

Later Fantasy Fiction: Tolkien's Legacy

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Fantasy After Tolkien: Actions and Reactions

Terry Pratchett has eloquently encapsulated Tolkien's all-pervasive effect on modern fantasy in a recent interview:

Tolkien appears in the fantasy universe in the same way that Mount Fuji appeared in old Japanese prints. Sometimes small, in the distance, and sometimes big and close-to, and sometimes not there at all, and that's because the artist is standing on Mount Fuji. (Pratchett 2010)

Indeed, despite the fact that there was fantasy before Tolkien – notably written by authors whom Tolkien himself read and admired such as William Morris (see ch. 21) – *The Lord of the Rings* has often been cited as the book that established modern fantasy literature as a genre, setting its mode and its formula, both used (and abused) by later writers. This “canonical” status of Tolkien as the “founder” has led to two opposing positions in modern fantasy: either a desire to imitate (even ape) Tolkien, or the urge to react against his blueprint and create fantasy literature with its own distinct character and voice.

For the first category of writers (and publishers), the potency of Tolkienian fantasy was too rich to escape, or the materialistic effort to match his sales figures was too attractive to pass by. Anderson (2006) has documented the history of the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series (1969–1974), explaining that initially the series appeared to

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fulfill the desire for more fantasy by reprinting several older texts by Dunsany, Morris, MacDonald, and other late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fantasists. Later, after the del Reys took over the editorship from Lin Carter, they actively encouraged new writing, but this had to have an emphasis nearly exclusively on plot and action and which could be packaged and marketed as being similar to *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps the most straightforward example of this type of fantasy was Terry Brooks's *The Sword of Shannara* (1977), the first book of a fantasy series that slavishly imitated Tolkien, to such an extent that critics have not been able to resist the temptation of discussing this work by using equations, such as The Vale = The Shire, Allanon = Gandalf, and so on (e.g., Shippey 2000, 319–320; Mendlesohn and James 2009, 109–110).

Brooks himself, in a recent reflective piece on his creative process, acknowledged this deliberate derivative nature of his work:

[I]n 1965, I read J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and I thought that maybe I had found what I was looking for. I would set my adventure story in an imaginary world, a vast, sprawling, mythical world like that of Tolkien, filled with magic that had replaced science and races that had evolved from Man. But I was not Tolkien and did not share his background in academia or his interest in cultural study. So I would eliminate the poetry and songs, the digressions on the ways and habits of types of characters, and the appendices of language and backstory that characterized and informed Tolkien's work. I would write the sort of straightforward adventure story that barreled ahead, picking up speed as it went, compelling a turning of pages until there were no more pages to be turned. (2003, 181)

Brooks's honesty is refreshing, but the fact that *The Sword of Shannara* (and the many sequels and prequels that followed it) does not aspire to be much more than an exciting adventure story, is modeled upon very predictable motifs and characters, and uses a trite writing style for utilitarian purposes, makes it a very challenging read.¹ Ursula Le Guin, for example, has voiced her opinion against this type of “mass-produced” fantasy:

All times are changing times, but ours is one of massive, rapid moral and mental transformation. . . . So people turn to the realms of fantasy for stability, ancient truths, immutable simplicities. And the mills of capitalism provide them. Supply meets demand. Fantasy becomes a commodity, an industry. Commodified fantasy takes no risks; it invents nothing, but imitates and trivializes. It proceeds by depriving the old stories of their intellectual and ethical complexity, turning their action to violence, their actors to dolls, and their truth-telling to sentimental platitude. Heroes brandish their swords, lasers, wands, as mechanically as combine harvesters, reaping profits. Profoundly disturbing moral choices are sanitized, made cute, made safe. The passionately conceived ideas of the great story-tellers are copied . . . advertised, sold, broken, junked, replaceable, interchangeable. (Le Guin 2001, xiii–xiv)

The second category of writers following Tolkien has often perceived him as a Freudian father-figure, looming large over modern fantasy and causing acute cases of Bloom's "anxiety of influence" (1973). It has become a trend for successful post-Tolkienian fantasists to renounce Tolkien as an influence either by pointing out the use of common sources as the reason for potential similarities of ideas, plot elements, characters, or setting (e.g., Garner); or voicing their disagreement with his views on a level of politics, philosophy, or ideology (e.g., Pullman). Others, however, have also acknowledged their debt to Tolkien, at least on the level of opening a space (both in the world of publishing and in terms of literary criticism) for respectable fantasy. Such writers, who have succeeded in finding their own, independent voice, have created original fantasy works that have taken the genre into new, exciting territories.

The remainder of this chapter will focus on a selection of those latter writers and their debt to Tolkien, not so much in terms of characters, motifs, or the grand structure of the plot, but in terms of their inventory of intertexts to draw upon (myth, legend, folklore, often as recorded in medieval literature) and the inward look (the tendency to theorize their own creative practice, following the example of Tolkien's seminal essay "On Fairy-stories"). The discussion that follows is necessarily selective. This chapter is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of fantasy after Tolkien but an account of some important trends of post-Tolkienian fantasy, aiming to demonstrate some of the exciting ways fantasy has evolved in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For other attempts to document the development of the fantasy genre after Tolkien, see Shippey (2000, 318–326; 2007) and Anderson (2006).

British Fantasy after Tolkien: Myth, Legend and Medievalism (Cooper, Garner, Wynne Jones)

A group of fantasy writers who can conveniently be considered together are Susan Cooper, Alan Garner, and Diana Wynne Jones. All three are British, were taught by Tolkien in Oxford (or at least attended some of his lectures), and have shown a fascination with British myth and folklore. Butler, who has recently examined their work in a monograph (together with that of Penelope Lively), has pointed out their biographical similarities: they were all children at the outbreak of World War II and they were all contemporaries at Oxford (2006, 7). This link of fantasy with the experience of war is one that Tolkien notes in his essay "On Fairy-stories," claiming that: "A real taste for fairy-stories was awakened by philology on the threshold of manhood, and quickened to full life by war" (*OFS* 56). Garner, Cooper, and Wynne Jones make this connection too (though with World War II rather than the Great War) in their own self-reflective writing (see Garner 1997, 17; Cooper 1996, 10; Wynne Jones 2012, 111, 210).

All three writers have acknowledged a debt to mythical or folkloric inspiration, and their sources in medieval literature. Wynne Jones and Cooper have explicitly linked this invaluable source to their Oxford English syllabus, which was designed

by Tolkien and C. S. Lewis and put an emphasis on Old and Middle English (see Butler 2006, 15). Wynne Jones in a talk about “Inventing the Middle-Ages” reminisces:

I went up to Oxford and read English, where a large part of the course concerned itself with what was called Middle English – and it is a very odd thing that there were quite a few women who were there at the same time as me – none of whom I met – who all went on to write successfully for children afterwards. I have never known what quite inspired them all, but with me I know it was suddenly being confronted with the way writers from the Middle Ages handled narratives. They were all so *different*, that was the amazing thing, and all so good at it. . . . I think the Middle Ages invented *me*, rather than the other way round. (2012, 165, 170)

Cooper has also made a similar point:

We read *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first book of *The Lord of the Rings*, with astonishment, and waited impatiently for its successors to come out. Tolkien’s Middle-earth, like his prose, was full of echoes of the Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Icelandic literature we were studying . . . (2002)

Such medieval texts are (often the only) records of British myth, legend, and folklore, from *Beowulf* and the Germanic past to the “Celtic”/Norman Arthurian legend. Tolkien’s reliance on Germanic myth and legend (primarily Old English and Old Norse) is well documented (see chs. 15–18) so it might be significant that Cooper and Garner turned to sources that Tolkien often renounced such as “Celtic” (Irish and Welsh) legend and folklore.² Cooper’s brilliant series *The Dark is Rising* draws on the Arthurian legend, not just its post-Galfridian tradition with a recognizable Merlin-figure (Merriman Lyon) and a grail quest in *Over Sea, Under Stone* (1965), but also the Welsh origins of Arthur in the penultimate book, *The Grey King* (1975), which is set in the area around Aberdyfi. Alan Garner did draw upon Scandinavian mythological motifs and characters, such as Elves and Dwarves, in *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1960) and its sequel, *The Moon of Gomrath* (1963), but the presence of Welsh names and Irish folklore is unmistakable in both books too, while his most praised novel, *The Owl Service* (1967), uses in a creative way the story of Blodeuwedd from the Medieval Welsh *Mabinogion*.

Wynne Jones’s debt to British myth and folklore, and especially “Celtic” sources, is often quite explicit and identifiable, such as her reliance on the Scottish ballads “Tam Lin” and “Thomas the Rhymer” for the plot and ideas of *Fire and Hemlock* (1985). She had also family links with Wales, where she spent part of her childhood when sent away from London during World War II (2012, 210–211) and has used Welsh mythological motifs in her books, such as *Dogsbody* (1975) and *The Merlin Conspiracy* (2003). However, she has also reworked Norse legends and tales (e.g., *Eight Days of Luke*, 1975) while in her essays she has acknowledged a more subtle influence by

medieval literature, on the level of narrative structure and style, claiming, for example, that the anonymous author of *Beowulf* taught her “more about how to orchestrate and shape a narrative than any writer of more recent date” (see Wynne Jones 2012, 49). However, Wynne Jones is also the most outspoken writer of the three against the clichéd medieval trappings of much modern fantasy. She has joined Le Guin in opposing “commodified” fantasy, but – instead of writing a “serious” essay – she has mocked mercilessly the pseudo-medieval setting and motifs of much mass-produced fantasy (as a bad imitation of Tolkien’s Middle-earth) in her hilarious book *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (1996), “a piece of literary criticism disguised as a guidebook” (Butler 2012, xvi).

It should also be noted that out of these three British authors, Wynne Jones was the only one to write what fantasy theorists call “high” or “immersive” fantasy, in which an entire “secondary world” (in Tolkien’s own terminology) is invented, with its own history, cultures, and consistent rules of reality (whether this includes magic or not). Wynne Jones actually has relished inventing multiple parallel worlds which might, or might not, interact with our primary world, thus also contributing to the “portal” fantasy sub-category. Cooper and Garner, on the other hand, have written within the very un-Tolkienian category of “low” or “intrusion” fantasy, in which fantastical or supernatural occurrences “intrude” into our own, recognizable world. Cooper has made the observation that this type of fantasy seems to suit better British authors, claiming that:

Fantasy writers born in America tend, for whatever reason, to be more direct than those born in Britain. They take you straight to their world apart: from the first page, you are not in our own world but in Ursula Le Guin’s Earthsea, Anne McCaffrey’s Pern, Lloyd Alexander’s Prydain. Or for that matter, just to disprove my own generalisation about nationality, Professor Tolkien’s Middle-earth. This brand of fantasy could be said to be the ultimate in separation: how much further from reality can you get than to be in a different universe, a different time, belonging to different species? (1996, 112–113)

For Cooper, this “separation” is not the desired result. One of her main interests is the interrelationship between the landscape of Britain and its mythical past, especially in the way this past informs the present (see Cooper 1996, 8), and “intrusion” fantasy serves this main thematic concern in a direct way. Garner is also quite vocal about his preference of “intrusion” over “immersive” fantasy:

[T]he modern, material world is the effective setting for Fantasy. An arbitrary time in a never-never land softens the punch. For example, if we are in Eldorado and we find a mandrake, then OK, so it’s a mandrake: in Eldorado anything goes. But, by force of imagination, compel the reader to believe that there is a mandrake in a garden in Mayfield Road, Ulverston, Lancashire, then when you pull up that mandrake it is really going to scream: and possibly the reader will, too. (1968, 591)

Garner is also very much fascinated by the links between British myth, folklore, landscape, and ancient ruins and sees “low” fantasy as a way to express their interconnections. Still, this twin interest in myth and place was also one of Tolkien’s main creative impulses as in his early mythology the lands of the Elves (or fairies) was England itself, while later on he repeated his claim that Middle-earth was not an imaginary world but Europe in a mythical proto-prehistory (see *Letters* 239).

Garner, Cooper, and Wynne Jones have contributed to the evolution of the fantasy genre by producing original, refreshing work that builds on some of Tolkien’s premises but also takes them a step further in different directions. The same feat has also been accomplished by one of the best American fantasists, whose long writing career has encompassed both fantasy and science fiction: Ursula K. Le Guin.

The Peak of American Fantasy: Responding to and Questioning Fantasy Conventions (Le Guin)

Ursula Le Guin’s fantasy writing is often recognized as “the next best thing” after Tolkien, but the secondary world and mythology she weaves in the Earthsea cycle is very much un-Tolkienian. Earthsea is a fully-fledged secondary world, with its own history, languages, and traditions, but this is a very different world to the medieval “British” or even “European” flavor of Tolkien’s Middle-earth, and the similar landscapes of much other fantasy. Earthsea is an archipelago of islands, and most of the heroes of its tales are copper-brown in complexion. The spiritual undertones of the cultures of Earthsea are Eastern, reflecting Le Guin’s Taoist leanings. In contrast to Middle-earth, the peoples of Earthsea are not distinguished so much in terms of their linguistic and cultural history, but in terms of ethnographic and anthropological observation: they display elements and traditions of tribal societies rather than the strict hierarchies and politics of medieval society.

Nevertheless, Le Guin has acknowledged Tolkien’s impact on her fantasy writing, including the original “germ” of her first Earthsea book. When she was commissioned to write a book for young adults in the 1960s, her imagination was drawn to one of the most familiar fantasy stock characters, as established by Tolkien:

Serious consideration of magic, and of writing for kids, combined to make me wonder about wizards. Wizards are usually elderly or ageless Gandalfs, quite rightly and archetypically. But what were they before they had white beards? How did they learn what is obviously an erudite and dangerous art? Are there colleges for young wizards? And so on. (Le Guin 1979, 51)

Her response to these questions was the School of Magic on the island of Roke, and the story of young Ged in *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), a boy who will later on grow up to be the Archmage of Earthsea, a role analogous to Gandalf and a long line of other such figures in fantasy literature, including J. K. Rowling’s Dumbledore. At

the same time, despite the Eastern/Taoist echoes in Earthsea and the anthropological approach to her invented cultures, Drout and Comoletti (2001) have argued convincingly that at least the first three books of the Earthsea series betray echoes of medievalism in Le Guin's imaginary world. The mages of Earthsea resemble medieval priests who remain celibate and change the material world by performing "speech acts." Le Guin also uses dragons, another staple character of fantasy. Dragons originate in myths and legends of medieval Europe and were popularized by Tolkien in modern fantasy, but Le Guin's dragons "are not to be confused with the dragons of the Christian tradition, representatives of fallen nature" (Hunt and Lenz 2001, 52), as Tolkien describes them in his famous essay on *Beowulf*. Le Guin's dragons are closer to "oriental lineage," a symbol of "a nature in which savagery is a necessary part of the whole – something to be respected more than feared" (Patteson 1985, 246). They are the original speakers of the Old Speech and the more Le Guin reveals about their mysterious nature, the more she also explicates the cosmology of Earthsea.

Le Guin has navigated her way around Tolkien's legacy with care and a real creative flair. Some of the central concerns of Tolkien's invented mythology are shared by Le Guin's secondary world, including the importance of language (in Earthsea tied with the very existence of magic) and the significance of transmitting history and poetry via an oral tradition. Nevertheless, Le Guin has made a point of challenging a number of previous assumptions or givens of fantasy literature, often established by Tolkien. In her Earthsea books, issues of race and color are central. Contrary to Tolkien (and the mainstream of fantasy tradition), who follows medieval perceptions of race and presents the white peoples of the North-West as good and the dark-skinned people of the South-East as evil or disloyal, the wizard Ged, the main protagonist of the Earthsea cycle, is copper-brown (emulating the Native American population), while the white-skinned Kargs are the main antagonists for most of the series. In Le Guin's words:

My color scheme was conscious and deliberate from the start. I didn't see why everybody in science fiction had to be a honky named Bob or Joe or Bill. I didn't see why everybody in heroic fantasy had to be white (and why all the leading women had "violet eyes"). It didn't even make sense. Whites are a minority on Earth now – why wouldn't they still be either a minority, or just swallowed up in the larger colored gene pool, in the future?

The fantasy tradition I was writing in came from Northern Europe, which is why it was about white people. I'm white, but not European. My people could be any color I liked, and I like red and brown and black. I was a little wily about my color scheme. I figured some white kids (the books were published for "young adults") might not identify straight off with a brown kid, so I kind of eased the information about skin color in by degrees – hoping that the reader would get "into Ged's skin" and only then discover it wasn't a white one. (Le Guin 2004)

The same iconoclastic tendency is also present in Le Guin's later treatment of gender in her Earthsea cycle. Her secondary world begins with a male protagonist and with magic as the patriarchal right of men, epitomized by the Earthsea saying

“Weak as woman’s magic” or “Wicked as woman’s magic” (Le Guin 1968, 19). However, the introduction of Tenar in *The Tombs of Atuan* (1970) already showed a strong interest in gender roles and prejudices, which Le Guin revisited in perhaps the most difficult book in the series, *Tehanu* (1990). This latter “protest” novel can be read as a late reaction to the second wave of feminism, seeking to expose the fate of women in patriarchal societies and reveal the gender imbalance of traditional fantasy narratives. On the other hand, Le Guin’s last two additions to the Earthsea cycle (*Tales from Earthsea*, 2001 and *The Other Wind*, 2001) are much more attuned to what Elaine Showalter has called the “Female phase” in which “women reject both imitation and protest – two forms of dependency – and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art” (1985, 139). By bringing gender issues to the fore, Le Guin has challenged a strong set of fantasy stereotypes that present women as either damsels in distress or demonic enchantresses – both remnants of an ideology that continued from the Middle Ages to the Victorian era.

The Legacy of Tolkien’s “On Fairy-stories”: The Fantasy Author as Critic and (Self-)Theorist

Apart from inspiring an entire generation of twentieth-century writers to work within the fantasy genre, Tolkien’s legacy also extends to the fields of literary criticism and theorizing of the genre. His essay “On Fairy-stories” has become one of the most influential theoretical explorations of fantasy literature. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson note that:

“On Fairy-stories” is . . . [Tolkien’s] most explicit analysis of his own art. . . . It is the template on which he shaped his idea of sub-creation, and the manifesto in which he declared his particular concept of what fantasy is and how it ought to work. (*OFS* 9)

Tolkien’s terms “primary world” and “secondary world,” “sub-creation” and “eucatastrophe,” have become important theoretical tools to explore and analyze fantasy literature (see ch. 5). For example, Clute and Grant’s widely used definition of fantasy refers to “this world” and the creation of an “otherworld,” while their three stages of the narrative structure of fantasy consist of “bondage,” “recognition,” and “healing” or “eucatastrophe” (1997, 338–339), mirroring the structure of *The Lord of the Rings*, but also echoing Tolkien’s insistence on the centrality of the happy ending in fairy-stories and fantasy.

Most significantly, Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-stories” initiated a tradition of the fantasy writer as a critic and theorist of their own craft. It is notable that, for example, Le Guin and Wynne Jones have published critical analyses of *The Lord of the Rings*, but it is even more important that all fantasy authors explored in this chapter so far (and they are just some among many others) have published reflective essays on their own creative practice, attempting to define (and often defend) fantasy and discuss its

function and techniques. Le Guin's *The Language of the Night* (1979), Cooper's *Dreams and Wishes* (1996), Garner's *The Voice that Thunders* (1997), and Wynne Jones's more recent *Reflections on the Magic of Writing* (2012) collect a number of essays that each writer delivered as talks or published in various periodicals, and converge with Tolkien's themes and concerns in a number of ways.

Le Guin comes very close to Tolkien's idea of "sub-creation" by defining imagination as "play" of the mind, by which she means "recreation, re-creation, the recombination of what is known into what is new" (Le Guin 1979, 41). She also considers the fantasy setting (Tolkien calls it "Faërie" while Le Guin names it "Elfland") as "a real wilderness" where travelers "should not feel too safe" (Le Guin 1979, 84), very much akin to Tolkien's understanding of the same enchanted space as a "Perilous Realm" (*OFS* 32). For Le Guin, fantasy can be perilous as it touches on some fundamental human needs and concerns. Her Jungian approach to fantasy defines the main subject of the genre as the "spiritual journey" and the exploration of the psyche:

The events of a voyage into the unconscious are not describable in the language of rational daily life: only the symbolic language of the deeper psyche will fit them without trivializing them . . . fantasy is the natural, the appropriate, language for the recounting of the spiritual journey and the struggle of good and evil in the soul . . . Fantasy is the language of the inner self. (Le Guin 1979, 65, 68, 70)

Susan Cooper follows Le Guin's conception of the genre, claiming that fantasy allows the reader to move:

out of time, out of space, into the unconscious, that dreamlike world which has in it all the images and emotions accumulated since the human race began. We aren't escaping out, we're escaping in, without any idea what they may encounter. Fantasy is the metaphor through which we discover ourselves. (1996, 45)

The connection of fantasy and dreaming is further reinforced by Le Guin's and Cooper's perception of myth and dreaming as having similar functions and uses. Garner concurs by defining "myth" as "the dream-thinking of the people" (1997, 150). But Wynne Jones also reminds us that dreaming as a literary device cannot be legitimately used as a "mechanism" for fantasy, agreeing with Tolkien that this would be akin to "cheating" the reader, after compelling them to believe in the imaginary world presented to them (Wynne Jones 2012, 62; *OFS* 35).

In *OFS* Tolkien refers to fantasy in terms of Dasent's great "soup" made up of "bones" that include myth, legend, and fairy-tale (*OFS* 39). Cooper, Wynne Jones, Garner, and Le Guin all share Tolkien's understanding of fantasy as a genre that reuses and reshapes such traditional narratives. Garner comments especially on the way this material is used, insisting that fantasy should not just retell mythological tales, but make them belong to a new context (1968, 591). He thus comes very close to Tolkien's metaphor of the traditional source material as "the bones," but "the soup" being "the

story as it is served up by its author or teller” (*OFS* 40), and ultimately being what really matters.

Le Guin and Garner seem to agree with Tolkien on fantasy being a way of understanding reality, of removing the trite and familiar and experiencing reality in a different way. Le Guin maintains that fantasy is:

a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence. It is not antirational, but pararational; not realistic, but surrealistic, superrealistic, heightening of reality. (1979, 84)

Garner seems to concur, adding that fantasy is “an intensification of reality” (1997, 62) and “an attempt to come to terms with the world, not avoid it” (1968, 591). Cooper’s way of verbalizing the fantasy author’s ability to approach reality from a different angle is to describe it as “seeing around corners” (1996, 6).

Perhaps most importantly, all four writers – just like Tolkien – have been preoccupied with the function of fantasy, attempting to answer the question “what is fantasy for?” As discussed above, for Le Guin and Cooper, fantasy is about truth and the discovery of the inner self. For Garner it is about intensifying and illuminating reality. Wynne Jones comes closest to Tolkien’s own perception of the function of fantasy. She argues for the importance of what Tolkien has termed “Consolation of the Happy Ending” (*OFS* 75):

Fantasy certainly does provide comfort – and who is not entitled to a little comfort if they can get it? (Wynne Jones 2012, 65)

It is no accident that the majority of folk tales at least have a happy ending. Most of them are very deep-level blueprints of how to aim for the moon. The happy ending does not only give you gratification as you read it, but it also gives you hope that, just maybe, a fortunate outcome could be possible. Your brain likes that. It is built to *want* a solution. (Wynne Jones 2012, 142)

“And Wither Then?”: Fantasy in the Twenty-first Century (Pullman and Rowling)

Fantasy has continued to thrive at the turn of the twenty-first century. Perhaps the best known contemporary fantasy writers are Philip Pullman and J. K. Rowling. Often perceived as representatives of “prestigious” and “popular” fantasy writing respectively, both fantasists have taken the genre to new territories.

Philip Pullman’s trilogy *His Dark Materials* attempts a complex, intertextual narrative, responding to such canonical texts as William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Pullman also sees his fantasy world as a polemical reaction to the Christian undertones of Tolkien’s and C. S. Lewis’s fantasy, striving for

a humanist (rather than religious) understanding of the world (but see Hatten 2005 on Pullman's debt to Lewis and Tolkien). Like Tolkien's, Pullman's fantasy is concerned with ideas of morality (good vs. evil) and death and its aftermath, but his approach to these issues is that of humanist secularism rather than a religious or spiritual system.

Pullman's grand narrative unfolds in a multitude of alternative worlds, of which our primary world is just one. In the first book of the trilogy, Lyra's secondary world is portrayed as very like, yet unlike, our primary world. The very opening of the book captures the "hesitation" between what we recognize as familiar and what we find new and unexplained: "Lyra and her daemon moved through the darkening hall, taking care to keep to one side, out of sight of the kitchen" (Pullman 1995, 3). The reader is confronted with the idea of a "daemon" right from the first line, and is left to work out its significance in the next few pages. Lyra's world right from the start features a number of elements that we sort of recognize, but not quite: there is "ambaric" energy, "naphtha" lights, zeppelins and "chocolatl." Pullman's multiple worlds originate not only from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and God's potential capability to create more worlds out of the leftover matter of our universe (see Hatten 2005; Robinson 2004), but also from modern quantum physics and the theory of many worlds, according to which for every action in this universe a new universe is created with alternative actions.

At the same time, Pullman's many secondary worlds – just like Tolkien's – are populated by a great variety of wondrous and magical beings, from witches, armored bears and Specters, to angels and the evolutionary imaginative mulefa. Many of these beings are used as metaphors (compare, for example, Pullman's soul-eating Specters, and Rowling's soul-sucking Dementors, both of which are associated with modern understandings and perceptions of mental illness). Perhaps the best of those metaphors is the idea of the daemon, an external (and very much physical) manifestation of a person's soul or consciousness. Pullman, however, has used exactly this (perhaps his most inventive) creation, to argue that he does not write within the genre of fantasy literature at all. In an interview he has stated:

I have said that *His Dark Materials* is not fantasy but stark realism, and my reason for this is to emphasise what I think is an important aspect of the story, namely the fact that it is realistic, in psychological terms. I deal with matters that might normally be encountered in works of realism, such as adolescence, sexuality, and so on; and they are the main subject matter of the story – the fantasy (which, of course, is there: no-one but a fool would think I meant there is no fantasy in the books at all) is there to support and embody them, not for its own sake. Daemons, for example, might otherwise be only a meaningless decoration, adding nothing to the story: but I use them to embody and picture some truths about human personality which I couldn't picture so easily without them. I'm trying to write a book about what it means to be human, to grow up, to suffer and learn. My quarrel with much (not all) fantasy is it has this marvellous toolbox and does nothing with it except construct shoot-em-up games. Why shouldn't a work of fantasy be as truthful and profound about becoming an adult human being as the work of George Eliot or Jane Austen? (Pullman, n.d.)

In other interviews Pullman has voiced similar strong views against fantasy, but this is often coupled with qualifying what kind of fantasy works he finds interesting, enriching, worth reading, and writing. Pullman's opinion is not unlike Ursula Le Guin's view about "commodified" fantasy. It is intriguing that he prefers to align his work to realism, which is perceived as dealing with "serious" topics, and to assert that his work uses the "mechanisms" of fantasy to speak metaphorically about aspects of the human condition.

J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books follow in the tradition of much previous fantasy by showing an interest in the origins of evil and the themes of death and immortality. Tolkien's Melkor/Morgoth is a central character that allows an exploration of how evil originated in the world, and attempts to understand it. In the *Harry Potter* books, the figure of Lord Voldemort is originally taken for granted as a stereotypical villain or Dark Lord of fantasy literature, but the later books show a growing interest in his childhood and development. Just like Tolkien, Rowling addresses the question "where does evil come from?" This question is especially pertinent in the twenty-first century, when evil is becoming an increasingly difficult category to define and understand. Here we have a prime example of fantasy "mythologizing" contemporary anxieties and concerns, helping readers cope with fundamental questions of human existence.

In the same vein, Rowling's fantasy deals with metaphysical questions often left unaddressed by mainstream literature. As part of a recent interview with her, Geordie Greig claimed that "Death is the key to understanding J. K. Rowling. Her greatest fear – and she is completely unhesitant about this – is of someone she loves dying." He quotes her saying:

My books are largely about death. They open with the death of Harry's parents. There is Voldemort's obsession with conquering death and his quest for immortality at any price, the goal of anyone with magic. I so understand why Voldemort wants to conquer death. We're all frightened of it. (Rowling quoted in Greig 2006)

Rowling's statement is uncannily close to Tolkien's claim that *The Lord of the Rings* "is about Death and the desire for deathlessness" (*Letters* 262), usually understood as referring to the Elves' onerous immortality and the "sin" of the Men of Númenor. Rowling's "message" of mastering death by accepting it also resonates with Ursula Le Guin's *The Farthest Shore*, and the thinning of Earthsea's magic due to one wizard's desire for immortality.

Nevertheless, Rowling has also moved away from the Tolkienian paradigm and her other British predecessors by avoiding both immersive (high) and intrusion (low) fantasy, creating instead "a world-within-a-world, marked off by physical boundaries" (Gamble and Yates 2002, 122). Gamble and Yates acknowledge this as a third, separate sub-genre of fantasy, noting that:

Although there is an invisible barrier that Harry has to pass through in order to board the Hogwarts Express [platform 9¾], the school is still in our world. Muggles and

wizards inhabit the same space, although there are some areas that muggles cannot access because they do not have the necessary powers. (2002, 122)

At the same time, the *Harry Potter* books may conform to the usual narrative structure of fantasy literature, as described by Clute and Grant (bondage-recognition-healing) but Rowling also borrows freely from a great number of recognizable literary genres such as the school story, detective fiction, and the gothic (see Alton 2009), blending them successfully to create a hybrid type of fantasy that is often postmodern in the ways it contradicts readers' expectations.

Tolkien's legacy on modern fantasy continues to be strong, but his work is also slowly moving towards the position of a "canonical" author within the genre, with whom younger generations of fantasists have to grapple and write against. The best exemplars of fantasy after Tolkien, who include the writers explored in detail in this chapter, have managed to write within the fantasy tradition, as established by Tolkien, but also to critique, interrogate, and expand it. Garner, Cooper, and Wynne Jones have stayed within the framework of medieval intertexts, but have reused myth, legend, and folklore for their own purposes. Le Guin has excelled in immersive fantasy, but has challenged gender and race assumptions in Tolkienian fantasy. Pullman and Rowling have stayed away from the clear medieval trappings of previous fantasy by either using early modern or Romantic intertexts, or playing with a multitude of genres that are not traditionally part of the fantasy inventory. The best fantasy writers of the future will continue to pay homage to Tolkien, if only in their willingness to turn inwards and analyze their own creative practice, but will also continue to challenge what Tolkien has established as "canonical" and "traditional."

NOTES

- 1 Another fantasy author of the same period as Brooks, and also championed by the del Reys, was Stephen R. Donaldson, whose *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* (initially a trilogy, later enlarged by further novels in an ongoing series) seems to attempt a deliberate break from Tolkien by introducing an unlikeable hero who doubts the reality of the secondary world he enters. Thomas Covenant is a leper who is transported to the Land following a car accident. He refuses to believe his experience is real, and one of his first actions in the secondary world is raping a young girl. Clute and Grant have argued that Covenant's unbelief "is perhaps [Donaldson's] most original single invention. . . . It thoroughly exposes the artifact of the normal fantasy secondary world as a stage-set for the deeds of protagonists" (1997, 282). Nevertheless the Land, its characters, and its premises are very Tolkienian (see Shippey 2000 and 2007) while the focus on action and the trite writing style are very reminiscent of Brooks's "commodified" fantasy.
- 2 The use of the term "Celtic" to signify a homogeneous culture that spans centuries and unites geographically diverse areas (from the Iron Age Danube basin to modern Ireland and Wales) has been called into question by archaeologists and other scholars. Still, the term remains useful in linguistics and is still popularly used for folklore material from the "Celtic" fringes of Britain and certain areas of

the European continent. At the same time, Tolkien's strong words against "things Celtic" should not be taken to signify a complete

absence of Irish, Welsh, and Breton motifs from his mythology (see ch. 19 for a detailed discussion).

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24

Modernity: Tolkien and His Contemporaries

Anna Vaninskaya

Introduction¹

Few authors are taken out of context as persistently as popular ones, or with more impunity. If, by the vagaries of literary fate, J. R. R. Tolkien had remained in the recollection of posterity as the author of the 1912 play “The Bloodhound, the Chef, and the Suffragette” featuring “Detective Sexton Q. Blake-Holmes” (Carpenter 1977, 59), or the 1931 verse satire “Progress in Bimble Town,” critics would have no trouble placing him in the context of modern literature. But instead, Tolkien is known the world over as the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and this fact entails several related difficulties. Like his near-contemporary George Orwell, whose collected works run to some 20 volumes, but whose nation- and generation-spanning popularity is built on two books alone, Tolkien is regarded by mainstream literary critics and by the public at large as a two-hit wonder. In actual fact, of course, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* represent just a portion of his extensive creative output, the greater part of which remained unpublished during his lifetime and only saw the light after his death. Tolkien’s status is therefore somewhat analogous to that of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Emily Dickinson, though unlike the fame of these two poets – which has been built entirely on the posthumous legacy squabbled over by generations of editors – Tolkien’s reputation continues to be based on the two texts which appeared in print and achieved popularity while he was still alive.² And despite much illuminating recent criticism, it is still the case that no one outside the community of

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