

**Policing Fantasy:**  
**Problems of Genre in Fantasy Literature**

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## **Introduction**

The focus of this thesis is on generic theories of fantasy literature. For a number of reasons that will be made clear, the existing theories of fantasy literature have not been able adequately to include the different types of the genre. This is so, partly because of the genre's weak position within the greater generic hierarchy, and partly because of an inward power struggle between its subgenres. Most common is the tendency to focus on works by otherwise recognised authors, or works that are already part of the western literary canon. This often leaves little room for works that are (perhaps) more central and interesting in a study of this genre.

To show how and why so many fantasy theorists have had problems in creating a comprehensive theory, chapter one will work through some concerns regarding general genre theory, before establishing the position of fantasy literature in relation to these concerns. This will help isolate some problems that are frequently debated in modern genre theory, problems that are perhaps especially visible, or acute, in fantasy theory.

Chapter two will provide an overview of the most important and influential theories of fantasy literature, and I will try to show how the problems discussed in chapter one affect these specific theories. I will also address other problems that have to do with the specific approach of each particular study. Some of the theorists downplay one part of the genre, perhaps in order to gain academic acceptance for the study of the genre, or for their own theories. There may be many reasons for doing this, and most of the time they are not clearly spelled out. However, where it is possible, I will go more closely into the studies to try to reveal those underlying reasons.

The format of this thesis does not allow me to create a fully developed theory that can incorporate all the different types of fantasy literature. Instead, I aim to present, as my third chapter, a study focusing on how mythology is used in modern fantasy literature of various kinds.

I will try to explore the role of myth or mythology in various fantasy texts, from gothic low fantasy, to epic high fantasy, post-modern fantasy, science fantasy and magical realism. I am aware that this thematic approach will limit my scope, and it will of course influence my choice of texts. But the effort to include texts from across the whole spectrum will hopefully counter this potential weakness. My intention is, however, that this study could be a model for other similar studies taking other central themes as their starting point, and thus include those fantasy works that are left out by my current focus on myth. A compilation of several such studies could approximate a comprehensive theory of fantasy literature, and at the same time hope to avoid the problems pointed out in chapter one. It is my hope that a compilation of thematic studies of this kind can successfully incorporate all variants of the genre and show their relations to each other, without the necessity of creating a rigid generic framework. This is not done to downplay the value of sub-genre studies, but to try to show the value of treating fantasy as one genre, and to show the need for one or more comprehensive theories to which the various sub-genre studies can be related.

The first chapter will provide a further introduction to the more theoretical aspects of this thesis. Let me now just summarise my overall ambition. My claim is that theorists of fantasy literature have failed to formulate a theory which brings together all the different types of fantasy. By exploring the problems of general genre theory as well as a number of works that deal specifically with the fantasy genre, I will try to show how and why these theorists have failed. After this, I will, through a

consideration of a number of textual examples, suggest how one might amend the situation.





## **General genre theory**

What is fantasy literature? This question can be answered in many different ways. First of all one would have to decide what one has in mind when using the phrase 'fantasy literature'. What I am interested in, is the literary genre, or subgenre called fantasy. This, however, has necessarily led me to another, and more general, question. Namely, what is meant by the word genre?

## **Genre and terminology**

I have already called fantasy both a genre and a subgenre. This is because the term genre can be understood in different ways. I have called it a genre in the same way that science fiction or horror fiction, or crime fiction, are called genres. However, when talking of genres one may also refer to the division of literature into poems, novels, drama, epics and essays, and so on. To try to escape some earlier inconsistencies regarding the generic terms genre and mode, I want to introduce, for the sake of discussion, a new set of terms. The first group mentioned above, are 'genres of matter', while the second group are 'genres of form'.

I would first like to get an objection to this new set of terms out of the way. The objection is that the different genres of matter, that I have mentioned, could easily be mistaken for genres of form. Detective stories, or crime fiction, for instance, can be said to rely heavily on form. This can be exemplified in a recurrent plot-structure, a specialised language and style of narration, archetypal characters etc. All these examples apply to some degree to fantasy and science fiction as well. These common attributes make it seem like crime fiction, fantasy and science fiction are genres of form. However, one only needs to reflect on the fact that the genres of matter can take

several forms, to find evidence that this is not so. In other words, the genre of fantasy consists of fantasy novels, fantasy poetry, fantasy short stories, and so on.

One could choose to view the categories of fantasy short story, fantasy novel etc., as different fantasy genres, and fantasy could then be called a 'transgeneric', 'intergeneric' or 'multigeneric' category. All of the terms above suggest in various ways that fantasy is a grouping of subgenres of the different genres of form. The same would be the case for science fiction, horror fiction, crime fiction etc. This does not mean, however, that the different genres of matter will exist as a subgenre of every genre of form, even if those subgenres are theoretically conceivable. Non-fiction genres of form, for instance, probably do not have such subgenres.

Genre terminology seems to be problematic, not only in fantasy theory, but in genre theory in general. The sorting of literary texts into genres are done by many different approaches and by different logical principles. The problems arise when groupings of texts are made by varying principles but called by the same name, genre. My need for a distinction between genres of matter and genres of form illustrates this. A look at some of the subgenres of fantasy can serve as further illuminating examples.

One set of subgenres are based on whether the story takes place within our world, or on a secondary world. This is what makes the distinction between high and low fantasy. A third subgenre is based on the use of quest-narrative and its influence on plot structure. Comic fantasy is a fourth subgenre, religious fantasy a fifth and subversive fantasy a sixth. My point is that neither the quest fantasy, nor the comic fantasy category takes into consideration the question of high or low fantasy. Further, a comic fantasy may very well also be a quest fantasy, a religious fantasy or a subversive fantasy. It may even be all of the above. Except for the pair of high and low fantasy, these subgenres do not exist on the same sublevel to fantasy or in any

necessary relation to each other. These groupings of texts are based on largely arbitrary principles, usually on one common quality. Still, when listed together, they give the impression of making up a coherent system of subgenres that could be illustrated like an organisational map with hierarchical levels and set relations between the groups.

What I have spoken of as genres of matter and genres of form have had several other names, although the different terms are only roughly equivalent because the logical principles behind them are not exactly the same. If every set of terms meant exactly the same, a new set of terms would not be necessary. As mentioned above, most groupings of texts are referred to as genres, but further distinctions are frequently made. The distinction between genres and modes is most common, but this distinction is potentially confusing. However, because some theorists have suggested that fantasy should be treated as a mode rather than a genre, I think it necessary to try to clear up this distinction, and at least to make clear my own understanding and use of the term mode. In his anthology *Modern Genre Theory*, David Duff has made a list of key concepts within genre theory. Here the term mode is explained in this way:

A term which, confusingly, is used in two almost opposite senses in modern genre theory: to denote the manner of representation or enunciation in a literary work (the three basic modes, in this sense, being the narrative, the dramatic and the lyrical – though the validity of this triad has been questioned); and to denote more strictly literary categories such as the tragic, the comic, or the pastoral, which are thematically specific but *non*-specific as to literary form or mode of representation. In this second sense, a mode is often distinguished from a **genre**, the latter term being reserved for types of literature which are both thematically *and* formally specific: tragedy as distinct from the tragic, comedy as distinct from the comic, etc.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Duff, David. *Modern Genre Theory*. Harlow: Longman, 2000. xv.

Within the first sense of the word, Duff mentions three basic modes, a triad of questionable validity. The use of the qualifier 'basic' suggests that there are, or, at least could be, other modes as well. In the introduction to his book, Duff explains how this triad has traditionally been erroneously traced back to Aristotle.<sup>2</sup> Later Duff explains how Northrop Frye speaks of what he calls the four 'radicals of representation', drama, epic, lyric and fiction, and uses the term genre to denote these four.<sup>3</sup> These are clearly examples of this first sense of the word mode, although Frye uses the term 'mode' as an alternative term for what he calls the 'mythoi', another set of four fundamental categories, consisting of comedy, tragedy, romance and irony/satire.

Frye has, in other words, reversed the use of the Aristotelian pair 'genre' and 'mode', but not only that. He calls the 'mythoi' pre-generic, which means that for instance comedy appears before drama. This might at first seem strange, but Frye seems to be in line with other modern theorists here. In an article called 'The Formation of Genres in the Renaissance and After', Alastair Fowler writes that 'in the formation of kinds, it seems usual for subgenres to emerge before genres. If this appears counterintuitive, one has only to reflect that particulars are identified before generalities.'<sup>4</sup> I will come back to this point later, in a discussion of the development of fantasy as a genre.

Fowler proceeds, however, to say that 'the absence of a genre label is of course no argument against the genre's existence'<sup>5</sup>. This last sentence from Fowler needs to be qualified. Genre critic Jean-Marie Schaeffer points out that before

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<sup>2</sup> Duff. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Duff. 98. For more in-depth explanations of Frye's terms, consult his book *Anatomy of criticism: Four Essays*.

<sup>4</sup> Fowler, Alastair. 'The Formation of Genres in the Renaissance and After.' *New Literary History*; Spring 2003; 34, 2. 187.

<sup>5</sup> Fowler. 'The Formation.' 188.

romanticism, genres were normative and prescriptive, they functioned as sets of rules for the writing of different types of texts, and texts were judged or evaluated on the basis of their accordance with any given set of rules.<sup>6</sup> This contrasts quite sharply with Fowler's claim that a genre could exist prior to its genre label, and shows how important it is to distinguish between the notion of genre as something existing in, or something we extract from, the literary work, and the pre-romantic notion of genre as a set of rules that are applicable to the work. What Fowler says is appropriate within the post-romantic period, but not within the pre-romantic period and its notion of genre.

The second sense of the word 'mode' in Duff's glossary seems quite close to what I have called genres of matter, although the genres of matter are specific as to subject matter, rather than as to theme. If one follows Duff, it might seem tempting to place the fantastic beside the tragic and the comic, and distinguish between the fantastic as a mode and fantasy as genre, after the model of modes and genres given in the second sense of the term mode in Duff's glossary. But fantasy is not thematically, nor formally specific, and the term 'the fantastic' has already been appropriated by Todorov as a term for a very limited portion of the fantasy genre.<sup>7</sup> One might be able to make Todorov's term and theory of the fantastic fit with the thematically specific mode, but the term fantasy, inclusively understood with all its directions and subgenres, cannot fit into this system.

The relationship between mode and genre, as described in Duff's glossary, does not seem to fit with other genres either. Neither the comic nor the tragic mode is thematically specific. One can try to get at what a mode is by looking at the terms

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<sup>6</sup> Schaeffer, Jean-Marie. 'Literary Genres and Textual Genericity.' Ed. Ralph Cohen. *The Future of Literary Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1989. 168-169.

<sup>7</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan. *The fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975.

tragedy and tragic. The term tragic is derived from tragedy, meaning something tragedy-like. A tragic text, then, involves one or more characteristics of tragedy. Among these there may or may not be a thematic characteristic. It follows, that two specific, tragic texts, involving different characteristics of the tragedy genre, may be quite dissimilar, despite the shared label, 'tragic'. It also follows that specific theme is not a necessary characteristic of a mode. Furthermore, genres could only be called thematically specific in such a broad sense that it would become uninteresting in any thorough study of a genre or field of literature.

Modes generally appear as a mixture of one genre with another.<sup>8</sup> That is, a tragedy is of course written in the tragic mode, but then we normally speak of the genre and not the mode. It is unnecessary to say that a tragedy is tragic, unless it is meant as a value judgement. Thus, when we speak of modes, we generally deal with a mixture of genres. The work is situated within one genre, but includes characteristics of one or several other genres. In this way, a novel, for instance, can be said to be tragic. Alastair Fowler distinguishes between local and comprehensive modulation, meaning that the modulation can take place within a small portion of the text, or 'pervade much or all of the work'.<sup>9</sup>

Several critics have tried to treat fantasy as a mode that influences genres like the novel, the short story and poetry. If one accepts that modes are made by using a set of characteristics from one genre to influence another genre, one has to accept that all modes have a generic origin. One argument against viewing fantasy as a mode is that its generic origin is proving hard to find. Some have proposed myth as the origin of the fantastic mode, while others have connected it to romance, but both romance and the mythic are separate modes. The one thing that all previous definitions of

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<sup>8</sup> Alastair Fowler makes a point of this in his *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982.

<sup>9</sup> Fowler, Alastair. *Kinds of Literature*. 107.

fantasy have had in common is that a fantasy text contains or deals with something unreal, whether in the form of something impossible, or just something that is nonexistent in our real world. But this is not enough to suggest the generic origin of a mode.

### **The development of genres and fantasy theory**

The Polish genre critic Ireneusz Opacki discusses the development of genres, or the translation of socio-political conditions into the language of genre. The idea is that when the conditions under which authors live change, literature changes too, in taking into itself the new topics, motifs, and problems of the time. According to Opacki, this is a main force of generic change, and it happens in three specific ways:

The first is the creation of completely new elements of the language of poetry, in keeping with a completely new set of problems introduced by a given stage of history. Thus there arise new motifs, vocabulary, compositional devices. The second form is a semantic modification of the elements of poetics up to that time, as with a 'change in the meaning of an expression' in the evolution of language. In the history of the genre at this point two externally similar forms may appear – at different stages of its development; however they will be different forms, endowed with different meanings – like a pair of homonyms. And then it is impossible to combine them in a whole, in one variant or model of the genre; this is why the temporal boundaries of a specific genre model are so important. The third variety of evolution is the introduction within the field of one generic trend of elements belonging to specific, historically defined models of other genres.<sup>10</sup>

The second and third forms of evolution, as presented by Opacki, are especially relevant to the discussion of fantasy literature. The fantasy genre has, since the end of the nineteenth century, evolved into at least two externally similar forms, (similar in

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<sup>10</sup> Opacki, Ireneusz. 'Royal Genres.' *Modern Genre Theory*. Ed. David Duff. Harlow: Longman, 2000. 119-120.

that they are both called fantasy,) which seem to be impossible to combine in one model of the genre. As to the third form of evolution, what Opacki describes is the use of a mode, or, in Fowler's term, modulation.

Within fantasy literature one can see the use of elements belonging to a wide range of 'historically defined models of other genres.' Among the most common are the epic, myth, romance, satire, historical novel, utopian/dystopian tale, fairy tale, and fable. The list could surely be made longer, but this is enough to make my point. Modulation has been very important to the development of modern fantasy literature, and has probably been one of the reasons for the kind of change described in Opacki's second form of evolution.

The extensive use of different modes in modern fantasy has led to such a richness and diversity, that it is hard to fit the genre into a traditional generic model without making the model too vague to be useful. Nevertheless, one has not developed a consistent use of distinguishing terms. Thus, the terms fantasy and the fantastic has been kept, more or less interchangeably, as labels for most of these forms, or subgenres. Further, although one may have trouble fitting all of fantasy into one generic model, one sometimes has equal trouble deciding within which model a specific text 'belongs' or fits best. It is therefore important to remain aware of the ties and relations between differing forms of fantasy literature.

With the growing interest in, and the gradual academic acceptance of, the fantasy genre during the 1960's and 1970's, the need for theoretical works on fantasy literature became evident. Based on various backgrounds and various goals, many theorists tried to define the genre. In relation to this, Fowler's point about the formation of genres is highly relevant. He states that 'in the formation of kinds, it



seems usual for subgenres to emerge before genres'<sup>11</sup> By making definitions and models of fantasy based on a subgenre, or sometimes creating new subgenres by allowing a specific theoretical approach to gain prescriptive and definitional qualities, scholars did and still do 'injustice' to the other subgenres, presenting one part or kind of fantasy as the whole genre. Following Opacki's idea of generic homonyms, so to speak, it might seem natural to divide fantasy into several genres, but if one is able to free oneself from the dependence on static generic models, this might not be necessary.

The low regard for fantasy among critics and scholars during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and well into the 60's and 70's, seems to be generally accepted as a fact. Among the fantasy theorists that will be discussed in detail during the second chapter, Rosemary Jackson and Christine Brooke-Rose comment on this directly.<sup>12</sup> In 'Why are Americans Afraid of Dragons' from a collection of essays by Ursula LeGuin called *The Language of the Night*, she deals not only with the low regard for fantasy, but with a general distrust of fiction, especially among American men.

I suspect that, based on the low status of the genre of fantasy during this period, some theorists felt inclined to stretch the boundaries of their definitions, so as to include highly regarded works and highly regarded authors. Whether this is true or not, many theorists have focused on works by such authors as Kafka, Dostoevsky, Henry James, Gogol, Poe, Thackeray, Dickens, etc. In some studies, it is also a problem that the focus is largely upon older works, and that one does not adequately take into consideration the developments in the field since around 1930.

The connection of such names as Kafka, Dostoevsky, Gogol and Dickens with the genre of fantasy, has of course done something to its cultural status, and the need

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<sup>11</sup> Fowler. 'The Formation of Genres in the Renaissance and After.' 187.

<sup>12</sup> See Jackson's *The Literature of Subversion*. vii, and Brooke-Rose's *The Rhetoric of the Unreal*. 7.

to establish a tradition is understandable. I do not claim that Kafka, Dostoevsky and others did not write fantasy, and sometimes even good fantasy, but merely suggest that the significance and centrality attributed to these works might be out of proportion in many studies of modern fantasy.<sup>13</sup> Though it may not secure cultural status, a focus on some selected works published by relatively un-acclaimed authors during the last fifty years as the central works of modern fantasy, preferably keeping Kafka, Dostoevsky and the rest as useful reference points on the periphery of the genre, would lead to a greater understanding of fantasy literature in general.

### **The problems of change, definition and generic systems**

Since the beginning of literary criticism and literary theory, scholars have made an effort to systematise and classify literature. They have made definitions of genres in order to clearly delimit their study or the topic of discussion.

One danger inherent in this approach is the subsequent belief that literature consists of static classes, like the species of biology, and many have strived to make literary theory and criticism more like the natural sciences.<sup>14</sup> Despite the dynamic quality of genres evident through historical change, many scholars have continued to hold on to the old notions about genres as static entities. Faced with the problem of change, the literary scholar has traditionally had two options. He can either dismiss the new on the grounds that it does not follow the prescribed norm, or he can restructure literary theory to fit with a new reality. This has led to lack of recognition

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<sup>13</sup> The specific studies of fantasy will be discussed in depth in Chapter 2.

<sup>14</sup> This is an accusation frequently levelled at structuralists. Tzvetan Todorov, for instance, makes claims of using a scientific method, and criticises Northrop Frye for not being scientific enough. Also see David Duff's introduction to Derrida in *Modern Genre Theory* where he states that 'as a focal point of structuralist endeavours to create a "science of literature", the concept of genre was an obvious target for deconstruction.'

of innovative talent and, when talent has been recognised, to successive restructurings of generic systems.

As mentioned earlier, the genre critic Jean-Marie Schaeffer has said that ‘in the classical era generic notions were essentially conceived as criteria serving to judge the conformity of a work to a norm, or rather a set of rules.’<sup>15</sup> Genres did change even then, but one did not have the ideal of creation and innovation. These changes were mostly results of external influences such as shifts of political power, new laws regarding censorship, changing tastes among the reading public, or changing markets as a result of increased literacy. Only to a lesser degree were generic innovations done purposefully by the author.

With the romantic emphasis on creating something new and unique, the traditional notion of normative genres lost ground. With the introduction of the ideology of the individual and the idea of the creative genius, authors began to intentionally change genres or go outside generic boundaries, and authors and critics alike slowly came to think of genres as dynamic categories. As modern readers, we still have expectations based upon our understanding of genres, of course, but we also appreciate textual innovation, playfulness and disregard of generic norms.<sup>16</sup>

In the introduction to Duff’s study of genres, he gives a brief summary of this shift in genre theory:

Another major development in genre theory which occurs in the romantic period is the recognition of the historical character of genres. To the modern reader this seems so obvious and fundamental a point that an effort of imagination is required to recall a time when it was believed that genres were static, universal categories whose character did not alter across time; and that it was therefore feasible to judge a work written in, say, 1750, by rules formulated in the fourth century

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<sup>15</sup> Schaeffer. 168.

<sup>16</sup> See Schaeffer’s article for a more detailed discussion of different notions of genre.

BC, or to deny the existence of a new genre on the grounds that Aristotle didn't define it. Yet such practices were absolutely orthodox before the advent of Romanticism, as almost any example of Neoclassical criticism would illustrate. How they eventually came to be abandoned – in face of the irrefutable fact of the ascendancy of the novel, and the irresistible claims of an 'expressive' poetics – is a remarkable episode in the history of ideas. Its result was a new conception of genres as historically determined, dynamic entities, a view given fullest expression in Hegel's famous lectures on aesthetics.<sup>17</sup>

With this development one would expect that critics found a new approach to genre, and in some ways they did. Critics started to treat the historical context and biographical information about the author as an important frame for understanding a work, and they paid attention to the differences of various periods. But very few have adequately questioned the hitherto most important tool in describing a genre, namely definition. Definition is a tool used to delimit a term, a species, a type, as accurately as possible. Its ideal is to leave out nothing that belongs, and to include nothing that does not belong. This cannot possibly be done with a constantly changing or dynamic entity.

Despite the impossibility of making lasting, accurate definitions of literary genres, critics have had a need to delimit and describe exactly what they are working with. Because of this, definitions are still being made and used. The definition may work within a specific critical study, because it was designed for that particular study, but by changing the approach, or the selection of texts, or letting time take its toll, the definition will become inaccurate and perhaps even misleading.

I am, of course, not the first to discover problems in the theories of genre. As a result of the shifting notions of genre during the Romantic period, some scholars became opposed to the whole concept of genre, claiming that it functioned as a

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<sup>17</sup> Duff. 4.

straightjacket for literature and was destructive to creativity. The Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce was one of the most fiercely anti-generic theorists at the time. He made a distinction between intuitive and logical knowledge and claimed that art belongs to the former and that theoretically constructed systems like generic systems, belong to the latter. Thus, according to Croce, it is a fundamental mistake to judge a work of art according to the 'rules' or 'laws' of a genre. Croce suggested that the notion of genre was only useful for the shelving of books in, say, a library.<sup>18</sup>

The modernist movement can be said to continue and in some ways even to complete the romantic riot against the doctrines of genres. With the move from heavily prescriptive forms of poetry to free verse and a shift in prevalent themes, and with the new stream-of-consciousness-technique in the novel and short story, to name only a few of the major changes of the modernist movement, authors tried to break free from restrictive norms. But in doing this the modernists did not really part with the notion of genre. While cutting the old strings that bound them, they created new ones. Free verse and the stream-of-consciousness novel made new forms, renewed genres, but remain part of their respective generic traditions. The stream-of-consciousness novel remains a novel, thus proving the dynamic quality of genres.

It is important to remember that the new forms stand in relation to the old. Although many modernists, without doubt, felt that they 'made it new', one need only to reflect on the term free verse to see that this is not so. In the term free verse is embodied a negation of, or opposition to, older traditions based on strict formal criteria. This relation implies the kinship between the old and the new, and the continuity of the genre.

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<sup>18</sup> Croce, Benedetto. 'Criticism of the Theory of Artistic and Literary Kinds.' *Modern Genre Theory*. Ed. David Duff. Harlow: Longman, 2000. 25-28.

Not all theorists were negative to the concept and study of genres, however. While the New Critics focused only on the text and did away with all types of context, including genre, the Formalists and later the Structuralists became very interested in genres, especially how they work in relation to each other. Formalists have made some of the most insightful theories of literary change and on the functions and evolution of generic hierarchies.<sup>19</sup>

Jacques Derrida is, as one would expect, critical of the notion of genre. In his essay 'The Law of Genre', he attacks the delimiting tendency of genre: 'As soon as the word "genre" is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: "Do", "Do not" says "genre", the word "genre", the figure, the voice, or the law of genre.'<sup>20</sup> But here again it is genre as a defined and therefore static entity that is criticised. Derrida's second objection, condensed by Duff into the claim that 'the marks by which a work inscribes itself within a genre paradoxically do not belong to that genre; and hence the generic boundary is dissolved at the very moment when it is established,' evaporates if one ceases to view genre as a definable entity and rather, in more pragmatic terms, treats it as a tool for communication and interpretation.<sup>21</sup>

I want to go back to my quotation from Jean-Marie Schaeffer, where he says that 'in the classical era generic notions were essentially conceived as criteria serving to judge the conformity of a work to a norm, or rather a set of rules.'<sup>22</sup> With some fundamental qualifications, what I propose here is a return to the classical, by understanding genre as something one applies to a text rather than something one tries

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<sup>19</sup> See for instance Tynyanov's and Opaeki's articles in Duff's book *Modern Genre Theory*.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, Jacques. 'The Law of Genre.' *Modern Genre Theory*. Ed. David Duff. Harlow: Longman, 2000. 221.

<sup>21</sup> Duff. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Schaeffer. 168.

to find intrinsic in the text. Genre should be seen, in our modern world, as a tool of interpretation or as a way of understanding texts rather than as a means for the measurement of quality, value or conformity to norms.

In practice, the dynamic genres seem to have inherited something from the old static ones, in that scholars have a tendency to treat them as if they exist, as living, natural things, as something to which both literature and its scholars are subjected. There seems to be a tendency to forget that they are constructs and tools that can be fitted to suit a purpose. Genres should not be understood as a body of works, but rather as the set of communicative functions or properties which those works have in common. Specific genre models, in this sense, are only legitimate as long as they have positive pragmatic value. Thus they must adapt, as new texts challenge the old logic of the genre.

Some critics have tried to solve the problem of change by treating genres as synchronic entities belonging to limited time periods. Synchronic studies of literary genres are undeniably important within the field of literary studies, but giving the selected works of such studies the status of genres does not solve the problem of generic change. On the contrary, this attempt quickly causes more problems because one will inevitably end up with quite a large number of genres, called for instance tragedy, conceivably with various prefixes like Greek, Roman, Shakespearean, Renaissance etc. If one were to work in this way with all kinds of literature, one would end up with an unmanageable amount of genres, and still not escape the fact that the tragedies of various periods have much in common, despite their differences. Readers and critics would still see the value of viewing tragedies throughout history in relation to each other. But since this group consists of such various works, it cannot

be defined without including too much, or leaving too much out. So the problem of change remains.

Since genres seem to resist definition, one obviously needs a new approach. Alastair Fowler is one of several genre critics who have pointed this out. He says, in his book *Kinds of Literature*, that 'genres are best not regarded at all as classes, but types' and continues to quote E. D. Hirsh's distinction that 'A type can be entirely represented in a single instance, while a class is usually thought of as an array of instances.' Later, Fowler explains that 'the notion of type is introduced to emphasize that genres have to do with identifying and communicating rather than with defining and classifying. We identify the genre to interpret the exemplar.'<sup>23</sup>

Fowler makes it sound very simple, but one can easily turn that last sentence around. One needs to interpret the exemplar to identify its genre. It is of course quite common that the author or publisher label a book a 'novel', and thus seemingly identify the genre of the work for us. However, it is not so easy to be sure exactly what this label tells us about the work. First, the term 'novel' has had different, specific meanings in different historical periods. Secondly, the modern novel can be heavily influenced by older, historical genres, and also mix different modes within a single work. Thus one can speak of epic novels, comic novels, pastoral novels, historical novels, realist novels, modernist novels, fantasy novels, science fiction novels, minimalist novels, maximalist novels etc.

I think that when Fowler talks about identifying the genre, he has in mind a more specific category than the novel. Still, if a work is labelled for instance 'epic fantasy novel,' one has no guarantee that this label provides the best framework for interpreting the work. Further, it is no longer self evident, that a work belongs to only

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<sup>23</sup> Fowler. *Kinds of Literature*. 37-38.



one genre, or rather, that only one genre can be used as its interpretive key. With the ideal of innovation, the high regard for avant-garde literature, the frequent use of modulation, together with the continued use of the realist and modernist modes, literature has gained a certain level of pluralism. Even conflicting or mutually exclusive generic traditions must sometimes be accepted as parts of the same work.

### **Generic systems and the trappings of generic discourse**

It seems to me that the literary production today is more varied than ever before. This image of an unusually diversified age might partly be the result of simplified presentations of our literary history, but I still think there is some truth to this observation. While one has had a development in terms of modernism and post-modernism, the realist novel, for instance, has continued to exist and evolve alongside the innovations and the avant-garde literature. Minimalism and maximalism, within both the novel and the short story, exist side by side. In terms of criticism, one has Marxist critics, psychoanalyst critics, feminist critics, structuralist critics, reader-response critics, new historicist critics and deconstructionist critics, to name some, working more or less peacefully side by side.

Together with the constant changes in genres, this pluralism that characterises contemporary literature and literary studies has made the notion of a steady and ordered generic system impossible to maintain. As subgenres evolve into major genres, and vice versa, the distinction between levels in the system is blurred and the order slowly disintegrates. While it is liberating to see the static generic systems fall, it is also problematic to lose its order, because we are left dependent on the generic discourse, and the logic of the hierarchical system is inherent in this discourse. Almost unnoticeably, one assists in fulfilling the ordering function of the generic

system. One gets trapped by the logic of the system, by the necessity of using its terms, while the order is no longer there.

This can be avoided by self-reflexivity, by being constantly aware of the ‘danger’ of being trapped, and of consciously counteracting the misleading force inherent in the system. In practical terms, this means that one has to balance unrealistic simplification, represented by the system logic, with the impractical elusiveness and chaos caused by the partial disintegration of the system.

For the most part, modern literary history – particularly the history of the twentieth-century fiction – is regularly abbreviated to an all-too-simple tale of dynastic successions: Realism, the crowning achievement of the nineteenth-century narrative, was supplanted by modernism, its inevitable successor, which, due to its own inherent limitations, in turn gave way to postmodernism.<sup>24</sup>

In the article from which the quotation above is taken, Brian Richardson further points out that the heart of this problem is not really in the actual histories of modern literature. He suggests rather that this ordered succession exists as ‘a near ubiquitous *idée reru* that circulates unchallenged throughout the profession.’<sup>25</sup>

Richardson continues to discuss how the narrative of modern literary history has helped create this streamlined conception of literary history:

The main problem with the standard narrative of modern literary history is precisely its narrative features: a distinct origin, a series of causally connected events in a linear sequence, a teleological progression culminating in the present, the absence of unconnected or distracting subplots, the unspoken but uncontested male domination of narrative agency, and the unproblematic closure implied in this version of history.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Richardson, Brian. ‘Remapping the present: The master narrative of modern literary history and lost forms of twentieth-century fiction.’ *Literature Online*. 7 October 2005.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Richardson also finds it problematic that this narrative structure lends itself to the moral that 'postmodernism is a superior representation of human experience, more recent and therefore more appropriate.'<sup>27</sup>

Most literary histories and most period studies tend to focus on the main literary movements of the different literary periods. These movements usually take place within what is often called high literature, or they elevate a certain type of text into this high literature. This tendency is certainly understandable and probably also defensible within most single works on literature. One has to limit the scope of a literary study. However, it is a problem that low literature is not proportionately represented in such works on literature, because it gives the impression that all literature follows the developments within high literature. Thus literary histories treat the development from romanticism to realism to modernism to post modernism as something that has taken place in all literature, and not just high literature.

In much the same way that the term 'fantasy' has been used reductively to denote different subgenres of the fantasy genre, the term 'literature' has been used reductively for the high literature of the canonised genres. 'Popular literature' has come to be a pejorative term, and anything written within a 'popular' genre has had a tendency to be judged a priori as mediocre literature at best. In the eagerness to embrace experimentation and avant-garde literature some critics have even made the concept of genre suspect.<sup>28</sup> Thus 'genre fiction' has become a pejorative term for literature with a strong generic identity such as science fiction, fantasy, horror and crime fiction as well as true romance-novels and girl sleuths, based on the assumption that all such literature must be unimaginative and bad. No doubt much of it is

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> See for instance 'Genre' in David Duff's list of key concepts in genre theory.

unimaginative and bad, but the field of literary studies does not profit by such a priori judgements.

When trying to say something about literature in general, one has to take all of literature into account. A passage from Pierre Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production* is interesting in this respect:

The science of the literary field is a form of *analysis situs* which establishes that each position – e.g. the one which corresponds to a genre such as the novel or, within this, to a sub-category such as the ‘society novel’ [*roman mondain*] or the ‘popular’ novel – is subjectively defined by the system of distinctive properties by which it can be situated relative to other positions; that every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants, on the other positions constituting the field.<sup>29</sup>

What this says is that literary genres stand in relation to each other, and that they are determined by these relations. From this follows that a development within, for instance, the short story does not only change the genre of the short story, but changes, for instance, the novel because of the new relative position of the short story. Granted, most such changes will be of such minor quality that they may not even be noticed, but the principle of this intermixed dominance and dependence is still interesting.

Bourdieu's model of the literary field shows, among other things, that the significant literature of a period always stands in relation to, and frequently in opposition to, the insignificant, and often forgotten, works of that same period. Therefore it is, by an inverse logic, important to be aware of the insignificant literature of a period, to fully understand the canonised works. Further, if one

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<sup>29</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993. 30.

considers that what we think of as the most important works within contemporary literature may be seen as rather insignificant in fifty years, and that some of the works and authors we are not even aware of at this point may then be viewed as the most important of our time, there is all the more reason to expand the awareness of seemingly insignificant literature. In other words, in order to gain a full understanding of what is happening in contemporary literature, it is important to be aware of what is happening in the low status genres.

I have tried here to show some of the problems of modern genre theory, and some of the ideas as to how one might solve these problems. I have also tried to show the relevance of these problems and ideas to the study of fantasy literature without losing the focus on genre theory in general. To really see how these issues affect the study of fantasy literature, however, it is necessary to focus in on the leading fantasy theorists and their theories. It is particularly interesting to examine how they respond to the problem of definition and the trappings of the hierarchical genre systems. One can also see how the power struggle between genres is reflected in the search for clear definitions of genre boundaries, and in some theorists' need to distinguish clearly between fantasy and science fiction, or between the uncanny, the fantastic and the marvellous.<sup>30</sup> The tendency to create definitions establishing the fantastic and fantasy among already canonized works, and thus, perhaps falsely, create acceptance for the genre by largely presenting fringe works of the genre and in reality reducing the scope of the study to an often dubious sub-genre, is also a sign of the generic power struggle.

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<sup>30</sup> See for instance Darko Suvin's article 'Considering the Sense of "Fantasy" or "Fantastic Fiction": An Effusion' and Todorov's *The Fantastic*.

At the end of this brief exploration of modern genre theory some pertinent questions present themselves: Is there sufficient communication between theorists of general and specific genre theory? How are the general ideas about genre followed up in works on specific genres? These and other issues will be dealt with in the next chapter.

## **Fantasy Theory and fantasy theorists**

This chapter will contain discussions of the best-known studies of fantasy and fantastic literature available in English. My aim is to find and show their shortcomings in relation to a sufficiently comprehensive and inclusive theory of fantasy literature. My project is not to deny that these studies are useful, or that they contain helpful and illuminating insights, but to find out why, despite these insights, their authors are not able or willing to make a more comprehensive and inclusive theory of fantasy. Such an approach will necessarily mean a focus predominantly on the negative or problematic elements of each study. Before I start this survey of the different studies, however, I need to clarify my own use of the somewhat confusing terminology surrounding this genre.

In order to include all the types of literature that can be understood as fantasy, I will try to use the phrases ‘fantasy’ and ‘fantastic literature’ synonymously. This would, then, include texts by authors like Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, William Beckford, Lewis Carroll, Jan Potocki, Henry James, William Morris, George MacDonald, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Gogol, C. S. Lewis, Tolkien, Ursula LeGuin, Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, Gabriel García Márquez, Gene Wolfe, Tad Williams, Stephen R. Donaldson and others.

I do not want to appropriate works by these authors on behalf of fantasy, or in any way claim that they belong to the genre, but rather point out that they can be conceivably be read as fantasy literature. Some of these authors are clearly on the fringes of the fantasy genre, and the greater parts of the production of many of them should not be considered as fantasy at all. However, some of their works can be understood as fantasy and have definite relevance to the genre and should therefore be included by the use of these terms.

It is also important that fantasy should not be restricted to the medium of the novel. Although the novel is predominant in the field, and I have chosen to deal mainly with novels, short stories have played an important part in the development of fantasy literature and there are also examples of fantasy in both drama and poetry. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' and Goethe's 'Der Erlkönig' are obvious examples.

The term 'the fantastic' should be distinguished from 'fantastic literature' and I will only use it to denote the genre described by Todorov. It is important to be aware that for instance Rosemary Jackson sometimes uses 'fantasy' as synonymous with Todorov's term 'the fantastic', although at other times she uses it in a more inclusive sense. This may lead to some confusion, but I have tried to make it clear what the terms mean at any particular time.

There is also a common distinction between high and low fantasy. These terms do not in any way contain a value judgement. In high fantasy the impossible or nonrational elements function according to the natural laws of the fictive universe. At least some of these elements are treated as commonplace or natural. High fantasy nearly always involves a secondary world. Low fantasy, however, is situated in our own recognisable world. The supernatural or impossible elements of the work are treated as such. Something exists or occurs which is explicitly in conflict with natural laws. There are borderline cases between these subgenres as well, but usually the two types are easy to distinguish from each other.

Many studies relate explicitly to Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, and use his theories as a starting point for their own. Therefore I will present the key points of Todorov's theory and discuss the premises of his study in some detail. This will be followed by detailed discussions of



the theories of Rosemary Jackson, Christine Brooke-Rose and Colin Manlove, whom I consider to be the most important and influential theorists within the field of fantasy literature. Before going on to deal with specific theorists, however, I will give a brief overview of the field.

### **Two groups of theorists**

The large majority of fantasy theorists can be divided quite easily into two groups. The first is a group of theorists who tend to reserve the term fantasy for what I call low fantasy. Keep in mind that the term 'low' has to do with how the fantastic elements of the texts are perceived and that its use in this context is not in any way parallel to the traditional use as in high and low culture. Some of the theorists use different terms, most notably Todorov's set of uncanny, fantastic, marvellous, but the effect is still to make a rather too narrow model of the genre. In addition to Todorov, Jackson, and Brooke-Rose, which I will deal with in some detail, the group includes T. E. Apter, Tobin Siebers, Neil Cornwell, Lucy Armitt, José B. Monléon, Darko Suvin, Eric S. Rabkin, Marcel Schneider and Harold Bloom.<sup>31</sup> This group is more or less interested in the same type of subversive text that is the focus of Jackson's study. Let us call them 'low fantasy theorists.'

Although the way this group of theorists use of the term fantasy is far to exclusive, they deserve credit for using the term for parts of the literary canon that have not traditionally been thought of as fantasy literature. This may widen the understanding of readers and critics who have not previously viewed this literature as fantasy. By focusing on works which border on or are part of the literary canon, they

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<sup>31</sup> Some of these names are taken from a passage in Manlove's *From Alice to Harry Potter: Children's Fantasy in England*. This will be further discussed in the section on Manlove's theories.

may also increase interest in the genre within the field of literary studies, and thereby lift its status.

There is a clear tendency among the low fantasy theorists toward an interest in psychoanalytical theory. In relation to this, many theorists ignore the distinction between 'fantasy' as a generic term and 'phantasy' as a psychological term. This tends to lead to an incorporation of psychoanalytical theory and discourse into their generic models, which again excludes any text which does not deal with themes and subject matter explicitly relevant to psychoanalytical theory or a psychoanalytical approach. The focus of the different studies is largely on modernist and postmodernist texts together with gothic novels and short stories. The low fantasy theorists also tend to situate fantasy within or on the fringes of the literary canon, including Kafka, Dostoevsky and Hawthorne rather than Tolkien, Lewis and MacDonald.

Many of the theorists within the group are influenced by Todorov, and try to expand upon, or improve, his theories. Common to all of them is the tendency to greatly reduce the scope of the term fantasy, and to give the impression that what can be termed secondary world fantasy, high fantasy or the marvellous is in some way inferior to the literature within their focus.

Almost as a contrast to the 'low fantasy theorists', there is a group of theorists and critics trying to restrict the fantasy genre to high fantasy only. This group includes John H. Timmerman, Brian Attebery, Ann Swinfen, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. C. N. Manlove seems to have belonged in this group. His books *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* and *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* deal only with high fantasy. However, in his more recent publications he has become more inclusive and is today one of the theorists who are closest to a truly comprehensive theory of the fantasy genre. One might guess that his acquaintance with the theories of Rosemary Jackson

and some of the other low fantasy theorists have been instrumental in this development.

The introductory chapter to Richard Mathews' *Fantasy: The liberation of Imagination* shows that his theory of fantasy is rather the opposite of exclusive, but in his treatment of actual texts only high fantasies are represented. A similar instance can be found in the book *Fantasy Literature: A Core Collection and Reference Guide*, where both high and low fantasies are discussed in the introductory chapter, but where the collection and reference guide deals only with high fantasy. Thus the terms 'fantasy' and 'fantasy literature,' respectively, are in practical terms appropriated on behalf of high fantasy.

Since much of the subgenre high fantasy seems to have been kept out of the literary canon, out of mainstream literature, out of the academic study of literature and even out of many definitions of its own genre, it is perhaps understandable that some literary scholars have wanted to treat it as a separate genre. However, while its separate treatment as a subgenre can be rewarding, the isolation of this group of fantasy texts as the only real fantasy literature will create more problems than it solves.

There are of course a few theorists who do not fit into either of these groups. Perhaps most interesting among these are Kathryn Hume and Mark Bould. They both have an inclusive view of fantasy literature, and they both speak up for a new approach to the genre. Their solutions to the problems of fantasy theory, however, are quite dissimilar. I will deal with both their theories at the end of this chapter.

## **Tzvetan Todorov**

Todorov creates the theoretical genre of the fantastic, a genre in which the hesitation between a natural and a supernatural explanation of some seemingly unnatural phenomena is never resolved:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. . . . The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous.<sup>32</sup>

If a natural solution is revealed, the text becomes a member of the neighbouring genre of ‘the uncanny’. If a supernatural explanation must be accepted, the text belongs to the genre of ‘the marvellous’.

Todorov bases his definition on structural characteristics within the text, and the hesitation of the actual reader is of course not a structural characteristic. Todorov tries to solve this problem by assigning the hesitation to an implied reader:

The fantastic . . . implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader’s own ambiguous perception of the events narrated. It must be noted that we have in mind no actual reader, but the role of the reader implicit in the text (just as the narrator’s function is implicit in the text).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Ithaca: Cornell University press, 1975. 25.

<sup>33</sup> Todorov. 31.

Todorov also adds two other conditions for a work to be considered part of the fantastic, one of which is optional and therefore not a condition. The optional condition is that one of the characters of the work experiences and represents the hesitation. The other is that 'the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations.'<sup>34</sup>

This rejection of allegorical readings seems to be something many theorists agree upon, while perhaps not quite adopting Todorov's strictness. Christine Brooke-Rose takes up a more nuanced position in her book *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: studies in narrative and structure, especially of the fantastic*.<sup>35</sup> Both J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis have been critical of allegorical readings of fantasy literature, although they have used other generic terms in their essays. They have also rejected allegorical readings of their own works on numerous occasions. It is ironic however, that Todorov indirectly places the works of these two fantasists within the genre of the marvellous, in which allegorical readings are not only accepted, but also deemed necessary by Todorov, in order to reach a meaningful interpretation.

Where Todorov uses the term 'poetic' interpretation, other critics have used the term metaphorical interpretation. The point, for Todorov at least, is that if the text is not understood as referential, as referring to some hypothetical reality, the hesitation between natural or supernatural reality disappears. The poetic interpretation removes the necessity of choosing between the natural and supernatural explanations and thus dissolves the ambiguity. As such it endangers the fantastic. If one does not view 'the poetic' as a strictly nonrepresentative category, opposed to 'the fictional', this condition becomes confusing. In any case, it is only a continuation of the first condition of hesitation between a natural and a supernatural explanation.

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<sup>34</sup> Todorov. 33.

<sup>35</sup> Brooke-Rose, Christine. *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1981. 68.

What is most problematic about this condition is that Todorov makes a demand upon the actual reader. Todorov does not say that allegorical or poetic interpretations of the text must be impossible or improbable, but that the reader must reject them. The requested attitude of the reader cannot possibly apply to an implied reader, so once again Todorov is in conflict with his structuralist framework.

Because of the narrow definition of 'the fantastic', one in which the ambiguity has to be upheld throughout the book, there are naturally few texts which fit into Todorov's genre. It is odd that Todorov's supposedly best example, Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, is only mentioned twice, and not analysed in any detail. Henry James' book will be discussed further in the section concerning Christine Brooke-Rose, as she follows up on Todorov's claim about the ambiguous nature of James' work.

Todorov admittedly sees a problem with the narrowness of his genre definition, and in his further discussions he includes two hybrid genres as well, namely 'the fantastic-uncanny' and 'the fantastic-marvellous'. In both these hybrids the ambiguity is maintained for most of the work, but in the end one or the other solution must be accepted.

In Todorov's system, 'the marvellous' is the category most fully describing what I would call fantasy, although the pure fantastic would also be a part of it. Even some examples of what Todorov calls the uncanny could probably be read as fantasy works, if the element of fantasy, in Kathryn Hume's sense of the word, is of real importance within the individual text. Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* is

frequently labelled as a work of fantasy even though the whole story is set in a dream-frame, and thus can be said to have a natural explanation.<sup>36</sup>

What is of real importance here, is that even when Todorov is forced to deal with the marvellous, he does not venture into a discussion of popular literature, or modern fantasy works. He discusses Poe, Kafka, Gogol, E.T.A. Hoffman, Maupassant, Dostoevsky, Henry James, Jan Potocki and other more or less canonized authors, but central fantasy authors like C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, Lord Dunsany and William Morris are not even mentioned.

Another interesting point about Todorov's theories is that he limits his genre's existence to a relatively short period of time, claiming that it appeared at the end of the eighteenth century, and that the last satisfying example of the genre was written by Maupassant, who died in 1893.<sup>37</sup> The Polish formalist scholar Ireneusz Opacki, but Opacki makes a very relevant point about the temporal boundaries of genre models:

The second form [of generic change] is a semantic modification of the elements of poetics up to that time, as with a 'change in the meaning of an expression' in the evolution of language. In the history of the genre at this point two externally similar forms may appear – at different stages of its development; however they will be different forms, endowed with different meanings – like a pair of homonyms. And then it is impossible to combine them in a whole, in one variant or model of the genre; this is why the temporal boundaries of a specific genre model are so important.<sup>38</sup>

The crucial difference between Opacki's and Todorov's temporal boundaries is that Opacki limits the model, and not the genre. The genre has changed, but fantastic literature still exists. Whether or not Todorov was familiar with Opacki's ideas, it seems obvious that his model would not be fit for a discussion of fantasy or fantastic

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<sup>36</sup> See for instance Manlove's *The Fantasy Literature of England* or Eric S. Rabkins *The Fantastic in Literature*.

<sup>37</sup> Todorov. 166.

<sup>38</sup> Opacki. 119.

literature outside his chosen period. Still, surprisingly many critics and theorists draw on his model or make adaptations of it in their studies of modern fantasy and fantastic literature.

Despite his claims of a scientific method, Todorov is surprisingly inconsistent. In his second chapter he states that 'fairy tales can be stories of fear'.<sup>39</sup> He further presents fairy tales as part of the genre of the marvellous. Thus one can say that fear can be part of the marvellous. Still, he later claims, in a discussion of Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis,' that 'the marvelous implies that we are plunged into a world whose laws are totally different from what they are in our own and in consequence that the supernatural events that occur are in no way disturbing.'<sup>40</sup>

To say that supernatural events happening within a supernatural world cannot be disturbing, would be much the same as claiming that nothing happening within this world, according to the natural laws of this world, can be disturbing. What Todorov probably means is that the supernatural events would not be perceived as supernatural within the realm of the marvellous. This observation, however, ruins his point about 'The Metamorphosis' not being part of the genre of the marvellous, because the transformation of Gregor Samsa from human to enormous, insectoid creature is not perceived as supernatural by the other characters, but just accepted. Admittedly, they are disgusted and afraid when confronted with him, but only in a way that is similar to the feeling we would have if confronted with, let us say, a large spider. It is not a response to something supernatural.

José B. Monleón criticises Todorov for being inconsistent regarding his dismissal of fear as a definitional characteristic of fantastic literature. On the question of fear as a component of the fantastic, Todorov claims that:

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<sup>39</sup> Todorov. 35.

<sup>40</sup> Todorov. 171-172.



It is surprising to find such judgements offered by serious critics. If we take their declarations literally – that the sentiment of fear must occur in the reader – we should have to conclude that a work’s genre depends on the *sang-froid* of its reader. Nor does the determination of the sentiment of fear in the *characters* offer a better opportunity to delimit the genre.<sup>41</sup>

Monleón responds to this by saying that ‘a similar argument could be made in relation to the theory of hesitation and the degree of “credulity” of the reader – whether implicit or not.’<sup>42</sup> Todorov has two other objections to regarding fear as a defining characteristic of the fantastic. The first is that the fear of the reader is not a necessary condition, and the second is that fairy tales, a subgenre of the marvellous, can also be stories of fear. The fact that all of Todorov’s objections can be applied equally well to his own defining characteristics should help us question his theory. However, surprisingly many scholars are unwilling to give him up.

### **Rosemary Jackson**

Rosemary Jackson is one theorist who adopts Todorov’s definition of the fantastic, and much of his theory, in her book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. Her study is also based on Marxist and psychoanalytic theory. As a study of low fantasy, meaning fantastic literature containing a plot set in our own recognisable world, Jackson’s book is a rewarding study. Her exploration of the subversive function of this particular type of fantasy opens up for new interpretations of many old classics. Further, from a Marxist point of view, the subversive quality functions as a purpose for, and a justification of, fantasy literature.

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<sup>41</sup> Todorov. 35.

<sup>42</sup> Monleón, José B. *A Specter is Haunting Europe: A Sociohistorical Approach to the Fantastic*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990. 11.

Jackson states that ‘like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by its social context . . . it cannot be understood in isolation from it,’ and I take it that Jackson’s ‘social’ context includes the political, economical and cultural context of the literary text.<sup>43</sup> The consideration of this context is something she finds missing in Todorov’s study:

In common with much structuralist criticism, Todorov’s *The Fantastic* fails to consider the social and political implications of literary forms. Its attention is confined to the effects of the text and the means of its operation. It does not move outwards again to relate the forms of literary texts to their cultural formation. It is in an attempt to suggest ways of remedying this that my study tries to extend Todorov’s investigation from being limited to the *poetics* of the fantastic into one aware of the *politics* of its form.<sup>44</sup>

Despite these good motives and honourable goals Jackson’s study is problematic. Ignoring the fact that some of her statements and findings about fantasy applies equally well to high fantasy and low fantasy, she isolates low fantasy as her focus and thus contradicts her own statements about context.<sup>45</sup> Although she briefly acknowledges the existence of high fantasy, she appropriates the terms fantasy and the fantastic for her own study and the literature that to the greatest extent confirms her findings. Thus her claims about the nature of low fantasy are made in the name of all fantasy literature. This leaves the fantasy works which do not fit her study in both a terminological and a theoretical vacuum. In other words, the major problem with her study is the appropriation of terminology, and not the theory itself, although some of her theoretical points can be discussed.

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<sup>43</sup> Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London: Methuen, 1981. 3

<sup>44</sup> Jackson. 6.

<sup>45</sup> See for instance her point about ‘desire being “expelled” through having been “told of”.’ Jackson. 4. Her discussion of Bessière and contradictory truths is another good point which is valid for some types of high fantasy as well as the texts within Jackson’s focus.

The general editor of *New Accents*, the series of which Rosemary Jackson's book is a part, and Jackson herself, claim to support an inclusive and unprejudiced view of literature. In the general editor's words, they want to 'encourage rather than resist the process of change, to stretch rather than reinforce the boundaries that currently define literature and its academic study.'<sup>46</sup> Jackson praises Todorov by saying that 'the value of Todorov's work in encouraging serious critical engagement with a form of literature which had been dismissed as being rather frivolous or foolish cannot be overestimated, and anyone working in this area has to acknowledge a large debt to his study.'<sup>47</sup>

These statements may appear as paradoxical, because both Todorov and Jackson seem to be dismissing large parts of fantasy literature as 'rather frivolous and foolish' or, at best, not interesting. Todorov's definition actually excludes secondary world fantasy, and thus excludes well known fantasy authors like J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Ursula K. LeGuin, and Terry Pratchett, to name only a few, from the genre. The will to enter new theoretical ground is praiseworthy, but Jackson's narrow selection and treatment of actual texts is disappointing, while Todorov makes his definition so narrow that even he has trouble finding textual examples of the genre, and furthermore claims it ceased to exist, except as a historical genre, at the end of the nineteenth century.

Jackson does in fact discuss Charles Kingsley, William Morris, George MacDonald, Ursula LeGuin, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien under the heading 'Victorian fantasy.' The last three of these are of course not Victorian fantasists, but Jackson sees them as continuing the trends of the Victorian fantasy authors. She comes to the negative conclusion that the works of these authors all 'function as

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<sup>46</sup> Jackson. vii.

<sup>47</sup> Jackson. 5.

conservative vehicles for social and instinctual repression.’<sup>48</sup> In other words they don’t suit Jackson’s own political views.

In her introduction, Jackson explains that:

the best-selling fantasies by Kingsley, Lewis, Tolkien, Le Guin or Richard Adams are not discussed at great length. This is not simply through prejudice against their particular ideals, nor through an attempt to recommend other texts as more ‘progressive’ in any easy way, but because they belong to that realm of fantasy which is more properly defined as faery, or romance literature. The moral and religious allegories, parables and fables informing the stories of Kingsley and Tolkien move away from the unsettling implications which are found at the centre of the purely ‘fantastic’.<sup>49</sup>

This passage illustrates how Jackson discards works that do not corroborate with her theory. Jackson calls these works fantasies, but refuses to take them into account when she studies the workings of the genre. It seems to me that Jackson’s theories are only suitable for restricted parts of fantasy literature, and that this is the real reason for her evasive dismissal of the rest. What is really happening here is that her Marxist and psychoanalytical approach has gained prescriptive properties, and that anything that falls outside this approach is dismissed as bad or irrelevant literature.

Jackson’s book has a two-part structure. There is the theory part, laying out the principles and workings of the genre, and then there is the part dealing with specific texts and interpretation. The texts by Kingsley, Morris, MacDonald etc. are not allowed a place in making the theory of the genre, but are only discussed in the part on specific texts. Thus it is not surprising when they fail to meet the expectations Jackson has for the genre.

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<sup>48</sup> Jackson. 155.

<sup>49</sup> Jackson. 9.

Jackson's notion of what is at the very centre of the purely fantastic, as mentioned in the quotation above, is also questionable. If by 'fantastic' in this instance she means Todorov's term, I would perhaps agree. If, on the other hand, she understands it as it is discussed in the section of her book called 'The imagination in exile'<sup>50</sup>, as a literature of the unreal, I would claim that Tolkien's works, and other secondary-world fantasies, are at its centre because they, to the greatest possible extent, are disconnected from the real. Jackson's quotation from Joanna Russ, whom she seems to agree with, supports my view on this point.

Fantasy embodies a 'negative subjunctivity' – that is, fantasy is fantasy because it contravenes the real and violates it. The actual world is constantly present in fantasy by negation . . . fantasy is what *could not have happened*; i.e. what *cannot* happen, what *cannot* exist . . . the negative subjunctivity, the *cannot* or *could not*, constitutes in fact the chief pleasure of fantasy. Fantasy violates the real, contravenes it, denies it, and insists on this denial throughout.<sup>51</sup>

Russ' last sentence in this quotation holds a very different definition of fantasy from that of Todorov and Jackson, although Jackson seems unaware of it. It says that fantasy, throughout, insists on the denial of the real. This means that the text consistently promotes what Todorov would have called a supernatural solution. Gone is the idea of hesitation or ambiguity as the central aspect of fantasy. High fantasy, or secondary-world fantasy is of course also connected to the real, through the author and the reader, the language and our ability to recognise the unreal, and sometimes also, within the text, through a portal or some other transportational device, but this relationship between real and unreal is much less explicit than in most of the fantasies discussed by Todorov and Jackson.

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<sup>50</sup> Jackson. 13-18.

<sup>51</sup> Jackson. 22.

Jackson incorporates into fantasy many ideas which are familiar from the discourse of modernism and postmodernism, especially the questions around representation and referentiality, and the uncertainty of meaning, or significance. The idea within modernism of the author creating a subjective truth is also important to her psychoanalyst approach. She claims that the ‘gap between sign and meaning which has become a dominant concern of modernism is anticipated by many post-Romantic works in a fantasy mode.’<sup>52</sup> She continues by quoting a sentence from Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy*: ‘there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names’, and connects this with the fantasy genre.<sup>53</sup> There is undeniably a frequent use of ‘nameless things’ in fantasy literature, but this is motivated largely by the effect of suspense and mystery as well as the traditional fear of naming evil things, the belief that the name has power to call the evil forth. As such, most nameless things have nothing to do with Beckett’s allusion to the severed bond between language and some external physical reality.

Jackson does not fare better in the more complex discussion of ‘thingless names’. She says that ‘thingless names’ are ‘recurring in the fantastic as words which are apprehended as empty signs, without meaning’<sup>54</sup>, but her examples are poorly chosen:

Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books and his *Hunting of the Snark* and *Sylvie and Bruno* reveal his reliance upon portmanteau words and nonsense utterances as a shift towards language as signifying nothing, and the fantastic itself as such a language. His snark, boojum, jabberwocky, uggug, like Poe’s Tekeli-li, Dostoevsky’s ‘bobok’, or Lovecraft’s Cthulhu, Azathoth, Nyarlathotep, are all mere signifiers without an object. They are inverted and invented ‘nonsense’ (non-sense) words, indicating nothing but their proper density and excess. . . . The relation

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<sup>52</sup> Jackson. 38.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Jackson. 40.

of sign to meaning is hollowed out, anticipating that kind of semiotic excess which is found in modernist texts.<sup>55</sup>

This claim may hold some truth concerning the language of Lewis Carroll's books, although, as I understand him, his point is not that words are without meaning, but that their meaning is arbitrarily arrived at by common agreement. His chief point is that people can and do decide what words mean, but, paradoxically, still treat them as if the word's meaning is inherent in the word.

Lovecraft's names, however, is another matter. It is quite some time since names in the western world have had an active meaning other than the obvious referential function. Peter or John, Alice or Kate, are words that in themselves do not signify much. Cthulhu, Azathoth and Nyarlathotep do not signify less than, for instance, Gregor Samsa, or Hamlet, for that matter. Jackson states that they are 'mere signifiers without an object.' This is just as true for Homer's Odysseus, Cervantes' Don Quixote, Thomas Hardy's Tess, or Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary. They are all fictional characters, without an object. What makes Lovecraft's names different is that they are unfamiliar to us.

Fictional names, however, have a tradition for being heavy with meaning, and fantasy literature has an especially strong tradition in this respect. What is special about some of the names in fantasy literature is that what they refer to is fictional. Their object is fictional, not a part of our physical external reality. Because of this missing link to reality they are designed to be rich on connotations, to carry within themselves all the meaning that is normally carried by the word's object and its relations to its surroundings. Rather than being hollowed out, words like Cthulhu and

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

Azathoth are filled with significance. They convey the feeling of something mystical, sinister, exotic, forbidden, alien and old.

The name Nyarlathotep leads us to think of ancient Egypt, and brings with it a whole set of connotations connected with Egypt, without really being familiar in any way. One can easily list thousands of other meaningful examples. The fact is that a large portion of names in fantasy literature are specifically chosen, or even designed, to carry much greater significance than is normal for the real names of our real world. Precisely because there is no actual object connected with the word, the word itself needs to be full of meaning. The fact that many hack writers have failed to create good names, and, for instance, made hideous attempts at copying Tolkien and other successful authors of fantasy, does not change this.

Admittedly, Jackson recognises that these words carry meaning. She calls them ‘signifiers which are superficially full, but which lead to a terrible emptiness.’<sup>56</sup> What Jackson fails to recognise is that all significance is attributed to things, or words, or events by people, by human beings. It follows that the signifiers of fantasy literature are no more empty than other signifiers.

In contrast to Jackson’s claims, several fantasy critics have written about the especial importance of names in fantasy literature.<sup>57</sup> The character Strider, or Aragorn, from Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, shows very clearly that names are significant in fantasy literature. Names are strongly linked to both identity and heritage. Our experience of the Strider/Aragorn character would be very different if he had simply been called Aragorn throughout the book.

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<sup>56</sup> Jackson. 41.

<sup>57</sup> Boyer and Zahorski in the introduction to *Fantasy Literature: A Core Collection and Reference Guide* and Ursula LeGuin in *From Elfland to Poughkeepsie* are two examples.



The arbitrariness of meaning, the breach between signifier and signified and the lack of representation, belong to modernism and to postmodernism. But, although the discourses of modernism and postmodernism have found their places within the fantasy genre, they are not defining characteristics of fantasy or fantastic literature.

Jackson seems to think that a literary text, or at least a fantasy, should be disturbingly subversive, and that in order to be so, a text needs to be explicitly related to the real, and thus less unreal. What Jackson fails to note is that the more 'unreal' texts can be effectively subversive in their own way, partly because they have the ability to sneak past our 'verbal defences'<sup>58</sup>, our prejudices and set ways of thinking. High fantasy gives us the chance, for instance, to judge moral dilemmas or question the principles a culture is based on, without the prejudice and partiality we are subject to in the real world. Jackson seems to insist that high fantasy has to be read allegorically or by way of poetic interpretation to be meaningful in any way. This is not necessarily so. Through stylistic realism, a high fantasy can seem as real as reality itself, and thus show the necessity of our particular reality to be an illusion. This can be done completely without an allegorical relation between the secondary fictional world and our primary reality.

Jackson tries to trace a historical development in fantastic literature from the marvellous towards the uncanny, but here as well her results are predetermined by the narrowness of her approach:

In what we could call a supernatural economy, otherness is transcendent, marvellously different from the human: the results are religious fantasies of angels, devils, heavens, hells, promised lands and pagan fantasies of elves, dwarves, fairies, fairyland or 'faery'. In a natural, or secular, economy, otherness is not located elsewhere: It is read as a projection of merely human fears and desires transforming the

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<sup>58</sup> Hume. 20.

world through subjective perception. One economy introduces fiction which can be termed 'marvellous', whilst the other produces the 'uncanny' or 'strange'.<sup>59</sup>

After stating this, Jackson claims that one has gone from a 'supernatural economy' towards a 'secular economy', and thus from the marvellous as predominant to the uncanny as predominant. But this claim is problematic in several ways. First of all, our own society can be neither of the two types of economy since it obviously produces both types of fantasy. Secondly, if one changes the premises slightly and chooses to speak of rational and nonrational 'economies' instead of 'natural/supernatural', one can argue that there has been a development from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and onwards where the rhetoric of rationalism gained strength and popularity until the advent of romanticism. With the Romantic movement, idealism, the transcendental and the nonrational gained more ground once again and with it came the literature of the unreal.

Modernism and Postmodernism are, very simply put, results of a movement away from positivism within modern philosophy and high culture. According to the *Encyclopedia of Literary Critics and Criticism*, Postmodernism involves an awareness of the following themes:

The pervasive role of mass/popular culture and the dominance of international capitalism in postindustrial nations; the insights of the poststructuralist thought of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and others; the new feminist analyses of 'male'/phallogocentric ideologies and the promotion of an alternative 'female' position; and an aesthetics of openness, indeterminacy, multiplicity, pluralism, and an intertextuality which favors the calculated (and sometimes ironic) 'citing' or quoting of the past.

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<sup>59</sup> Jackson. 24.

The 'aesthetics of openness, indeterminacy, multiplicity,' the ontological insecurity, the notion that reality, and consequently texts, are unknowable, these characteristics of Postmodernism can all be said to take part in the development of the new rhetoric of the nonrational. The incoherence of narrative, the distrust of language, the chaos, the surreal and the absurd are all parts of this rhetoric. This development creates possibilities for the literature of the unreal. Thus the shift of fantasy should be towards the marvellous, and not towards the uncanny.

My slight altering of Jackson's model of explanation has attempted to show that her findings are largely arbitrary. Neither Jackson's argument about the natural and supernatural economies, nor my own rudimentary tracing of the history of the rational and the nonrational are wholly adequate. A brief study of the fantasy literature that is published each year will show that both types of fantasy are alive and well.

If one looks at the high literature of the last hundred and fifty years, one can see a shift from Realism and Naturalism towards first a subjective realism in the stream-of-consciousness techniques of the modernists, then toward the surreal and absurd, Magic Realism and then on towards disintegration and the abandonment of narrative structure in some postmodern literature. But parallel to this, one can see the continuation of, for instance, the realist tradition within the novel and the short story, and an increasing interest in science fiction and fantasy literature of all kinds.

These problems should not, as I have already pointed out, lead to a total dismissal of Jackson's theories. They only mean that her insights are not valid for all fantasy literature. Jackson's study is quite useful in a discussion of gothic fantasy and primary-world horror fantasy, and it constitutes a clear improvement of its basic starting point, namely Todorov's study of the fantastic.

However, she fails to differentiate properly between the psychological and Freudian term 'fantasy', or phantasy, and the generic term 'fantasy', and equally important, mixes up the generic term 'fantasy' with Todorov's narrower term 'the fantastic'. To add to the confusion she uses the term 'the fantastic mode', which is often equated with the more general phrase 'fantastic literature', which usually includes high and low fantasy, and might even include science fiction, gothic fiction, horror fiction and any other fiction which, in one way or another, focuses on something supernatural or impossible. As we have seen earlier, the term mode is often used as a more inclusive and also more elusive notion than genre. Arguably, this gives Jackson freedom to discuss works with fantastic content that would normally be considered to be outside, or on the periphery of the fantasy genre. However, she has in fact used the term mode selectively, in order to be able to include works by respected and well-known authors like Dickens, Kafka, Beckett and Pynchon.

### **Christine Brooke-Rose**

In the book *The Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in narrative and structure, especially of the fantastic* from 1981, Christine Brooke-Rose starts out with a philosophical explanation of the rhetoric of the real and the unreal, something that leads to an explanation of why society from time to time grows more interested in the literature of the unreal. The gist of her argument is that when the empirical world around us becomes discredited and familiar forms collapse, we turn to the metaphysical and the 'unreal' for a stable basis in our lives. Thus, in times of great upheaval and change, there is an increased interest not only in religion and religious literature, but also in fantastic or unreal literature.

While Rosemary Jackson tries to explain a development within the genre of fantasy toward the uncanny, Brooke-Rose tries to explain an increasing interest in literature of the unreal. Both base their explanations on larger societal tendencies. It is Brooke-Rose's claim that in our modern age the real has become especially meaningless and the unreal is once again gaining a privileged position.

Brooke-Rose's first chapter is quite interesting and gives a small but fascinating insight into what modern philosophy has to say about the real and the unreal. She also gives a brief introduction to modern literary theory and criticism. Here she comments on what she experiences as a state of confusion within both criticism and theory.<sup>60</sup> During these two chapters Brooke-Rose exhibits a vast and impressive knowledge of philosophy, theory and literary criticism, and she touches on some of the most important problems within modern literary studies.

Part two of Brooke-Rose's book narrows the focus to literature of the unreal, especially Todorov's theory of the fantastic, and science fiction. At this point the study begins to be problematic. Brooke-Rose has stated earlier in the book that she is 'trying to account for the return of the fantastic in all its forms, some of which were until not so long ago ignored or despised by intellectuals as crude.'<sup>61</sup> Sadly, this tendency has not disappeared among intellectuals during the twenty-four years that have passed since the publication of her book. I want to go in especial detail with parts of Brooke-Rose's book, because it seems to contain unusually clear examples of the tendency mentioned above.

After showing such control over theoretical material and such an awareness of the problems of modern theory and criticism, it is surprising to find that she falls

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<sup>60</sup> Brooke-Rose. 16-18.

<sup>61</sup> Brooke-Rose. 7.

victim to so many of the mistakes, or questionable practices, that she warns the reader about.

As literature of the unreal, Brooke-Rose includes religious literature, science fiction, fantasy, fairy tales and so on, although she does not discuss traditional fairy tales, mythic or religious literature directly or specifically. Contrary to the apparent inclusiveness, her book is largely built upon Todorov's model of the fantastic and its surrounding genres. Although she is more inclusive than Todorov, his theory seems to have inspired her limitations. The term fantasy is placed within Todorov's term marvellous, and Brooke-Rose seems to be reserved for what I call high fantasy.

Brooke-Rose states that she does not subscribe to a single theoretical platform, but rather to a form of eclecticism. She starts her second chapter by writing:

I do not believe in one method, infallible for every text. On the contrary I shall pick, here and there, concepts of modern theory (or rhetoric) that are useful to me, but will eschew pure theory in the sense of a closed, self-contained 'system', in favour of intuitive criticism.<sup>62</sup>

Brooke-Rose concludes the same chapter by saying that 'I shall be an eclectic, plural ltd, for no reader or critic can see all aspects at the same time, and some texts respond better to some methods (that is indeed the difficulty, the great "cheat" of the "scientific" dream).'<sup>63</sup> Brooke-Rose might have profited from approaching the works and genres from at least two different angles, or using two contrasting methods in her work on each text, so as to test the usefulness of one with the other. She has not done this, however.

Part four of Brooke-Rose's book is titled 'The unreal as real: the modern marvellous' and includes the chapters 'The evil ring: realism and the marvellous' and

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<sup>62</sup> Brooke-Rose. 13.

<sup>63</sup> Brooke-Rose. 51.

‘Titan Plus: the new science fiction (Vonnegut and McElroy)’. The first of these two chapters consists mainly of a critique of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. Brooke-Rose spends some pages establishing *The Lord of the Rings* as a quest narrative or in fact an anti-quest. She chooses to treat the destruction or ‘loss’ of the ring as the quest, and then starts complaining about delay, calling Tolkien’s subplots digressions.<sup>64</sup>

Brooke-Rose uses Tolkien’s work as an example of how the modern marvellous has failed in its mixing of the marvellous with realism. She uses fifteen ‘procedures of realism,’ a list made by Philippe Hamon, to determine how and to what degree *The Lord of the Rings* is influenced by realism.<sup>65</sup> These fifteen procedures are problematised to a certain extent, and Brooke-Rose ends up redistributing them. However, she does not question their applicability to fantasy literature. Neither does she question the applicability of the characteristic traits of the marvellous on fantasy literature. Further, Brooke-Rose does not state any reason for choosing Tolkien’s work as a yardstick for all of high fantasy.

It is quite legitimate to dislike both Tolkien and secondary world fantasy in general, but Brooke-Rose seems rather too intent on finding fault with *The Lord of the Rings* and thus with the subgenre. She does this by examining traits within the work, which she claims belong purely to the realistic novel or purely to the marvellous. On the one hand, she demands of the characters that they adhere to their traditional roles as adjuvants/opposants in the marvellous, while, on the other, she complains that characters are not psychologically motivated as in the realist novel. Also she complains that Gandalf and Aragorn function too transparently as adjuvants.

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<sup>64</sup> Brooke-Rose. 235-237.

<sup>65</sup> See part 3 of chapter 4. Brooke-Rose. 85-95.

If Brooke-Rose had chosen to see the destruction of Sauron, instead of the destruction of the ring, as the goal of the quest, the various subplots could be easily explained as necessary for the final outcome. Instead she treats them as tedious delay and gives the impression that she wants the book to be over and done with as soon as possible. In her treatment of *The Lord of the Rings* as a quest narrative, which should adhere to a quest structure, she does not take into account the influence of the old Icelandic sagas on Tolkien and his conscious assimilation of some of their traits into his own fictions. The narrative's lack of a single direction and goal, the pauses in the quest narrative to dwell on other places and other courses of action, is one of these traits, and should not be viewed as a failure of form. The annals and family trees are other signs of the influence of the sagas, and the fact that he chose to put this information in appendices rather than incorporate it into the text may be a sign of his awareness that this information might not hold the same interest for all readers.

Furthermore, Brooke-Rose does not take into consideration the well known fact that the stories and the world of Tolkien's fantasies were originally created as mere scenery for his constructed languages in order to secure a greater authenticity and coherence.<sup>66</sup> Needless to say, his fictions soon took on a much larger role than that, but the fictional universe itself is still as important as the quest structure in Tolkien's fantasies. Brooke-Rose insists on a notion of function that is common in the criticism and interpretation of quest narratives, and the fact that not all parts of *The Lord of the Rings* have a clear function seems rather to exasperate her. For instance, she complains that there are 'only two incidents in which Merry and Pippin are in any way functional.'<sup>67</sup> Not only is it not true that Merry and Pippin only have a function in two incidents, the details which cannot separately be attributed a specific function,

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<sup>66</sup> See for instance T. A. Shippey's *The Road to Middle-Earth*. 22.

<sup>67</sup> Brooke-Rose. 237.



can collectively give the fictional universe credibility and richness and a sense of life that is totally absent in, for instance, the traditional fairy tale. As a contrast to Brooke-Rose, Colin Manlove creates his theories of fantasy largely around the notion that the secondary world and its creation is as important to the genre as any thematic aspect.<sup>68</sup>

Brooke-Rose also complains of the transparency of the functions that are there in the narrative. The abduction of Merry and Pippin by the Orcs is said to cause Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli to abandon Frodo and Sam, so that they can achieve the quest on their own.<sup>69</sup> Brooke-Rose claims this without mentioning that at this point Frodo and Sam have actually secretly left the rest of the company. The role of the character Boromir is said to be even more transparent:

his function is wholly to introduce dissention in the Company (book II/chapter 10), *so that* it can split, *so that* Frodo and Sam should be alone on the quest, *so that* the adventures may be separated. When that is achieved Boromir is got rid of (dies).<sup>70</sup>

Brooke Rose has forgotten several important functions that Boromir performs. First, he shows how the evil forces manifested in the ring affects the people around it, slowly corrupting them by reinforcing their greed and hubris. By doing this Boromir shows to Frodo that he cannot go on with the company around him. Second, Boromir is instrumental in showing that the fight against the evil forces cannot be won by ordinary people stepping aside, letting the big and powerful handle it. Evil, in *The Lord of the Rings*, cannot be understood simply as a physical threat from outside, but as something inherent in everyone. That is precisely why the small and otherwise insignificant hobbits must take a part in the struggle.

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<sup>68</sup> See Manlove's *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature*.

<sup>69</sup> Brooke-Rose. 237.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Brooke-Rose's italics.

A clear sign of Brooke-Rose's purposeful narrow-mindedness is her portrayal of the two elven 'kingdoms' Rivendell and Lothlorien as 'creating much delay.'<sup>71</sup> The insistence on a swift and no-nonsense portrayal of the quest narrative, not allowing for any delay, is a clear refusal to take the book for what it is. In the same discussion, Brooke-Rose describes Faramir as a duplicate of his brother, instead of the contrast that he clearly is, and further down still she claims that 'a vast amount of time is wasted in talk, delay, explanation, quarrels and doubts about the route, as in "real" life, but not, normally and to that extent, in the marvellous.'<sup>72</sup> She seems to ignore that *The Lord of the Rings* is not a traditional fairytale and not a traditional quest narrative. Brooke-Rose seems in this particular instance to deny the possibility of generic change, and also to deny that a mixing of realism with the marvellous can become something new, that is neither realism nor the traditional marvellous.

It seems that Brooke-Rose makes the mistake of finding only what she wants to find, by only taking into account what she needs to prove her point. Indeed, she is so anxious to prove this point that she simplifies plot summaries and makes imprecise and sometimes downright wrong descriptions of characters and events to make her point clearer:

But Gandalf is also foolishly fallible in a transparently motivated way, that is, when his adjuvant role is forgotten for that of author-substitute and information-giver. For example when he leads the grey company through the depths of Moria and, already attacked by the horrible Orcs, finds the tomb of Belin and a big book in a hall and starts poring over it, telling his friends the history of Moria and of the dwarves who dug into it (book I/chapter 5, pp. 417-19). This megatextual information is irrelevant to the quest. It does however have the functional purpose of delaying the Company, *so that* the Troll attack can take place, *so that* Gandalf can disappear under the bridge of fire and out of the narrative – temporarily as it turns out – *so that* Aragorn can take over (and be

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<sup>71</sup> Brooke-Rose. 238.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

equally fallible), *so that* the company may eventually split and separate adventures start, *so that* the hero Frodo and his faithful Sam can be isolated.<sup>73</sup>

First, the orcs attack the company together with the troll, after they have found and read what is in the book. Second, it is the tomb of Balin, not Belin, a name Brooke-Rose consistently misspells. Third, the Company is lost in the mines and the book gives them information about where they are, something which is deeply relevant to the quest. Fourth, Balin and his people were relatives of Gimli, so it is natural that he wants any available information on what happened to them. Fifth, Gandalf does not tell them the whole history of the dwarves at this point, but only what the book says of the last days of Balin and his people. Sixth, this gives them information on what dangers they possibly face in the mines. Seventh, it is true that their delay makes the troll attack possible, but to criticise Gandalf for being too transparently motivated in this action is to stretch the point rather far. Gandalf is not omniscient, and could not have known what was about to happen. Further, to criticise the cause-and-effect relationship between events in the plot is rather controversial. One could just as well criticise the abduction of Helen in *The Iliad* for causing the siege of Troy and thus creating the Homeric narratives.

On several occasions, Brooke-Rose's language seems to reveal a personal agenda. For instance, she writes that 'nor are the histories and genealogies in the least necessary to the narrative, but they have given much infantile happiness to the Tolkien clubs and societies, whose members apparently write to each other in Elvish.'<sup>74</sup> Once again, Brooke-Rose is too much focused on the plot and the quest structure to understand that the appendices can be of interest to other readers. Further,

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<sup>73</sup> Brooke-Rose. 244.

<sup>74</sup> Brooke-Rose. 247.

literary criticism should not be based on what fan societies may or may not do with the information found in a work. Brooke-Rose's remark about infantile happiness says more about her approach than it does about Tolkien or his books. Without further comparison, thousands of teenagers throughout the world have written ludicrous love poems modelled on the style and language of Shakespeare, but one does not hold Shakespeare responsible.

There are numerous other examples of mistakes and questionable interpretations, but I think I have made my point. I do not try to claim that Tolkien's work is in any way perfect, but rather to show that Brooke-Rose has an a priori agenda. When something in the book follows the norm of the marvellous, she complains that it is too simple and unrealistic. When something follows the norm of realism she complains that it does not follow the norm of the marvellous. When the mixture of realism and the marvellous creates something new that is neither realism nor the marvellous, she finds fault in this as well, for not being the one or the other. After explaining how this particular mixture of realism and the marvellous has failed, Brooke-Rose briefly concludes that any such mixture will fail in the same way, without showing any good evidence why this should be so.

It is quite clear that Tolkien's text responds poorly to the method chosen by Brooke-Rose in its treatment, but if *The Lord of the Rings* really is such a poor book, its dismissal should not need reinforcement by Brooke-Rose's false information and inaccurate presentation.

Brooke-Rose's sixth chapter, on Henry James' novel *The Turn of Screw*, gives an opportunity to show how she falls for her own criticism. Brooke-Rose makes a list of other critics' errors and divides them into four methodological categories. These are the rehandling of the signifier, the fallacious argument, the extratextual argument

and something she calls ‘the tone or uttering act’.<sup>75</sup> What she means by this, is the critic’s way of expressing himself, which can sometimes give an unjustified colouring of his or her statements or claims. As examples of this, Brooke-Rose mentions the use of words like clearly and evidently.

Of the four types of error, the first and the fourth are especially interesting, although Brooke-Rose seems to be guilty of at least three of the four. The ‘rehandling of the signifier’ and ‘the tone or uttering act’ becomes an error, or at least a problem, when the result is an unjustified, subjective colouring of the critical text. Thus it is the objectivity of the critic that is at stake here. What is surprising is that Brooke-Rose is so far from objective herself:

Here there occurs a phenomenon almost as ‘hallucinating’ as the narrated events themselves, and worth studying in some detail: the state of the governess is contagious.

The critics reproduce the very tendencies they so very often note in the governess: omission; assertion; elaboration; lying even (or, when the critics do so, let us call it error).<sup>76</sup>

Brooke-Rose’s choice of the word hallucinating here indicates that she believes the governess to be hallucinating. Further she calls the governess’ state contagious, which implies that she fully accepts that the governess is in a state of illness. One could easily have made the same point concerning the critics by referring to ‘the supposed state’ of the governess. Instead Brooke-Rose concedes that the governess is guilty of all the accusations listed in the quote. This does not fit well with Brooke-Rose’s supposed stress on the ambiguity of the text. This sort of colouring of the critical text is an example of an unjustified ‘tone or uttering act’, although perhaps not as clear as the use of such words as clearly or evidently.

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<sup>75</sup> Brooke-Rose. 132.

<sup>76</sup> Brooke-Rose. 132.

All the inaccurate recapitulations of the plot in *The Lord of the Rings* qualify for the category 'rehandling of the signifier,' and Brooke-Rose's re-presentation of the scene in Moria, when they find the tomb of Balin and the Book of Mazarbul, is a good example of a fallacious argument. Contrary to what Brooke-Rose claims, the Company has not yet been attacked by orcs, and the 'megatextual' information given in the Book of Mazarbul is highly relevant to the quest.<sup>77</sup>

With her treatment of *The Turn of the Screw* as an ambiguous narrative, Brooke-Rose makes clear the influence that Todorov's theories has on her. It also lays bare a tendency to propagate Todorov's theories even where they do not fit. Along with a long list of other critics, Brooke-Rose seems incapable of accepting the supernatural within the story. A specific line of argument regarding psychoanalytical approaches in chapter 7 makes this inability especially clear:

Much has been said on the cause of the governess's state. In the simplest of the ghost hypotheses, the mere appearance of the ghosts and the evil they represent could make her 'hysterical' in the popular sense, but not hysterical in the psychoanalytical sense since, as Alexander Jones has pointed out . . . the hallucinations are the symptoms and cannot be their own causes.<sup>78</sup>

My objection to using the psychoanalytical sense of the term hysteria in this interpretation, is based on the premise that the first appearance of ghosts is indeed a hallucination. As I see it, the point of these ghost hypotheses would be that if the ghosts were real, they could trigger hysterical behaviour in the psychological sense. In other words, Alexander Jones's and Brooke-Rose's logic only works because of an inability to conceive of the ghosts as real. Whether modern psychological research deems the triggering of hysterical behaviour by sightings of ghosts hypothetically

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<sup>77</sup> See Brooke-Rose. 244. and Tolkien. 'The Fellowship of the Ring.' 418-427.

<sup>78</sup> Brooke-Rose. 158.

possible or not is irrelevant in this respect. The point is that, even when dealing with hypotheses that treat the ghosts as genuine, Brooke-Rose consistently treats the ghosts as symptoms of hysteria. Thus she constantly betrays her aim to present the text as ambiguous.

Brooke-Rose also ignores the fact that *The Turn of the Screw* is a ghost story. This is a serious problem for the hysteria interpretations. First, because the hysteria explains away the ghosts and the story then ceases to be frightening. Secondly, because ghost stories are supposed to have an instant effect and the hysteria theories are far too complex to be grasped by listening to the story being told once.

There are other problems with the hysteria theories as well. One problem is that the supposed hysteria is not mentioned nor suggested directly in the text. The possibility that what the governess sees is not real is of course there, but not to a greater extent than with any fictional sighting of a ghost. The existence of this possibility is not enough to treat this narrative, although written in a period obsessively interested in mental illnesses of different kinds, as a story of hysteria. According to Brooke-Rose, Edna Kenton was in 1924 'the first to suggest that TS was not a simple ghost-story'. That means that it took over twenty five years from publication until the first hysteria interpretation arrived in print. This fact puts Brooke-Rose's claim about the ambiguity of the text in a bad light.

Another problem is that the little boy, Miles, at the very end guesses at who the governess sees, and guesses first that it is Miss Jessel, and then that it is Peter Quint, both of whom are dead. A third problem is the final words of the story saying that 'his little heart, *dispossessed*, had stopped.'<sup>79</sup> This indicates that he had

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<sup>79</sup> James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*. London: Penguin Classics, 1984. 262. My italics.

previously been possessed, a notion which can explain much of the children's unchildlike behaviour.

All that the ghost interpretation demands is that the reader takes the story at face value, while the hysteria interpretation and the ambiguity interpretation require the explaining away of quite a few obstacles, both big and small. One can clearly create an ambiguity out of this text, but it is far from a necessity, as is testified by more than twenty-five years of unambiguous interpretations.

Brooke-Rose does not create a comprehensive theory of fantasy or fantastic literature, but she does treat texts from most of the field. Whether purposefully or not, she misrepresents the fantasy genre, and paints an untrue picture of high fantasy. Brooke-Rose also fails in her attempt to be pluralistic, because she does not use multiple methodological approaches to the same texts.

### **Colin N. Manlove**

Colin Manlove is the only critic who has come close to a comprehensive theory of fantasy literature, a theory which takes into the genre both the various types of high fantasy and the various types of low fantasy. Instead of trying to grasp a single uniform body of literature that can be called fantasy he has, except perhaps in *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*, made a division into several types of fantasy that are clearly distinct from each other. There are of course blurry lines between the subgenres, but large parts belong unambiguously to one specific subgenre.

In the introduction to the already mentioned *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*, Manlove states that:

The definition of 'fantasy' which will be outlined here makes no claim to satisfy everyone; all that matters ultimately is the isolation of a



particular kind of literature. However, though the name is relatively unimportant, that of 'fantasy' is kept here because most people, Bleiler included, apply it to the books we shall be considering.

This understood, a fantasy is: *A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms.*<sup>80</sup>

This definition is so inclusive that Manlove considers it necessary to give a ten-page, step-by-step explanation of the elements given in the definition, with examples both of books which fulfil the criteria and books which do not. In Manlove's later work *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature*, from 1983, the same definition is given, but the explanation is not repeated. This gives Manlove the opportunity to create a very different focus on fantasy literature. In this book he is mainly interested in what he calls 'a central and recurrent theme. This theme is its insistence on and celebration of the separate identities of created things.'<sup>81</sup> After a few sentences he continues:

At the core of the genre is a delight in being, whether it be Charles Kingsley's sense of the miraculous in all physical nature in his *The Water-babies*; George MacDonald's expression in his *Phantastes* and *Lilith* of the wonder of the reality seen by the unconscious mind; C.S. Lewis's transformation of the solar system into something rich and strange in his trilogy *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*; J.R.R. Tolkien's love of 'tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine' as portrayed in *Lord of the Rings*; T.H. White's love of the image of the Middle Ages he creates in *The Once and Future King*; the search for lost wonder in Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*; or the theme of the restoration of true being in Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*, *The Tombs of Atuan* and *The Farthest Shore*.<sup>82</sup>

All these works are high fantasies. In fact, there is no example of a low fantasy text among the major texts discussed in the book. Manlove is not wholly among those

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<sup>80</sup> Manlove, C. N. *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975. 1. His italics.

<sup>81</sup> Manlove, C. N. *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature*. London: The Macmillan Press, 1983. ix.

<sup>82</sup> Manlove. 1983. ix

defining only high fantasy as fantasy literature, however. His book on English children's fantasy, *From Alice to Harry Potter: Children's Fantasy in England* from 2003, makes this clear. Here Manlove repeats his definition of fantasy, from *The Fantasy Literature of England*, 'a fiction involving the supernatural or impossible.' He goes on to justify his definition in relation to other definitions of fantasy, pointing out that Rosemary Jackson's view of fantasy literature only works as a definition of what he calls 'dark' or gothic fantasies, and that it excludes many well known fantasy authors, before he continues with a list of different critics and theorists:

And so we might go on through the narrownesses – and sharpnesses – of focus in Tzvetan Todorov, Christine Brooke-Rose, T. E. Apter, Tobin Siebers, Neil Cornwell or Lucy Armitt, all of them discussing the same kinds of subversive text, commonly from nineteenth-century Europe, and all of them constructing definitions of fantasy out of a single class of animal rather than the whole zoo. No less narrow, however, are those on the other side, such as Tolkien or Lewis, who see fantasy as recovering old or traditional values, and would exclude practically all the fantasies that Jackson foregrounds.<sup>83</sup>

This is somewhat similar to my own division of fantasy theorists into two main groups, one group claiming the term for low fantasy and the other, somewhat smaller group, claiming it for high fantasy. Manlove seems to have belonged to the second group together with Timmermann, Ann Swinfen, and some few others, but somewhere between the publication of *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* and *The Fantasy Literature of England*, his focus changed. Thus he now operates with a division of fantasy into 'at least six modes.'<sup>84</sup> These modes consist of secondary world, metaphysical, emotive, comic, subversive and children's fantasy, and he says that 'any definition, to be adequate, should cover all these.'<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Manlove. 2003. 10.

<sup>84</sup> Manlove's use of the term mode corresponds roughly with the second sense discussed by Duff in *Modern Genre Theory*. In *The Fantasy Literature of England* Manlove does not use the term mode, but calls them "natural groupings" and "kinds of fantasy".

<sup>85</sup> Manlove. 2003. 11.

Manlove's six modes are not wholly unproblematic, for instance because any children's fantasy must necessarily belong to at least one of the other modes. Also, all these modes can figure in combination with any of the other modes. Despite this, the attempt to accommodate for the variety of different fantasy forms is praiseworthy. It is interesting in this respect to notice that Manlove has not kept his old definition of fantasy from *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* and *Fantasy Literature: Five Studies*, but rather made a new, simplified version that is more open and flexible. The result of this is, of course, that it is not strictly speaking a good definition, it includes far too much, but it serves well as a starting point for Manlove's exploration of the various types of fantasy literature.

The boundaries of the genre of fantasy must necessarily be rather vague and imprecise, but if genre is a tool for communicating with and interpreting the text, as Fowler suggested, then it is the centre of the genre that must be identified and not the boundaries. Even a peripheral work stands in relation to the central norms of a genre, and is understood by its accordance to and divergence from those generic norms. Thus it is not really necessary to draw clear boundaries around a genre. Manlove mentions that the critic Brian Attebery introduces the term 'fuzzy set' from the discourse of logic to describe fantasy. This means that some works are regarded as central to the genre while others are more peripheral, and that the boundaries between genres are blurry. Manlove's model of six groups thus constitutes six centres with blurry boundaries towards each other and other genres.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Manlove. 1999. 11.

## **Kathryn Hume**

Kathryn Hume is one of the few theorists who do not fit either of the two groups. She has tried to create a fundamentally new approach to fantasy literature. She suggests a radical inclusiveness, and argues that fantasy is not a genre, but one of two impulses which produce literature. The other impulse is mimesis. Mimesis is said here to be felt as the desire to imitate, and describe with such verisimilitude ‘that others can share your experience.’<sup>87</sup> The impulse of fantasy manifests itself as a ‘desire to change givens and alter reality –out of boredom, play, vision, longing for something lacking, or need for metaphoric images that will bypass the audience’s verbal defences.’<sup>88</sup> After elaborating on these points, Hume states as her inclusive definition, that ‘*Fantasy is any departure from consensus reality.*’<sup>89</sup> The goal of Hume’s study is entirely different from mine. She wants to abandon the idea of fantasy as a genre, while I want to look at the genre in a new way. Still, I find her first chapter useful. She attacks the same basic problem that I have found with previous theories of the genre: ‘Too frequently, studies based on exclusive definitions rouse a sense of frustration, for most stories generally called fantasy simply do not fit their definitions.’<sup>90</sup> Hume never arrives at the conclusion that the act of defining genres and the strictures laid down by a definitional framework may be part of the problem. Instead she wants to abandon the concept of genre in relation to fantasy.

Treating fantasy literature as a single genre is problematic, perhaps because fantasy, in a much clearer way than most other genres, has gone through the development traced by Opacki. However, much the same thing has also happened to the genre of the novel. It is problematic to treat the novel throughout history as one

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<sup>87</sup> Hume. 20.

<sup>88</sup> Hume. 20.

<sup>89</sup> Hume. 21.

<sup>90</sup> Hume. 20.

single genre, but it is still done. This is because the alternative is even more problematic. Hume's move from genre to impulse proves impractical, because it is too vague and elusive, and it creates a discourse that separates itself from all other discourse on fantasy and fantastic literature. It even creates a new generic discourse.

I have no trouble agreeing with Hume that most literature is based on both the impulse of mimesis and the impulse of fantasy, but I believe that the impulse of fantasy is used differently in different works and genres, and that it makes sense to speak of a *genre* of fantasy where the impulse of fantasy is of overriding importance. Manlove's solution of creating six types or groups of fantasy, for instance, is a better one than the abandonment of genre. According to Fowler, one also needs to identify a work's genre in order to interpret it. In other words, it is necessary to view a text in light of its generic context in order to really understand it. Hume's notion of an impulse of fantasy is too vague a concept to function as such a generic context.

### **Mark Bould**

Mark Bould does not fit into any of the two groups of theorists. He has a fairly inclusive view of what fantasy literature is. Unlike the other theorists I have chosen to present here, Mark Bould has not written a book on the subject of fantasy literature. He has, however written an interesting article for the periodical *Historical Materialism* named 'The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things: A Tendency in Fantasy Theory.' The article criticises the most influential theories of fantasy literature namely the theories of Tzvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson. He also brings in Monleón's theory, although it can hardly be compared to Todorov's and Jackson's in terms of influence.

Bould's criticism includes many of the things I have already pointed out, but he is primarily concerned with how the theories fail to meet the requirements made of literary theory by Marxism. He is interested in how they cover the means of literary production, and it seems to me that he thinks a comprehensive theory of fantasy is important, not just because it will show the relationships between different types of fantasy or because it will better our understanding of the genre, but because the neglected parts of the genre are seen as commercial literature and are interesting in terms of the means of production and class struggle. This makes for a very strange defence of high fantasy, but Bould effectively finds faults with the leading theorists. Concerning Jackson, he makes the following observation:

This distinction between secondary-world and paraxial fantasy is a false one produced not only by the tendency to marginalise and exclude mass and popular literature, film and TV but also by emphasising what is arguably a very minor distinction in the variety of milieu a novel offers its readers: namely, the way in which it relates to extra-textual reality . . . I would suggest that not only is this neat ordering improbable – in most cases, the transition to a fantastic milieu is displaced onto or pre-empted by markers of the text's existence as a commodity; contrary to popular belief, you *can* often judge a book by its cover – but also that both paraxial and secondary-world fantasy actually present worlds discontinuous to our own in prose which is mimetic to their respective milieux.<sup>91</sup>

Bould has a point about the 'transition to a fantastic milieu' being made already on the cover of many fantasy books. However, paperback fantasy novels are generally so overtly commodified and commercialised that many readers routinely ignore the signals given by the exterior of the books. On many occasions during the 70's, publishers put spaceships or dragons on the covers of books which contained neither

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<sup>91</sup> Bould, Mark. 'The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things: A Tendency in Fantasy Theory.' *Historical Materialism*. 4 (2002). 59-60.

spaceships nor dragons. This lack of correlation between exterior and interior when it comes to science fiction and fantasy books makes Bould's claim problematic.

Bould continues his criticism of Jackson with a point somewhat similar to one being made by Hume concerning most theorists working with exclusive definitions, namely that Jackson excludes the 'vast majority of literary fantasy in favour of paraxial fantasy.'<sup>92</sup> Bould also comments on Jackson's confusion of the terms fantasy and phantasy and suggest that this might derive from 'a reconstitution of texts as Freudian psyches which innocently and unintentionally express "unconscious drives" and are thus "particularly open to psychoanalytic readings."' <sup>93</sup> He continues, however, suggesting that:

This could, of course, be interpreted as that species of elitism which often haunts studies of popular culture, erasing the realities of textual and commodity production and treating mass culture as a reservoir of spontaneous, naïve and, above all, unreflexive expression.<sup>94</sup>

Bould correctly criticises Jackson's lacking distinction between phantasy and fantasy, but his suggestion of an 'elitism which often haunts studies of popular culture' is somewhat misplaced. Jackson's focus on paraxial fantasy, together with the prescriptive quality of her Freudian approach, largely excludes popular culture from her study. Thus it is the works of 'Dickens, Poe, Dostoevsky, Stevenson . . . Kafka, Cortazar, Gracq, Peake and Pynchon'<sup>95</sup> which are treated as 'spontaneous, naïve and above all, unreflexive expression' as Bould formulates it.

The prescriptive quality of a critical approach is a problem Bould's article has in common with Jackson's study, however. He states that:

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<sup>92</sup> Bould. 62-63.

<sup>93</sup> Bould. 62

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Jackson. 157.

It is necessary to construct a theory of the fantastic which takes account of its commodity status and forms; as a necessary adjunct to this, it is essential that a new canon be constructed which centres on those previously excluded or marginalised subgenres of the fantastic . . . which most clearly bear the marks of commodification, albeit in complex ways.<sup>96</sup>

One might get the idea from this, that the most important thing for Bould is not to get more insight into the genre of fantasy, but to show the works as clearly as possible as commodities, and thus prove a Marxist point. There is a clear danger that these new canonical centres that Bould speaks of will be explored, not as fantasies but only as commodities. Marxism can be useful as a theoretical platform in a study of literature, but it must not be the sole motive behind such a study.

## **Conclusion**

As I have pointed out, some of the theorists have fairly inclusive views of what fantasy is. Manlove and Hume both make attempts at a comprehensive theory of fantasy in their own very dissimilar ways. However, even Manlove's study does not take all fantasy into account. It is interesting to see that, as Manlove moves, book by book, from an exclusive theory toward a comprehensive one, his definition is gradually stripped away until it is so open and inclusive that it does not really function as a definition at all. Hume's move from fantasy as genre to fantasy as impulse is also largely brought about by the problem of definition. Since all exclusive definitions seem to exclude too much, she opts for an inclusive definition. The result is that genre is too small and rigid a concept for what she has defined. While Manlove seems to gradually abandon definitions as a tool, and by doing so develops a much more

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<sup>96</sup> Bould. 72.



comprehensive theory, Hume clings on to the tool of definition, and deems it necessary to abandon the idea of fantasy as a genre instead.

Some fantasy theorists refer to for instance Northrop Frye and Frederic Jameson regarding things that are directly relevant to fantasy literature, and others discuss Vladimir Propp regarding fairy tales, but it seems that very few scholars who write about a specific genre are much concerned with general, or unspecific, genre theory. In other words, too few fantasy theorists are genre theorists or have a conscious relationship to genre theory. Todorov gets trapped in his system logic, and its rigid hierarchy, something which causes his genre, the fantastic, to end with Maupassant. Kathryn Hume and Rosemary Jackson are both aware of problems with the genre hierarchy and its system logic, but their solutions to these problems are not satisfactory. While Jackson chooses to use a dubious variant of the term mode, and even fails to do so consistently, Hume decides to go outside the framework of genres and to create a system of two impulses, mimesis and fantasy which are present in all literature. This does nothing but move the discussion to a macro level. The fantasy genre still remains as a term used by readers, writers, publishers and critics. While Hume's study is interesting in its own way, the fantasy genre still needs a comprehensive theory.



## **Myth and mythology in fantasy literature**

In this chapter I want to discuss how myth and folklore are used in modern fantasy literature. In addition to exploring the functions and effects of the different uses of myth, I want to show how such an approach to fantasy literature makes it possible to incorporate different types of fantasy. Standing by itself, an approach to fantasy based on the role of myth within the genre would be both exclusive and reductive, but through a range of such 'thematic' approaches one will arrive at an adequately comprehensive study of fantasy which can show new and surprising connections between the different works and subgenres. Other approaches might include a more open-minded version of Rosemary Jackson's approach to fantasy as a subversive genre, an approach to fantasy as a genre concerned with ethics, or an approach to fantasy as a metaphysical genre. Such a collection of criss-crossing approaches could help unite the variety of fantasy subgenres instead of drawing borders between them. Within the framework of this thesis, however, there is only space to follow one such approach. Hopefully, this method will lead to a better understanding of the fantasy genre as well as of specific works.

I will explore the role of myth in a selection of texts as well as trying to arrive at some generalisations about how myth functions in certain types or subgenres of fantasy literature. The selection of texts includes both high and low fantasy and also reflects some variation within these broad sub-categories. Myth does of course not have the same centrality in all fantasy literature. Following my wish for inclusiveness, I have tried to balance my commentary on specific texts so as to represent textual examples from both of the major groups of fantasy theorists. In other words, I have tried to make a varied selection of texts from within both high and low fantasy. I have also selected two texts by Donald Barthelme which might be seen as peripheral within

the fantasy genre. To underline the fact that there are many subgenres of fantasy besides the division into high and low, I have also included a few paragraphs on myth in science fantasy.

### **Myth in high fantasy**

In studies of fantasy, whether high or low, the subject of myth occurs on a regular basis. Most studies include at least some mention of myth, and of how it is used. It is natural to assume, then, that myth is a central element in fantasy literature, or that it is closely linked to a central theme or function within the genre. It is safe to say that myths and folklore have a wide range of functions in fantasy literature, but most of these functions are relevant to specific works rather than being something shared by the majority of works within the genre.

In his article 'Folklore and Fantastic Literature,' C. W. Sullivan III mentions one of the functions of myth that is particularly important to secondary world, or high fantasy.<sup>97</sup> He points out that, confronted with an unfamiliar world, it is helpful for the reader to encounter familiar mythological and folkloristic elements. These elements can be as simple as a recognisable plot structure, or the use of idioms or sayings from our world by the characters of the secondary world, or the whole fantasy can be a rewriting of an existing myth, like Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* or T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, both of which rewrite the Arthurian legend. In other words, myth and folklore are used to set the unfamiliar into a cultural framework or logic that helps the reader make sense of the secondary world.

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<sup>97</sup> Sullivan III, C. W. 'Folklore and Fantastic Literature.' *Western Folklore*; Fall 2001; 60, 4. 279-296.

## **Tolkien, Middle-earth and elves**

In his essay 'On Fairy-Stories', Tolkien states that 'an essential power of Faërie is thus the power of making immediately effective by the will the vision of "fantasy." . . . This aspect of "mythology" – sub-creation, rather than either representation or symbolic interpretation of the beauties and terrors of the world – is, I think, too little considered.'<sup>98</sup> Tolkien's project, as a writer of fantasy, is to create something new, a new mythology. He wants readers and critics to recognise that myths are not just representations or symbolic narratives to be interpreted, but creations of fantasy which have value in and of themselves, as opportunities for experiencing Faërie.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, he claims that the main functions of such sub-creation are recovery, escape and consolation.

By recovery, Tolkien means that what has become familiar and dull to us is made new, or that it is seen as if for the first time.<sup>100</sup> It is a rediscovery of the world and thus a regained fascination with it. By escape, Tolkien means the escape from the familiarity and triteness of the everyday world, which again brings about the recovery. This escape is also supposed to change the experience of what is real, from the transient dictations of society and culture to the more eternal realities of nature and the universe. The third function, consolation, is said to reside in the happy ending, which Tolkien claims is a necessary part of fantasy or fairy-story in its best and most perfect form. To treat the happy ending as a necessary trait of fantasy, is certainly problematic, and Tolkien does not present strong arguments for this, besides his opinion that such a form makes the highest and most complete type of fairy-story.

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<sup>98</sup> Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997. 122.

<sup>99</sup> See Patrick Curry's *Defending Middle-earth* for a discussion of Tolkien's dream of making a mythology for England.

<sup>100</sup> Tolkien's ideas around this come quite close to the Russian Formalists' notion of 'estrangement,' as discussed by for instance Victor Shklovsky.

For Tolkien, the creation of a secondary world is also a necessary part of the sub-creation that is fantasy. During most of his life he worked on creating and developing such a secondary world, the Middle-earth that *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are situated within. The posthumously published *Silmarilion* and *Unfinished Tales* chronicle the creation and early history of Middle-earth and tell some tales of the 'First Age', and Tolkien's son Christopher has completed and published several other volumes concerning this fictive world. Tolkien's Middle-earth is perhaps the most comprehensive case of fictional world-building by a single author in the history of literature.

Although Tolkien creates a new mythology, he uses elements of several old mythologies. The chief influence is the common Germanic elf-myths, with details from Norse and Icelandic myths. In the already-mentioned essay 'On Fairy-Stories' Tolkien gives a somewhat half-hearted explanation of the origins of the elf-myths and the terms elf and fairy. However, since Tolkien's topic in the essay is stories involving Fairyland, or Faërie, and not faeries in particular, he does not close the matter sufficiently.

Since elves are represented in very different ways in three of my selected texts, I want to make a summary of the origin and nature of the elf myths. The word elf is of Norse or Old German origin but it has been adopted into English and it applies to a range of different creatures, from diminutive French faeries and Celtic 'little people,' to the tall and slender wood-people of *The Lord of the Rings*, to the more wild and animal-like chaotic beasts of Romantic German poetry. A problem arises when some use the word elf as a collective name for a whole group of supernatural creatures, while others, like Tolkien, use it in reference to a single species. The term faerie is normally used to designate any native inhabitant of Faerie.

According to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish scholar N. F. S. Grundtvig, the term elf was similarly used to signify all creatures that were not human, gods, or animals in Norse mythology.<sup>101</sup>

Grundtvig mentions that there apparently has been a more specific use of the word elf as well, but that the sources that indicate this are unclear. In the time that has passed since the dominance of Norse culture in Scandinavia, more specific uses of the word have become common, especially in English. Despite the tendency toward a more specific use, there are many opinions as to the nature and appearance of elves. Sometimes they are good, sometimes they are evil, and sometimes they are something in between. They are described as small and devious pranksters, or tall, slender and stately creatures, almost heavenly and angel-like.

In her book *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions*, H. R. Ellis Davidson argues that elves were a sort of land-spirits, closely connected to specific geographical areas, and that the Norse and the early settlers on Iceland worshipped these spirits and gave offerings to them. Davidson also connects these land-spirits with the Vanir deities and says that it 'seems reasonable to equate the Vanir with the elves and land-spirits worshipped by the early settlers (of Iceland), and indeed in the poem *Grímnismál* (5) Freyr is said to rule over Alfheim, land of the elves.'<sup>102</sup>

The origin of the faerie myths and elf myths seems to be a belief in, and a worship of, nature spirits. These early animistic or pantheistic beliefs gradually disappeared as these various cultures evolved and took in new religious beliefs, like Christianity. It is a popular theory that the nature spirits were non-corporeal, and they

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<sup>101</sup> See Grundtvig, N. F. S. *Nordens Mythologi*. København: Samlerens Forlag, 1983. 230.

<sup>102</sup> Davidson, H. R. Ellis. *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988. 105. See also page 114-115 for a discussion of Germanic and Celtic land-spirits.

were believed to take on physical form from time to time, in order to communicate with humans. While the belief in the spirits waned, their images and even specific characters were still figuring in stories, myths and faerie tales.

Since these creatures did not really have a physical form, they could look like anything they wanted. That is why we have so many different images of elves. In various places, cultures have gone through similar developments, and myths about the physical manifestations of nature spirits are found nearly all over the world. The particular form of the various manifestations is largely dependent on local culture and geography.

Although Tolkien has given his elves a very singular and specific appearance, they too are really spirit-creatures, and although the elves that remain in Middle-earth are mainly wood elves or forest elves, there are stories within the story, of long-ago elven peoples of the sea, the hills and the mountains. Tolkien has incorporated the spirit-nature of the elves in an inventive combination of Norse myth and Christian belief. At the end of the *Lord of the Rings*, the elves' time in Middle-earth has come to an end, and most of the elves, together with Bilbo, Frodo and Gandalf, embark on a journey westward across the sea to a 'spirit-land' from which they came in the ancient past. This seems to be a symbolic journey into heaven. The elves' ability to make this journey without dying, establishes them firmly as spirit-creatures. This spirit-realm is their natural habitat, so to speak. Gandalf is also a higher spirit, though of another kind, and Bilbo and Frodo have earned their 'tickets' on the ship westward by taking on the burden of the ring. Without committing myself to an allegorical reading, I want to point out that the history of Tolkien's elves has clear similarities to a Christian loss and the regaining of paradise.



The conception of elves as nature-spirits is interesting because of Tolkien's image of the spirit of nature as a force of good, and on the opposite end of the scale, machinery and industry as evil and corrupting forces. Tolkien uses myth to recover, or rediscover, the value of nature. Tolkien's antagonism towards industrialisation and even, in some ways, modernity, can be seen for instance in his essay 'On Fairy-Stories':

Not long ago – incredible though it may seem – I heard a clerk of Oxenford declare that he 'welcomed' the proximity of mass-production robot factories, and the roar of self-obstructive mechanical traffic, because it brought his university into 'contact with real life.' . . . . The notion that motor-cars are more 'alive' than, say, centaurs or dragons is curious; that they are more 'real' than, say, horses is pathetically absurd. How real, how startlingly alive is a factory chimney compared with an elm tree: poor obsolete thing, insubstantial dream of an escapist!<sup>103</sup>

This hostility towards 'progressive things like factories, or the machine-guns and bombs that appear to be their natural and inevitable, dare we say "inexorable", products' is part of a tradition of anxiety toward technology and a questioning of the modern progress.<sup>104</sup> Although Tolkien's sentiment is often characterised by critics as a naïve nostalgia for the pre-industrialised rural England, he is in the company of authors like John Ruskin, Mary Shelley, T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence, to name a few. Furthermore, Tolkien's dislike of industry and machinery may be understandable in someone who had fought in the trenches of World War I, and who had seen how industry had changed his country. But whether one is sympathetic with Tolkien or not, these views are kept in the background in *The Lord of the Rings*. Although there is a connection between industry and evil in the book, Tolkien does not preach. In

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<sup>103</sup> Tolkien. *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. 149.

<sup>104</sup> Tolkien. *The Monster*. 150.

accordance with Manlove's presentation of the genre in his book *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature*, Tolkien's works function as praise for nature and life, rather than as a polemic against modernity and the industrialised world.

The praise for life, the joy of sub-creation is brought about by a mixing of myths from different areas of north-western Europe. Increasingly often, authors of high fantasy have drawn on several mythical traditions and combined traits from conflicting traditions in order to create mythical worlds that are inventive and yet familiar. A good example of this is the myriad versions of elves and elven societies that exist within the worlds of fantasy literature. I want to use elves, in various fantasy incarnations, as a primary example of how folklore and myth enter into various kinds of fantasy literature, and to show how these kinds stand in relation to and in dialogue with one another.

The works of J.R.R. Tolkien have had an enormous influence on the portrayal of elves in modern fantasy literature, and his version of the elves almost inevitably springs to mind whenever one hears the word. But at the same time there are many who hold on to the otherworldly and unsettling images of elven creatures in the Celtic tradition, as Raymond Feist's book *Faerie Tale* shows us.

### **Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman**

These two fantasists have created an unusual series of books called *The Death Gate Cycle*, consisting of seven volumes. The series is a work of high fantasy, and might be considered similar to *The Lord of the Rings* in terms of genre. When it comes to the use of myth, however, *The Death Gate Cycle* is quite different. It plays with its mythical sources in a manner somewhat akin to the ludic quality of some postmodern fiction. For instance, it has a wizard who is at times consciously aware of his

archetypal quality, who compares himself, in his role as fictional wizard, to Merlin and Gandalf, and who, because of his extratextual awareness, seems utterly crazy within the text.<sup>105</sup>

Due to a power struggle between two peoples endowed with magical abilities, the world has here been reshaped into five different worlds, one for each of the four elements, plus a fifth place called the Nexus. This was done as a last desperate act by the Sartans, in order to deny the power-hungry Patryn absolute power. Those of the lesser peoples, humans, dwarfs and elves who did not die during the so called ‘sundering,’ were transported to the new worlds to live there. Somehow something went wrong, and all the worlds seem to be slowly dying. The first four volumes present one world each, following the travels of the Patryn Haplo.

When the books start, the ‘sundering’ has become nothing more than a vague myth, and the different peoples are occupied with local problems in their respective worlds. The Sartans and Patryns seem to have all but disappeared. There are a few left, however, to continue the power-struggle.

Mythology is important in these books in several ways. The most notable use of myth is the ironic and parodic treatment of elves and dwarfs. The different races have developed differently in the different worlds and their relations to each other vary from place to place, but the dwarfs of volume one and the elves of volume two stand out in providing some of the main characters, as well as presenting some really idiosyncratic images of their respective races.

Let us begin with the dwarfs. The dwarfs of Arianus, or the Gegs, as they call themselves, are a subservient race of mechanics that have been all but swallowed up by an enormous machine called the Kicksey-winsey. This they are set to look after,

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<sup>105</sup> See for instance Weis, Margaret, Tracy Hickman. *Elven Star*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991. 60-82.

and they actually live inside it. Even their language has to a great degree been fashioned by the machine and the noises it makes. Since the Sartans, who made the machine, have disappeared, and are only vaguely remembered as a sort of demi-gods, no one knows what the machine is for, only that it is somehow very important. The machine is powered by electrical discharges from frequent thunderstorms, and it is functions in such away that it reshapes itself and expands upon itself, seemingly at random. The dwarfs run around trying to fix whatever seems to be out of order, but have no idea how the machine really works or what it is for. The dwarfs of Arianus might be one of literature's most hilarious embodiments of an ignorant proletariat, and further on in the cycle they even manage to get their own revolution.<sup>106</sup>

The elves of Pryan are also untraditional. In terms of physical appearance, these elves seem to resemble Tolkien's elves, but they are certainly not nature-spirits. They are much more human, especially in terms of their negative qualities. They are vain, snobbish, racist, self-indulgent, cowardly, greedy, overly proud and stubborn. Further, though they do not wage war themselves, they live by providing the other races of the planet with magically enhanced weapons. They also keep human slaves. The elves of Pryan resemble the worst sort of aristocracy or capitalist upper class known from the history of our own world.<sup>107</sup>

This mockery of the two most commonly used mythical races in fantasy literature is interesting because they are also taken seriously. The mythic elements are deflated and parodied, but they are not reduced to a mere vehicle for satire. It is done, for instance, to escape the endlessly repeated portrayal of elves as being tall and slender, beautiful and frightening, gracious and awe-inspiring, a portrayal which is full of form, but lacking in content. Both elves and dwarfs often function as stock

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<sup>106</sup> Weis, Margaret, Tracy Hickman. *Dragon Wing*. See for instance chapter 8-13.

<sup>107</sup> Weis, Margaret, Tracy Hickman. *Elven Star*.

characters in much modern fantasy literature. The portrayals of the races have become increasingly unimaginative, and what used to be foreign and exciting has become familiar and dull. In Tolkien's terms, many modern portrayals of elves and dwarfs have lost the qualities of Faërie. Instead of portraying enchanted creatures, many fantasy writers resort to the unimaginative and mechanical magic of formula and uninspired tradition. Weis' and Hickman's elves and dwarfs revitalise the myths. 'The Death Gate Cycle' also adds something to the dwarf-race that too many fantasies lack, namely women. Apart from the jokes about whether or not they are bearded, the female dwarfs are refreshing.

### **Raymond Feist's Fairy Tale**

Feist's novel *Fairy Tale* is strictly speaking low fantasy rather than high fantasy, but I want to discuss it here for two reasons. The first is that this novel, like the works of Tolkien and Weis & Hickman, use elven myths. These examples show how this particular pool of myths has been used in very dissimilar ways in very dissimilar types of fantasy. The second reason is that *Fairy Tale* is an example of a type of fantasy which raises questions about the possibility of a clear distinction between high and low fantasy.

*Fairy Tale* is a story about a family who moves into an old house in a rural area in upstate New York. The family consists of Phil Hastings, his wife Gloria, Phil's teenage daughter from a previous marriage, and the eight-year-old twin brothers Sean and Patrick. Nearby is an old wood, which soon proves to contain some things quite out of the ordinary. By magic and an enforced treaty, the elves have been exiled to another plane of existence. This other plane of existence is bound to our world,

however, so that the elves can appear within certain restricted areas. The wood nearby the Hastings' house is one such area, and the elves are free to travel within its boundaries.

The trouble starts when the mad Elf-King and his minion try to trick the humans into digging up a secret treasure that was once given as the human part of a compact between the elves and the humans. If the Elf-King succeeds, the elves will be let loose on the whole world to create chaos and panic.<sup>108</sup>

The elves of Raymond Feist's book are spirit-creatures with no real corporeal form. They have magical powers, and as a rule they are neither good nor bad. The reason for their exile is not that they are evil, but that their lives and their view of the world are so radically different from the human view of the world, that the coexistence of the two races inevitably leads to conflict. Some of the elves have recognised this, while the Elf-King and a few others feel they have a right to rule the world.

In some ways Feist's story may be seen as favouring the small things that seem immediately important to humans, rather than Tolkien's more eternal values. To the long-lived elves our human concerns seem like trifles, but Feist tries to show how and why these things are important to us. Feist does, however, also value some elements of the elven view of the world, and he ends up as a moderate spokesman for both.

*Fairy Tale* traces a fictitious history of the elves, and connects myths and folklore from large parts of the world as variants of the elf-myth, coloured by local culture. The main mythical influence within the story, however, is of Celtic/Germanic origin. True Thomas, or Thomas the Rhymer, shows up at the Elf Queen's court, and

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<sup>108</sup> See for instance Feist. *Fairy Tale*. 404-413.

Wayland Smith, known from countless British, Scandinavian and German myths, turns out to be one of the favourite corporeal characters of the elf Ariel.<sup>109</sup>

Mark, one of the minor characters, even gets to experience the Wild Hunt, a mythical event that exists in numerous different versions throughout north-western Europe. It is a hunting party riding through woods or sometimes through the sky. In some myths the dead are the ones riding, and in other myths it is the gods. In this particular version, it is the Elf-King and his followers. There are also a number of elements from Irish lore in the book, for instance in how to protect oneself from the elves, and how to find the entrance to Elfland.

Unlike in most high fantasy, the myths are used to change the reality of this world. The book claims that the world is not what we think it is. Feist's novel can be said to occupy a generic landscape where the distinction between high and low fantasy becomes problematic. In most works of fantasy containing portals, or similar devices that is used to travel from one world to another, the different worlds, or dimensions or planes of existence, are kept apart. Usually a person from our world enters a secondary world and influences it, but there is little influence from the secondary world upon our own and the primary world may even be quite marginally present in the work. C. S. Lewis' Narnia books are good examples of this, since the primary world works mainly as a framing device for the 'real plot' which takes place in Narnia. In Feist's work, however, though the actual influence of the elves upon our world is kept at a minimum, the possible implications of such an altered reality are stressed. This brings about an almost impossible question, namely whether the existence of elves in another dimension, or another plane, constitutes a secondary world or not.

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<sup>109</sup> See *Fairy Tale* pages 83-86 and 404-413.

There is no easy answer to that question, although the book tends toward the traditions of low fantasy in its use of the supernatural as unsettling or frightening. The primary setting is the world as we know it, and the supernatural elements upset the old order rather than fully create a new one. At the same time, *Fairy Tale* is close to Tolkien's kind of fantasy in that it seems to be created more for the enjoyment of the experience it gives us, than for the representation or symbolism that a critic like Rosemary Jackson might look for. In other words, it approaches a kind of sub-creation despite being situated in our world.

### **Myth in low fantasy**

Most attempts to define fantasy literature take into consideration questions concerning the works' relation to the real, whether it is in terms of W. R. Irwin's 'overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility,'<sup>110</sup> Todorov's hesitation between the natural and the supernatural, Manlove's 'substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural' or Hume's 'departure from consensus reality.'<sup>111</sup> Myth too is concerned with reality. Myth has to do with the origins and purpose of things and, as a continuation of this, it has been used to explain events and phenomena around us which are not fully comprehensible. At the same time, myth has to do with that which is not real, like ghosts, vampires, elves, unicorns, or Greek gods. According to for instance Jung's theories of archetypes, some of these unreal things can be seen as instances of symbolic truths, and thus deal with reality on a different level. Myth may also be seen as a cultural instrument for ordering our surroundings into a coherent

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<sup>110</sup> Irwin, W. R. *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1976. 4.

<sup>111</sup> Manlove. *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*. 1. and Hume. *Fantasy and Mimesis*. 21.



reality that we can grasp. In his book *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature*, Eric Gould makes a somewhat similar point:

Myths apparently derive their universal significance from the way in which they try to reconstitute an original event or explain some fact about human nature and its worldly or cosmic context. But in doing so, they necessarily refer to some essential meaning which is absent until it appears as a function of interpretation. If there is one persistent belief in this study, it is that there can be no myth without an *ontological gap between event and meaning*. A myth intends to be an adequate symbolic representation by closing that gap, by aiming to be a tautology.<sup>112</sup>

Gould implies something more than I have hitherto pointed out, namely that myth not only orders our surroundings, but invests them with meaning. Myth re-presents reality in such a way that we can interpret it and thereby give it significance.

In a wide sense of the word myth, one can say that our preconceptions, prejudices, and indeed our whole understanding of the world around us, are based on certain internalised myths. Without these myths, our surrounding world would seem disorienting and chaotic. Myths help us assign some meaning to our existence. I believe that myth, in fantasy literature, is used to step past, pacify, or suspend these internally active myths that make up our horizon of expectations. High fantasy puts up a new set of myths, a new framework within which to understand the world within the work of literature. This makes it possible to present an alternative reality. Low fantasy, however, uses one or more myths or mythical elements that stand in opposition to our preconception of the real world. Low fantasy uses the tension between our horizon of expectations and the external myths of the literary work, which might reveal to us the mythic qualities of our 'consensus reality', to use

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<sup>112</sup> Gould, Eric. *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1981. 6.

Hume's phrase. This might be done to disrupt the order made up by the internally active myths, or to bring focus to any unconscious psychological mechanisms that these internally active myths may represent.

Within certain types of postmodern fiction there has been an interest in master narratives, or meta narratives, both religious and secular. The Bible and, in extension, the Christian worldview(s), are examples of such master narratives. As I see it, these master narratives are a special type of myth, or rather of mythology in the broad sense of the term. They are a kind of totalising myth, or system of myths, that makes claims of presenting an ultimate truth. Gould's point about the existence of myths being dependent on the gap between event and meaning, makes these master narratives highly relevant within a postmodern rhetoric. Different postmodern fictions question, parody and satirise these master narratives. If one accepts the often repeated claims that the modern world is experiencing an ontological and epistemological crisis, such a totalising system or worldview must necessarily be considered a myth, not a truth.

Gould states that 'the absent origin, the arbitrary meaning of our place in the world, determines the mythic, at least in the sense that we cannot come up with any definitive origin for our presence here.'<sup>113</sup> This connection of myth to the arbitrariness of meaning might help to explain why postmodernists like Donald Barthelme frequently use myth in his fictions. It might also help to explain why many postmodernist critics are interested in magical realism.

### **Donald Barthelme**

I want to discuss two texts by Donald Barthelme. The first is a short story titled 'The Glass Mountain.' The second is the novel *Snow White*. 'The Glass Mountain' consists

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<sup>113</sup> Gould. 6.

of 100 numbered paragraphs of various length. It might be called a mock fairy tale. It starts with the first person narrator trying to climb a glass mountain which stands ‘at the corner of Thirteenth Street and Eighth Avenue.’<sup>114</sup> Barthelme plays with the fairy-tale form, juxtaposing elements of fairy-tale plots with modern details, and also juxtaposing the logic of the fairy tale with modern rationality and postmodern discourse.

In the paragraphs 48-51, something important happens:

- 48. At the top of the mountain there is a castle of pure gold, and in a room in the castle tower sits . . .
- 49. My acquaintances were shouting at me.
- 50. “Ten bucks you bust your ass in the next four minutes!”
- 51. . . . a beautiful enchanted symbol.<sup>115</sup>

When the narrator is ‘interrupted’ in paragraph 49 by the shouting of the acquaintances, it gives the reader time to mentally supply the rest of the sentence left hanging in paragraph 48, and one naturally expects to find a princess in the castle tower. However, the expectations are not met. Instead of a beautiful enchanted princess there is a beautiful enchanted symbol.

Further on, the narrator asks himself two questions and gives an answer to both:

- 58. Does one climb a glass mountain, at considerable personal discomfort, simply to disenchant a symbol?
- 59. Do today’s stronger egos still *need* symbols?
- 60. I decided that the answer to these questions was ‘yes.’
- 61. Otherwise what was I doing there, 206 feet above the power-sawed elms, whose white meat I could see from my height?<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Barthelme, Donald. ‘The Glass Mountain.’ *Sixty Stories*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993. 178.

<sup>115</sup> Barthelme. ‘The Glass Mountain.’ 180.

<sup>116</sup> Barthelme, Donald. ‘The Glass Mountain.’ 180.

The fairy-tale form, seen as a kind of myth-narrative, is disenchanted by this narrative of the Glass Mountain. Instead of the princess of the fairytale becoming a symbol for interpretation, one has a development, within the narrative, where the symbol becomes a mere princess, which the narrator has no use for and throws headfirst down the mountain.

*Snow White* is a somewhat similar disenchantment of a fairy tale, although this is in the form of a novel. It is a strange, contemporary retelling of the Snow White narrative, where Snow White lives in a house with all the dwarfs. The dwarfs are not content with the situation, there is jealousy and rivalry and no one is really sure of their role. Snow White is disillusioned and wonders when her prince will come. She tries waiting, she tries hanging her hair out the window, she tries other actions which in the fairy tales lead to the rescue by the prince, but nothing works. In short, the modern lifestyle, the insecurity about gender roles, and the relatively new ideal of self-realisation, makes a real mess out of the fairy tale narrative. *Snow White* is a vision of a society falling apart because almost no one acts according to expectations, and if someone does, this often turns out not to be sufficient, or to fail because others do not follow the rules.

It might be argued that *Snow White* is not a fantasy novel. This might even to a large extent be true, but while the genre of fantasy might seem only vaguely relevant in a discussion primarily focused on the novel *Snow White*, the novel is still relevant in a discussion of fantasy literature. It does deal with the fairy tale, and in some other small ways it indicates a relationship with a body of fantastic literature. It can be no coincidence that Jane, one of the characters, at a certain point identifies herself as Jane Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. Jean-Marie-Mathias-Philippe-Auguste, Comte de Villiers de l'Isle Adam (1838-1889) was a French author known among other things as a writer

of fantastic fiction.<sup>117</sup> There is also the mention of a magical singing bone, one which has told Snow White stories with a fantastic content.

In relation to Barthelme and *Snow White*, Christine Brooke-Rose points out that 'meaning is itself one of our many fictions.'<sup>118</sup> By juxtaposing the fairy-tales, or myth-narratives, with modern narratives, Barthelme shows how these myth-narratives are insufficient as a source of meaning and order. He reveals meaning as fiction by playing a game with the logic of myth. This is most clearly seen in the ending of 'The Glass Mountain'. As symbol, the enchanted thing at the top of the mountain has meaning. As soon as the symbol is grasped, however, it is re-established in our world as merely a princess, and the ontological gap that Gould speaks of is re-established as well. The princess, having lost the status of symbol, has become meaningless and is thrown off the mountain.

### **H. P. Lovecraft's 'The Call of Cthulhu'**

In 'The Call of Cthulhu,' Lovecraft creates a set of mysterious events, distant rumours, secrets and coincidences, which gradually lead the narrator to a belief in something supernatural. The narrator tells of a constantly sceptical attitude on his own part towards what is being told, but this is done in the past tense, so that the real effect is rather to convince the reader that all possible doubts have been addressed and judged insubstantial. In this way, the narrator gradually establishes what can, in a wide sense of the term, be called a mythology about an evil alien race slumbering under the sea, waiting to regain the rule over our world.

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<sup>117</sup> His work is discussed in detail in Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic*.

<sup>118</sup> Brooke-Rose. 378.

These creatures lie in a sort of death-sleep, a death that can in a mysterious way be reversed. They lie waiting for the right time to emerge from the city R'Lyeh with help from their High Priest Cthulhu. These creatures have telepathic qualities, and when their city emerges from the sea, their priest conveys messages to 'highly sensitive' people, such as painters, sculptors and poets. By this sort of communication, he seems to have established a secret cult whose members are supposed to help these creatures rise from the dead when the time comes. The sunken city leads the thoughts to the myths of Atlantis, but there is no definitive connection between this myth and Lovecraft's short story, although both the notion of aliens and the notion of telepathy have been connected to myths of Atlantis.

The fact that supernatural or fantastic events happen in the real world, not in a secondary world, makes the events more directly disturbing. In much the same way as Feist's *Fairy Tale*, Lovecraft's 'Call of Cthulhu' discloses a secret about the world which changes our perception of it. The world we know turns out to have hidden elements which contradict the natural laws that we depend upon to explain our existence.

In the book *Myth and Reality*, Mircea Eliade states that:

. . .myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the 'supernatural') into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really *establishes* the World and makes it what it is today.<sup>119</sup>

Eliade defines many other requirements and properties of myth, making his use of the term more precise than mine, but this particular function of myth is nevertheless largely relevant to my discussion of Lovecraft. In 'The Call of Cthulhu' this function

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<sup>119</sup> Eliade, Mircea. *Myth and Reality*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1964. 6.

of myth might be said to be inverted, so that the unholy breaks into the world and that this establishes, or at least suggests, the world as something alien or unknown. While traditional myths are comforting and ordering, Lovecraft's myth is disruptive and frightening.

### **E. T. A. Hoffman's 'The Sandman'**

Hoffman's 'The Sandman' is one of relatively few literary texts which come close to the ambiguity required in Todorov's genre, the fantastic. It is a story about a boy, Nathaniel, who believes that he has met the devil, or a servant of the devil, in the guise of an acquaintance of Nathaniel's father, or as Rosemary Jackson reads it:

Nathaniel, the tale's hero, cannot separate real from apparently unreal events. He confuses a figure of a sandman with his father's lawyer, Coppelius, then with an Italian optician, Coppola. This confusion derives from *taking literally* a metaphor . . . of the sandman as 'a wicked man who comes when children won't go to bed and throws handfuls of sand in their eyes so that they jump out of their heads all bleeding.'<sup>120</sup>

Following this, Jackson relates Freud's reading of the text, in which Freud explains away one strange thing after another by transforming them into instances of Nathaniel's unconscious fears, phobias and anxieties. However, regardless of whether the supernatural events are real or a result of the imagination, there is the image of Coppelius, the sandman, alchemist, sorcerer and devil-in-disguise. No matter how inventive the brain of Nathaniel may have become as he grew older, the violent death of his father in Coppelius' presence cannot be explained away by psychoanalysis. All details of the text suggests that Coppelius killed Nathaniel's father. There is also no

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<sup>120</sup> Jackson. 66-67.

reason within the text to doubt the disappearance of Coppelius immediately after the event.

Jackson makes an interesting point in regard to this and other low fantasies:

Fantasies express a longing for an absolute meaning, for something other than the limited 'known' world. Yet whereas 'faery' stories and quasi-religious tales function through nostalgia for the sacred, the modern fantastic refuses a backward-looking glance. It is an inverted form of myth. It focuses upon the unknown within the present, discovering emptiness inside an apparently full reality.<sup>121</sup>

This quotation is in line with my point that some types of modern fantasy aim to expose reality itself as myth. It might, however be just as useful, in relation to 'The Sandman,' to view the psychological explanations as myths. In this way there has been a true inversion of myth and reality, in that the narrative needs to be transformed into a psychological myth-narrative to order it and make it comprehensible.

This is of course only necessary if one does not accept Nathaniel's version of the narrative, and that the evil Coppelius really exists. If one accepts the supernatural within the story, then Coppelius can function as a small-scale Satan, a personification of evil. Such personifications of evil function as sources of horrible actions and events. This is once again an attempt to order reality. If bad things are seen as arbitrary, erratic or coincidental they cannot be fought. If, however, 'evil' has a source, it can be fought. This attribution of bad fortune or tragic events to a personification of evil may be comforting, in that it gives 'evil' a logic and maybe even a degree of predictability. The story creates a system where the horrible is generated by evil instead of being incomprehensible.

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<sup>121</sup> Jackson. 158.



## **Science fantasy and myth**

I have discussed two low fantasy texts, one which lies on the border between high and low fantasy, and three high fantasy texts in this final chapter, in order to show the importance of myth in a variety of different fantasy texts. Since high and low fantasy have seemed irreconcilable to many theorists, I have tried to maintain a balance between the two subgenres in this chapter, in order to show that these can very well be treated together.

There are, however, many ways, besides the distinction between high and low fantasy, in which fantasy texts differ. Science fantasy is one of several subgenres bordering on another genre, and myth plays a part also within this subgenre. One of the acclaimed masterworks within this genre is Gene Wolfe's tetralogy *The Book of the New Sun*, in which myths about the coming of a new sun, both metaphorically and literally, and myths of the old world, shape the life of the narrator and protagonist, Severian. Another great tetralogy of science fantasy is the books known as the *Otherland* books by Tad Williams, in which a whole set of virtual worlds, based on myths and famous literary works, are made real. Myth is central both to the plot and the themes of these books.

The reason for the existence of science fantasy might partly be that myths can explain and give coherence where the science of science fiction falls short.

## **Conclusion**

By bringing an awareness of general genre theory into the study of fantasy literature, I have tried to address some of the problems that have caused such confusion and disagreement upon what fantasy literature really is. There will always be different

opinions as to where a genre begins and ends, and there will always be disagreement as to the central aspects of a genre, but the fact that so many different studies have insisted upon using nearly the same vocabulary, strongly suggests that these groups of literature should be viewed together, as a single genre.

My last chapter, on myth in fantasy literature, is meant to show that it is indeed possible to treat texts from across the whole spectre of fantasy literature under one heading. At the same time, I have pointed out that the use of a single approach will necessarily exclude some texts because of the unclear relevance of the approach to those particular texts and vice versa. An eclectic or pluralist approach is therefore preferable. It is necessary to base an inclusive study upon several different approaches, so that some can include what others leave out. If one explores a sufficient number of different approaches to fantasy, one might begin to attribute a special centrality to texts which occur within all, or nearly all, of these approaches. One must still remember, however, that the less central texts can still be of great importance to the overall understanding of the genre.

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