daily, serialized listening (like *The Archers*): Radio 4 listeners were accustomed to variety in the *Afternoon Drama*, and if a listener did not care to follow the *Pilgrim* story, they knew to avoid it on Wednesdays in 2008 and tune into other dramas on other weekdays.

As a final point, the alteration in broadcast/scheduling during the latter years of *Pilgrim* is more akin to the concentrated storytelling for a fan audience that has become common since the ascendancy of SVOD transmedia storytelling. Transmedia storytelling has proven extremely lucrative for telefantasy franchises, as in the case of *Star Wars* and, to a lesser extent, *Star Trek*. In 2012, Disney acquired Lucasfilm for \$4 billion (Block, 2012), resulting in a coordinated transmedia production and distribution surge of *Star Wars* Intellectual Property (IP), across film, SVOD, and other media. More recently, Paramount, *Star Trek*’s parent company, has refined its transmedia storytelling and distribution strategy to include animation and live-action series for a variety of demographics, all set within the *Star Trek* universe, produced through CBS Studios and available through SVOD platform Paramount+ (Pascale, 2019).

As discussed previously, it is extremely unusual for content with a radio origin to move transmedially into film, television, or prose publishing formats. Nevertheless, Baczekiewicz reported in 2020 that *Pilgrim* is under option with Red Planet Pictures, claiming that the series has “a lot of fans in TV and film” (cited in SciFi Bulletin, 2015). As English-language radio drama since the demise of American Old Time Radio (OTR) in the 1960s has overwhelmingly arisen from a (BBC)

public service broadcasting context, the question can be posed about the suitability of IP franchises developed through public service broadcasting for transmedia storytelling. How might *Pilgrim* as a storyworld alter under commercial conditions imposed by media conglomerates? Perhaps some lessons can be learned from current developments with regard to *Doctor Who*, one of the BBC's most important programs, a telefantasy transmedia phenomenon. In September 2021, BBC Studios, in BBC's in-house production company, announced it would co-produce the 2023 series of *Doctor Who* with Bad Wolf Productions, an independent British production company (Yossman, 2021). In October 2021, Sony Pictures Television acquired majority shares of Bad Wolf, buying out previous shareholders HBO and Sky plc (Bad Wolf, 2021). While Bad Wolf has evinced a strong commitment to boost Wales' creative economy (Bad Wolf, 2021), it remains to be seen how the BBC can continue to fulfil its commitments as a public service broadcaster co-producing with Bad Wolf, majority owned by one of the world's largest commercial conglomerates (its parent company is Sony Group Corporation) with fiscal year sales in 2020 reportedly \$7.16 million (Frater, 2021). According to CultBox, "Sony is thought to be the best cultural fit because the Bad Wolf co-founders have previously worked with SPT president of international production Wayne Garvie" (Laford, 2021). For the BBC as a global media producer, such deals are positive, but who will retain creative control?

## Conclusion

*Pilgrim* is both characteristic and unusual for BBC Radio 4 drama. Its flexi-narrative structure and scheduling characteristics have evolved over time, while its approach to folklore and presenting Englishness/Britishness have remained consistent. The smaller cast sizes in the specials from 2018 to 2020 are reflective of wider BBC radio drama/BBC Sounds commissioning imperatives and drama budgets. Other potential influences on *The Timbermoor Imp* include the BBC's 50:20:12 workforce targets, which can only improve the richness and diversity of radio/audio drama production. The focus on younger protagonists like "Rabbit" Owens possibly shows the influence of other tenets of BBC Sounds, such as the foregrounding of a youth audience (Paul, 2018). A slide-based document outlining the launch of BBC Sounds in 2018 (BBC, 2018) emphasized that Sounds' programs should be "targeted, relevant and 'for me.'" This is very much on the pulse of indie audio drama—indeed, some Sounds dramas were made by production teams from the indie audio drama world. In the BBC Sounds Commissioning



Guidelines from 2020, Rhian Roberts, Digital Commissioning Editor for Radio 3 and Radio 4, claimed that they sought content that encourages “learning by accident.” (BBC, 2020) Neither of these phrases seems to particularly apply to *Pilgrim*.

Interestingly, in many ways, *Pilgrim* seems tied to the ethos of Radio 4 more than Sounds. For example, BBC Radio 4 and Radio 4 Extra Controller and Director of Speech, Mohit Bakaya, described Radio 4’s mission statement as helping “the audience make sense of their world” (2023, p.3). He went on to emphasize the “trusted” nature of Radio 4, the importance of attracting a new generation of listeners as well as the established audience, and the “responsibility to reflect the whole of the UK and the rich and varied lives of the people living here” (ibid.). Radio 4’s Commissioning Editor of Drama & Fiction Alison Hindell was seeking “exciting, innovative, stylish drama [...] from different cultures both within and beyond the UK” (2023, p.4). As a product of BBC public service broadcasting, *Pilgrim* clearly fulfills many of the BBC’s public purposes. Hindell seems convinced that the BBC still offers “the best world-class audio drama” (ibid.), despite an explosion of competition from new entrants in the digital and podcast drama age, such as drama podcasts made for large media conglomerates like Marvel (cf. McMurtry, 2019b), Audible, and increasingly legitimized independents like Wireless Theatre Company. Given the transmedia storytelling potentials of *Pilgrim*, the BBC could invest in continuing to tell the story across Radio 4 in traditional slots while telling smaller stories on Sounds that conform better to a young audience seduced by expectations of “choice & control” and storytelling that is “targeted, relevant and ‘for me.’” Given the current pressure upon which the BBC is thrust by the UK government (Rosney, 2022; Thorpe, 2022), it is unlikely to find the budget for such a bold transmedia storytelling strategy. It is, therefore, not inconceivable that when *Pilgrim* jumps onto an SVOD screen, it would be backed by a commercial company or conglomerate or in some kind of hybrid commercial/PSB system like *Doctor Who* from 2023. This would make a certain amount of sense, as *Pilgrim* shares much in common with successful speculative fiction franchises. What effect this would have on the content, narrative, tone, and style of the series is debatable; Sullivan (2018) and Watts (2023) both express concern about the encroachment of monetization and corporatization on the podcasting and audio fiction spaces, respectively. *Pilgrim* may yet achieve larger global transmedia significance or it may observe the pattern of the vast majority of radio drama, remaining in comparative obscurity.



## Notes

1. Less commonly, they are published authors of prose fiction or poetry (Amanda Dalton, Michael Symmons Roberts). Alternative entry points for BBC radio dramatists are through BBC Writers Room or other specific drives to discover new talent.
2. His other works have reworked Arthurian legend, such as episodes of *Arthur* (BBC Radio 4, 2004), and have dealt with real places, such as *The Ghosts of Heathrow* (BBC Radio 4, 2014).
3. According to the Bible, Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy Jewish man who buried Jesus Christ's body after crucifixion. Legends say that Joseph brought Christianity to Britain and hid the Holy Grail (a cup that caught drops of blood from the dying Christ) to Glastonbury in England (BBC, 2014). In Baczkiewicz's story, Joseph also guards the Sleepers of Arthurian legend.
4. An award in the BBC Radio Drama Awards has been named after Beeby: The Marc Beeby Award for Debut Performance.

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## Appendix

Series number	Transmission date	Episode title
1	26 November 2008	He Who Would Valiant Be
	3 December 2008	Then Fancies Flee Away
	10 December 2008	No Foes Shall Stay His Might
	17 December 2008	'Gainst All Disaster
2	31 August 2010	The Drowned Church
	7 September 2010	The Lost Hotel
	14 September 2010	The Lady in the Lake
	21 September 2010	Hope Springs
3	26 January 2012	Crowsfall Wood
	2 February 2012	Sookey Hill
	9 February 2012	Aisley Bridge
	16 February 2012	Lindie Island
4	21 February 2013	Mullerby Fair
	28 February 2013	Tregarrah Head
	7 March 2013	Wedlowe Sound
	14 March 2013	Bleaker Lake
5	21 November 2013	Lyall Park
	28 November 2013	Gallowstone Hill
	5 December 2013	Woolmere Water
	12 December 2013	Parsons Mount
6	22 December 2014	Jackson's Mill
	29 December 2014	St Lewin
	5 January 2015	Ouldmeadow Jack
	12 January 2015	Daventree Mansions
7	29 February 2016	Clennan Court
	1 March 2016	Stickton General
	2 March 2016	Shoulder Hill
	3 March 2016	Caudley Fair
Special 1	4 March 2016	Bayldon Abbey
	10 December 2018	The Winter Queen Part 1
	11 December 2018	The Winter Queen Part 2
	23 October 2020	The Timbermoor Imp Part 1
Special 2	30 October 2020	The Timbermoor Imp Part 2