Fantasy Fiction:
An Introduction

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What Is Fantasy Writing?

'When we decide that something is unreal, the real it isn't need not itself be very real . . .'[1]

Introduction

'Fantasy' is a word commonly disparaged by literary and nonliterary voices alike. Summed up in the dismissive phrase 'castles in the air,' fantasy takes on a kind of vertical trajectory that must be flattened, smoothed out, replaced with a more acceptable 'horizontal' out-look. So we are encouraged, in life, to keep our feet on the ground and our ambitions firmly anchored while fantasy writing guiltily reaches for 'blue sky.' What *is* fantasy writing? Utopia, allegory, fable, myth, science fiction, the ghost story, space opera, travelogue, the Gothic, cyberpunk, magic realism; the list is not exhaustive, but it covers most of the modes of fiction discussed in this book as 'fan-tasy.' Where fantasising is 'airy-fairy,' then, realism is 'grounded' (the recent colloquial meaning of this phrase underlying the positive implications of the distinction). It is, from this point, an easy slip-page to glide from 'realistic' to (literary) realism. Literary realism is certainly the type of fictional writing adopted most readily by the canon, seen as most fitting for serious or weighty subject matter. Certainly, it is difficult to imagine a work of fantasy attaining the *gravitas* of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1863–69). Then again, the same might be said for most other works of literary realism, and Milton's epic, *Paradise Lost* (1667), is far closer to fantasy than it is to real life, with Maureen Duffy going so far as to call it 'our longest and greatest romance work of science fiction.'[2]

What is it about literary realism that endows it with this innate privilege over fantasy? In essence, the advantage seems to reside in the perceived proximity between realism and 'the real.' The very term 'mimesis' (describing 'the imitative representation of nature or human behaviour'[3]) implies a documentary relationship between the world and its fictions, in the process endowing fiction with a false sense of truth. And yet, as specialists of literary realism remind us, there is no more a genuinely direct connection between realism and the real than there is between fantasy fiction and the real; fiction is fiction is fiction. As Lilian R. Furst puts it,

> The realists' insistence on equating truth with illusion [fiction] means that they could achieve their aims only on the level of pretense, by prevailing upon their readers to accept the validity of their contentions and to believe without reservation in the reality of the fictive worlds they created. They were remarkably successful in doing so because they were able largely to conceal the literariness of their practices. In a sense, therefore, the realist novel can be seen as a prodigious cover-up.[4]

The first proviso we must therefore accommodate in tracing out the question 'What is fantasy writing?' is one apparently bending back upon itself: all fiction is fantasy, insofar as narrative scenarios comprise an interiorised image (one having existence only in the author's head) projected outwards onto a blank page. Through the intervention of a reader, one who brings his or her own reading fantasies to that book, we have a dynamic meeting point giving shape to the unique pleasures inherent in every readerly encounter.

Fantasy, then, is the basis upon which all reading and writing is founded. In his 1908 essay 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,' Sigmund Freud identifies this process in the following terms:

> Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him? . . . [T]he creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously . . . while separating it sharply from reality.[5]

So far so good, but our aim in this book is to establish a specific type of writing that exists as fantasy in a more rigorously defined sense. In identifying this aspect of fantasy writing, we need to be clear that Freud's word 'phantasy' is not synonymous with the word 'fantasy' as it is employed here. 'Phantasy' is a psychoanalytic term referring to that storehouse of fears, desires, and daydreams that inspire all fictions equally and that has its ultimate source in the unconscious.[6]

I have noted that 'phantasy' is not the same as 'fantasy'; nevertheless, those same fears and longings upon which our unconscious is founded frequently find their most resonant surface manifestations in fantasy literature. Fantasy enjoys—along with the unconscious—a greater freedom from that overdetermination to order, organise, and package the chaotic set of experiences we call 'real life' than classical literary realism can. There is, however, a third element of interest in Freud's words, which is the natural relationship he identifies between children and phantasying. For those of us who work in the field of literary fantasy, we are all too aware of the tendency to dismiss fantasy writing as childish: children read fantasy; adults read realism. Nor would we wish to deny that some of the most influential fantasy narratives *were* written for children: Lewis Carroll's Alice books (1865 and 1871), Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937), C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–56), and most recently, of course, J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books (1997–present). Nevertheless, this is not the same as identifying all fantasy as innately childlike.

What literary fantasy and psychoanalysis have in common is their shared need to construct narratives to explain the utterly inexplicable: what drives us, what terrifies us and why, and what our greatest desires might be. In examining, as we will in this book, texts such as Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Orwell's *Animal Farm*, or Shelley's *Frankenstein* (among others), we know we are not reading children's literature. Nevertheless, it is perhaps *as* children that the kind of questions these narratives raise ('What do we most fear?' 'What is the most exotic place we can imagine?' 'Who are we?' 'What will become of us if . . . ?') loom largest, and when we are most receptive to them. As we mature,

the questions remain, but our philosophising on them becomes more complex and our response to their irresolution more intense. What we also realise is that while, as children, we pose these questions as individuals, as adults we know them to have a collective social and cultural significance. Similarly, although as children we believed there might be a precise geographical location where such dream worlds reside ('Second to the right and then straight on till morning'), on reaching adulthood we need to discern locations of a more philosophical kind. It is here that we return to our differentiation between vertical and horizontal axes. The desire to fly is a common childhood fantasy, one that narratives such as *Peter Pan* exploit to good effect. But the challenge facing fantasy writing for adults is to take that vertical trajectory and give it a more grounded dimension while still enabling it to take flight. One of the means by which it does so is in its use of the horizon itself.

Beyond the Horizon

In his fine essay on utopia, Louis Marin examines the horizon as a symbol of simultaneous limit and infinity: 'The conquest through the discovery of mountain landscape at the end of the eighteenth century, of higher and higher viewpoints, moved the horizon further and further back, until it vanished . . .'[8] Though capable of being pinpointed with mathematical precision, absolute in its refusal to allow access beyond it, the horizon can never be reached, for it continually recedes as we approach. For Marin, this is the essence of utopia: a vista onto unknowable promise. It is in this same complex relationship between geometric precision and an utter sense of the impossible that the essence of fantasy fiction in general is born: a hyperbolic, endlessly expansive desire for the uncontainable, trapped within the constraints of a literary genre in which narrative closure is ruthlessly effected.

Though not all utopias are fantasy narratives as such (More's, as we shall see in Chapter 5, is not, and critics such as Louis James happily embrace Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* [1719] as a utopia, though it is difficult to accommodate under the generic term 'fantasy'), it is easy to see how those early encounters with 'scientific investigation[s] of the habitat and lifestyles of alien peoples'[9] paved the way

for later subgenres such as science/speculative fiction. As James himself observes, one of the many intertextual influences *Crusoe* can be seen to have had on subsequent adventure narratives includes the making of cult sci-fi films such as *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (1964).[10] When, as is so often the case, fantasy utopias do amalgamate fictive futurism with a utopian rereading of ancient mythological sources such as Eden or classical Greek legends, they become enabled to carve out spaces no longer beholden to time, allowing for a thorough deconstruction of the basic structural principles of realism.

Many of the points Marin makes about sea travel are equally valid for space travel, so much of the terminology of space navigation being of maritime origin. Hence the notion of a journey into the unknown, interrupted by forces unforeseen, epitomises the plot of H. G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). Whilst by no means a 'no place' (not least because the moon is a specific location familiar to us all—if only from a distance), the difference between the moon and the Earth, combined with a perceived difficulty in the ability to return to Earth, results in Earth being considered utopian by contrast in the minds of the central protagonists:

> 'Daylight!' cried I. 'Daybreak, sunset, clouds, and windy skies! Shall we ever see these things again?'
> As I spoke, a little picture of our world seemed to rise before me, bright and little and clear, like the background of some old Italian picture. The Sky that changes, and the sea that changes, and the hills and the green trees and the towns and cities shining in the sun. Think of a wet roof at sunset . . . Think of the windows of a westward house!'[11]

It is perhaps primarily when horizon meets ocean or space, rather than land, that utopianism fulfils its most alluring potential, for like water running through our hands, no matter how hard we try to shape it, horizons trace the point at which sea strives to become air but fails to be either. In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Romantic Gothic ballad 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1797–98), the shooting of the albatross propels the mariner and his crew into an obsessive relationship with that imaginary line of navigation:

All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody Sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the Moon.

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.
(lines 111–22)

While the horizon is literally absent for Coleridge's reader (no mention being made of it in these lines), its presence, paradoxically, is insisted upon through the immense but still ocean framed by the horizon in the same manner in which the 'painted ship' and 'painted ocean' are framed by (again, literally absent) wood. Marin identifies a more characteristic pattern emerging in literature from this period:

> The limitless horizon is one of the main characteristics of the Romantic landscape, and seems to be related to the attempt to display transcendence: at this extremity it seems possible to glimpse the other side of the sky, a 'beyond-space' which can be encountered through the poetic and rhetorical figure of twilight—through which a bridge is established between the visible and the invisible. Then beyond the horizon, in the imagination, appear Utopias.[12]

Arguably, faced with the uncanny aspects of Coleridge's poem, it is the view across the 'horizon' into the delights of marriage that proffers (no place!) the possibility of bliss. The encounter takes place on the very brink of this new world: the ceremony over, 'The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide ... The guests are met, [and] feast is set' (lines 5 and 7). Hence the wedding guest can see the party but is prevented from joining in. Stuck upon the boundaries of that vision of promise, by the end of the poem he turns away

without partaking, and 'went like one that hath been stunned ... A sadder and a wiser man' (lines 622 and 624).

Nor is this vision of the horizon only applicable to spatial interpretation; it also has relevance to our understanding of time. As Susan Stewart puts it, a typical and contradictory pattern describes our shared relationship with time whereby, on the one hand, we 'see events as discrete, having discernible beginnings and endings,' while on the other we see 'time itself as infinite, beyond any knowledgeable origin or end.'[13] Similarly, left to its own devices there is an inherent structural paradox in fantasy writing. While it projects us beyond the horizon on the level of content, creating what J. R. R. Tolkien calls the 'Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible,'[14] it harnesses us within clearly defined constraints on the level of narrative structure. Multiple 'Secondary' worlds may proliferate, but the boundaries established around those worlds must remain constant in order for the narrative to succeed. This static identification enabled Vladimir Propp, in 1928, to execute an entire project dependent upon identifying a finite list of what he calls key narrative 'functions' within the fairy tale. Basing his work on a scientific breakdown of 450 fairy tales, he discovered he could identify a set of 150 such functions spanning the entire corpus. Paring down these functions, he claimed they cohere into one single common function pairing, prohibition versus violation or, as he refers to it elsewhere, the 'principle of freedom' set against 'little use of this freedom.'[15] Herein lies the difference between modes of genre fantasy such as fairy tale, science fiction, fable, and allegory and more disruptive, open-ended narratives of the literary fantastic such as magic realism and certain types of supernatural/ghost narrative. Where genre fantasy imposes absolute closure, the fantastic opens up onto Marin's 'fraying edge.'

This sense of fraying can be usefully developed in relation to Tzvetan Todorov's pivotal understanding of the literary fantastic, a mode of writing distinct from genre fantasy in two main ways. First, where genre fantasy deals in enclosed worlds, the literary fantastic deals in disruptive impulses. Second, where genre fantasy implies complicity on the part of readers, the literary fantastic actively seeks out reader hesitancy as a means of building in competing readings

of the text, typically revolving around two choices, the psychological or the supernatural. As Marin expounds his theory of the limit, he brings in a more complex sense of the finite. Taking the Latin term *limes* ('a path or a passage, a way between two fields'), he continues by noting what happens to this sense of a limit, once two distinct edges track each other without meeting: 'The limit [becomes] at the same time a way and a gap . . .'[16] In maintaining plural readings, possible choices track each other—perhaps on occasions veering towards one or another—but while hesitancy remains, so does this fraying edge of semantic possibility.

How, then, can texts as diverse as the biblical Book of Genesis, Tennyson's poem 'The Lady of Shalott,' Orwell's novel *Animal Farm*, J. M. Barrie's play *Peter Pan*, and Bunyan's allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress* all shelter under the same literary umbrella, fantasy? The answer lies in the fact that they share two primary characteristics. First, as already implied, they deal in the unknowableness of life. A reader of Doris Lessing's realist first novel, *The Grass is Singing* (1950), may find she can relive at least an element of that literary experience by reading up on or even visiting present-day Zimbabwe, but none of us can holiday in the Garden of Eden. A child who delights in Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877) may try to recapture that pleasure through learning to ride, but no reader of *Animal Farm* can teach beasts to speak, any more than they can make pigs fly. To reiterate: fantasy sets up worlds that genuinely exist *beyond* the horizon, as opposed to those parts of our own world that are located beyond that line of sight but to which we might travel, given sufficient means.

Epic Space

Second, a fantasy narrative threatens infinity in the manner described by Stewart in *On Longing*: it conveys 'a world not necessarily known through the senses, or lived experience.'[17] One supreme instance of this lies in the potency of legends and myths, the primary instance of which—at least in the Anglo-American tradition—are those relating to the tales of King Arthur. Indeed, there is a sense in which Arthur himself *is* a fantasy narrative: lacking any clear anchor point in historical reality, writers and readers return endlessly to

Arthurian legend as if driven by the impossible need for closure. A paradox is clearly at work here. Though there are those like Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman, who have embarked on a quest to find the historical figure behind the legend (in their case, painstakingly tracing it back to Owain Ddantgwyn 'the Bear,' a sixth-century Prince of Gwynedd in North Wales), legend it remains.[18] In this dynamic, we see a replication of longing and miniaturism, for by taming Arthur in text after text, we 'cut him down to size' and at the same time render him larger than life. Explication also miniaturises Arthur. Phillips and Keatman draw attention to the fact that 'their' Arthur came from the Votadini, a tribe sympathetic to the Romans at a time when the Britons as a whole were divided. As such, they suggest he

> may well have adopted a name which personified both [Briton and Roman] sympathies in order to avoid any implication of favouring one faction more than the other. If his tribal title was the Bear, he may not only have used the Brythonic word *Arth*, but also the Latin word for bear, *Ursus*. His original title may therefore have been *Arthursus*, later shortened to *Arthur* . . . [19]

Here, however, pinning King Arthur down to one individual identity comes immediately into conflict with the endowment of a battle name. For if Arthur is a battle name, it further contributes to his larger-than-life hyperbolic status, in the same way that pseudonyms such as the Black Panther or the Yorkshire Ripper mythologise serial killers. It is perhaps through this concertina-like desire to aggrandise and reduce, accompanied by the inability to reconcile both, that Arthur becomes the stuff of dreams, shifting out of focus however hard we peer. Hence, satisfactorily indistinct, Arthur can become his own text, across which we inscribe projections of heroism, cultural struggle, leadership, and romance. For (and here is the crux of the 'beyond the horizon' aspect of fantasy) despite impressive studies such as Phillips and Keatman's, the quest for Arthur must remain open, fantasy ending at the moment of realisation.

How, then, do we reconcile this view of Arthur with the fantasy formula already offered, in which each world functions as a discrete entity in order for the formula to work effectively? To some extent,

though individual texts may satisfy the closure dynamic, once seen as a drive to read (or write) the next (hence more definitive) Arthurian narrative, sequences of texts accumulate in a manner that complicates the fantasy model. In these terms, the enforced closure of the formula exists in tension with the expansive elements of all our fantasies (positive and negative). According to J. R. R. Tolkien, the most appropriate metaphor to use to describe the diachronic composition of Arthurian legend is that of the soup cauldron simmering on the hob: the essence remains the same, but the precise flavour and ingredients change.[20] As history mingles with myth and faerie, the result is a composite, the original an impossible quest. From here it is easy to see how Arthurian fantasy changes shape to accommodate its readers and, in addition, the societies they represent: 'King Arthur has always been many things to many people . . . from [him] being an extra-terrestrial to his being the king of Atlantis . . . and in the 1980s, King Arthur was again sensationalised in the wake of the "Dungeons and Dragons" craze.'[21]

This lack of historical specificity is a particular feature of epic fantasy in general. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy, as its recent adaptation for cinema reveals, has a similar aptitude for capturing the shifting preoccupations of successive generations of readers—Tolkien was named 'Author of the Century' in the year 2000 by a readers' poll in the UK. Peter Jackson's recent films have fuelled the popular appeal of the series to even more exaggerated heights. As Michael Coren observes, the initial short trailer for The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (New Line Cinema, 2001) was 'downloaded more than 1.7 million times. That was twice the number of downloads for the trailer for Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace, which had previously held the record . . .'[22] One of the reasons Lord of the Rings allows for such reinterpretations is that its vast cartographic canvas (another version of elongation) opens across epic space in the same way that Star Wars opens across outer space, or Arthur opens across time. Like the Arthurian tales, it is specific enough in its vision of heroism, comradeship, and corruption to mirror the world we know, while being general enough for us to flesh out the detail with the vision of monstrosity most pertinent at the time.

In mirroring our own world, we return briefly to realism and the role played by reflection in that form. As Furst observes, 'In attribut-

ing to both mirror and eye the capacity for faithful representation, the realists wanted to have it both ways, by ascribing transparency to the reflection and so inscribing it with truthfulness.'[23] In fantasy writing, mirrors draw attention to themselves, and in so doing, they become simultaneously more compelling and their glassy surfaces more effectively breached. In fact, what they take on is a kind of architectural function, offering an aperture into a second fictive world that makes the cinema screen one of its most effective canvases. In turning, now, to consider the development of fantasy writing across the ages, the mirror's reflections become contemplative, tracing a path from classical antiquity to the twenty-first century, while evoking possibilities of a perfect future.

Notes

1. Irving Goffman, Frame Analysis, 560–561. Cited in Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic the Souvenir, the Collection (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 25.

2. Maureen Duffy, The Erotic World of Faery (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), 175.

3. Collins English Dictionary, Third Edition (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1991).

4. Lilian R. Furst, All Is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 9–10.

5. Sigmund Freud, 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' in the Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 14, Art and Literature, Albert Dickson, ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 129–141 (p. 131–132).

6. For a fuller discussion of the interrelationship between 'phantasy' and 'fantasy,' see Lucie Armitt, Theorising the Fantastic (London: Arnold, 1996), 39–42.

7. 'Peter Pan, Or the Boy Who Would Not Grown Up,' Act I, in The Plays of J. M. Barrie in One Volume (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928), 29.

8. Louis Marin, 'The Frontiers of Utopia,' in Utopias and the Millennium, Krishan Kumar and Stephen Bann, eds. (London: Reaktion Books, 1993), 7–16 (p. 7).

9. Louis James, 'From Robinson to Robina, and Beyond: Robinsón Crusoe as a Utopian Concept,' in Utopias and the Millennium, Krishan Kumar and Stephen Bann, eds. (London: Reaktion Books, 1993), 33–45 (p. 34).

10. Robinson Crusoe on Mars (dir. Byron Haskin), Paramount, 1964. See James, 'From Robinson to Robina,' 45.

11. H. G. Wells, The First Men in the Moon (1901; London: Everyman, 1993), 100.

12. Marin, 'The Frontiers of Utopia,' 7–8.

13. Stewart, On Longing, 117.

14. J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories,' in *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 1–81 (p. 49).

15. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Laurence Scott, trans. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 64, 111.

16. Marin, 'The Frontiers of Utopia,' 9.

17. Stewart, *On Longing*, 38, 44.

18. Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman, *King Arthur: The True Story* (London: Century, 1992).

19. Phillips and Keatman, *King Arthur*, 128.

20. 'Speaking of the history of stories . . . we may say that the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story, has always been boiling. . . . It seems fairly plain that Arthur . . . boiled for a long time, together with many other older figures and devices, of mythology and Faeries, and even some other stray bones of history . . .' J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories,' 27–29 passim.

21. Phillips and Keatman, *King Arthur*, 3.

22. Michael Coren, *J. R. R. Tolkien: The Man Who Created The Lord of the Rings* (Basingstoke: Boxtree, 2001), 4.

23. Furst, *All Is True*, 9.

Chapter Two

Fantasy as Timeline

Introduction

With the exception of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), all of the fantasy narratives discussed in any detail in this book are written after 1800. However, this is not to suggest that fantasy is, in any way, predominantly a post-1800 narrative phenomenon—quite the reverse. In fact, it is with the introduction of narrative fiction in novel form around this time that fantasy first starts to become surmounted by the newly emergent narrative realism. This chapter therefore briefly examines some of the key pre-1800 concepts that have shaped and conditioned post-1800 fantasy, concluding with one of the key debates provoked—around 1800—by an element of critical hostility towards the new realism: the relationship between fancy and imagination as discussed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his 'Biographia Literaria.'

The Origins of Modern Fantasy

Whether it be the gods of ancient Greece or the Yahweh of the Old Testament, writings of the gods typically employ narrative modes we would now call 'fantasy':

> . . . Mercury prepared to obey his exalted Father's command. First he laced on his feet those golden sandals with wings to carry him high at the speed of the winds' swift blast over ocean and over land alike. Then he took his wand; the wand with which he calls the pale souls forth from the

Nether World and sends others down to grim Tartarus, gives sleep, and takes sleep away, and unseals eyes at death: So shepherding the winds before him with his wand, he swam through the murk of the clouds.[1]

The relationship between the real and the unreal during the classical period was far more fluid than our own rather prosaic determination to assert reality at all costs. We may well attach much of the strength of fantasy in the writings of the ancients to the fact that mythology was, during that time, wrestling with ideas that may have appeared monstrous in scale. As Kathryn Hume puts it, these myths 'assert values that cannot be validated scientifically, and the stories they tell are most decidedly not verifiable—creation, activities of the gods, the deeds of semi-divine beings and culture heroes.' By extension, this has an effect upon character construction: 'Displaced from the mythic level, we find tales of men, many of whom still deal with marvelous adversaries since such enemies are necessary to define the heroes as heroes.'[2]

Intriguingly, however, the encounter with fabulous monsters can also work to render the central character heroic in a more modern sense: not by setting him apart from the rest of humanity, but by strengthening the common ground between him and the reader. It is, in fact, this aspect of heroism, rather than the cosmological significance of the gods, that tends to be conveyed in more recent writings. Hence, in John Bunyan's comparatively recent allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1684), one of the ways in which Christian maintains his status as Everyman is through the figurative implication that each of us must be prepared to face our share of periods in the Slough of Despond and encounters with whatever constitutes, for us, our personal Apollyon, in order that we might reach the resolution and consolations of our Celestial City. To evoke an obvious comparison, Christian's pattern is identical to Frodo's in *The Lord of the Rings*.

While Bunyan happily employs the traditional fantasy device of the dream narrative for his Christian allegory, it is interesting that, though the Old Testament section of the Bible is full of wonderful fables and dreams, the New Testament insists on realism, almost to the exclusion of any other mode of writing.[3] This overemphasis on

realism remains a strong facet of contemporary Christianity—particularly in its more evangelical guises. So the Harry Potter series continues to receive a lot of adverse criticism from Christians anxious about its apparent promotion of magic to an avid generation of child readers. (As an aside, I once knew a Christian couple who refused to allow their children to believe in Santa Claus, fearing that when they discovered Santa Claus to be 'made-up' they would believe Jesus was 'made-up,' too.) Hume reads this phenomenon more historically, blaming much of the current prejudice against fantasy writing on early Christian works that, she claims, 'unconcernedly perpetuated mimetic assumptions,' partly as a reaction against the fantasy favoured in the pagan myths of Greece and Rome.[4]

And yet, of course, without the significant presence of equally appreciative Christian fantasists there would be no *Pilgrim's Progress*, no *Chronicles of Narnia*, and no Lord of the Rings trilogy either. The view of J. R. R. Tolkien, a 'devout and orthodox Catholic,'[5] is clear and in direct contravention to those who deem fantasy to somehow imperil the Christian faith: in its determination to reach beyond the limits of the real, fantasy takes us closer to the act of divine creation than mimesis can possibly allow, hence becoming a form of devotion in its own right. To put it in Tolkien's own words, fantasy empowers a storyteller to divorce 'green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood,' cloak him—or herself in 'an enchanter's power;' and in remixing and creating anew, 'put a deadly green upon a man's face and produce a horror . . . cause woods to spring with silver leaves . . . and put hot fire into the belly of the cold worm . . . [I]n such "fantasy" . . . new form is made; Faërie begins; man becomes a sub-creator.'[6]

Early Modern Fantasy

It is presumably this ability of fantasy to create the world anew that makes it, during the early modern period, such a valuable technique for certain key canonical writers. William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1623), for example, parallels the discoveries 'really' taking place in the New World at the time by placing a new island paradise centre stage. In the process, the central protagonist, Prospero, flaunts his

power to effect freedom and slavery in one fell swoop, freeing the airy spirit Ariel from the 'foul witch Sycorax,' who had trapped him physically within a cloven pine, but only at the expense of enslaving him anew, rendering Ariel the conduit for many of his 'charms' (Act I, Scene 2, ll.257–99). Though classified by Shakespearean scholars as a 'pastoral drama,' *The Tempest*, in its wholesale use of magic and faerie—not to mention its masque elements drawing on the gods of classical antiquity—is clearly a work of fantasy as we understand the term. And like the later fairy stories, Shakespeare bases his play on other, more popular, ancient oral literatures, 'saga, ballad . . . and folktale.'[7] Unlike *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1600) or the contemporaneous *Twelfth Night* (1623), however, both of which also employ faerie as part of their dramatic foundation, there is a developed sense of the sinister in *The Tempest*, conjuring occult forms to undermine the paradisiacal, creating a sense of haunted space. Faerie is, as Maureen Duffy reminds us, available 'in manifestations of light and dark, beautiful and ugly, enchanting and terrifying. The Fairy Queen is balanced by the witch; the Fairy King [Prospero?] by the devil . . .'[8]

On a far grander scale, then, we see similar developments in the warring factions between good and evil filtered through a framework of fantasy in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). As Margaret Kean puts it, through the employment of fantasy Milton is enabled to convey 'the world in its creational perfection' whereby, as part of that process, 'the poem discovers a new space where, freed from the limitations of mortal existence . . . an ideal fiction can be developed.'[9] Immediately, we see the connections with Tolkien's vision of the 'sub-creator,' also embodied wholesale in Shakespeare's demonic Prospero. As Duffy observes, part of the ambivalence in evidence in literary and aesthetic representations of faeries involves their taking on a religious guise as 'rebel angels who didn't fall all the way when they were turned out of heaven'[10]: the comparison with Milton's Satan and his fall from Paradise is self-evident.

When we come to consider some of the similarities in the use of imagery between *The Tempest* and *Paradise Lost*, one of the first traits that springs to mind is the 'vertical' factor with which we opened Chapter One. Ariel is, as his name suggests, of the air, and to some extent, he is a product of those elemental surroundings—

by which I mean that much of *The Tempest* (as its very name suggests) concerns the potency of wind-borne things. Thus it is difficult to separate Ariel from the 'music of the spheres,' described in Act III, Scene 2, as 'Sounds and sweet airs' (l.134) that haunt and torment Caliban. Similarly, in *Paradise Lost, Book IV*, we are made as aware of the 'gentle gales / Fanning their odiferous wings' (ll.156–157) around Eden as we are of the equally wind-borne Satan, who 'flew, and on the tree of life / The middle tree and highest there that grew, / Sat like a cormorant . . .' (ll.194–196).

As Duffy tells us, the presence of winged creatures in faerie guise is a new phenomenon during this period. Puck, Ariel's equivalent in the earlier Shakespearean fantasy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is devoid of wings, and in the opening dialogue between Puck and a Fairy in Act II, Scene 1, of that play, Puck asks, 'Whither wander you?' (l.1), receiving the reply 'I do wander everywhere . . . And I serve the Fairy Queen, / To dew her orbs upon the green / . . . I must go seek some dew-drops here, / And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear' (ll.6–15 passim). In other words, these are land-based forms, whereas the later Ariel is defined by or in flight. Duffy reads this shift entirely performatively, citing the influence of the flamboyant architect and stage designer Inigo Jones upon early modern staging techniques and subsequent play texts. Under Jones's influence, the stage could, for the first time, become visually transformed into 'Rocky wastes, moving waves, clouds descending with personages . . . ,'[11] the dramatic possibilities of which Shakespeare was quick to grasp. Once fairies were winged, moreover, the ease with which religious imagery could become attached to them, and hence the combined power of pagan and Christian mythology, helped to render their new physical form irresistible.

'Tree' Versus 'Leaf': Reading the Present Through the Past

From the early modern period, Duffy moves her encyclopaedic study forward again, taking in the eighteenth century and such mock epic poems as Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock' (1712–14) with its own winged forms in the shape of 'airy elves' (l.31) and 'Sylphs [who] aloft repair, / And sport and flutter in the field of air' (ll.65–66)

before rejoining the core territory of this book in the form of *Gulliver's Travels* and on to the emerging Gothic novel. There is, however, no one easily defined sense of the progression of fantasy through the ages, because of the commingling of cultural and historical influences that rise and fall at any one point. For instance, Tolkien's sense of the development that became nineteenth- and twentieth-century fantasy differs in many ways from that of more contemporary critics. Where commentators such as Bruno Bettelheim or Jack Zipes[12] come to fantasy/faerie in the form of fairy tales, through European sources such as the German *Märchen* (later collected by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm as *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* [1812–15]), or Charles Perrault's earlier French collection, *Contes du Ma Mère L'Oye* (*Tales of Mother Goose*) (1697), Tolkien traces a lineage through Old Norse legends, Anglo-Saxon tales, and on through Arthurian myth. From this genealogy, Tolkien dwells on three aspects of lineage: '*independent evolution* (or rather *invention*) . . . *inheritance* from a common ancestry; and *diffusion* at various times from one or more centres.' As he acknowledges, however, 'All three things . . . have evidently played their part in producing the intricate web of Story. It is now beyond all skill but that of the elves to unravel it.'[13]

Tolkien was, in his 'dayjob,' the Rawlinson and Bosworth Chair in Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University, his actual field of study being Old and Middle English.[14] It is therefore by no means surprising that, with the exception of contemporary popular Arthurian novels, it is primarily through his work that the ongoing relevance of the medieval period to the field of twentieth- and (via Jackson's cinematic versions) twenty-first century fantasy is maintained. In the Lord of the Rings trilogy, Middle Earth seems to coincide with the Middle Ages, an era of horsebacked conflict and tribal warfare. This also accords with the dates set towards the end of *Volume III, The Return of the King* (1955) where the battle to secure the Shire once more is titled 'the Battle of Bywater, 1419, the last battle fought in the Shire, and the only battle since the Greenfields, 1147 . . .'[15] As we will see in Chapter 3, even medieval dream vision continues to have currency in his work. But there is more to this than the employment of medieval themes within fiction. Even the title of his critical book *Tree and Leaf* retains connections with what Angus

Fletcher refers to as 'the medieval allegory of virtue and vice,' which takes its shape from the tree:

> Thus the parable of the two trees is used during the twelfth century to the point of threadbareness, the reason being that the highly articulated structure of the growth of nature could lodge complicated systems of abstraction and their upward development could be interpreted step by step— or rather, branch by branch.[16]

In Tolkien's *Tree and Leaf* (or at least the part of it encapsulated by the essay 'On Fairy-Stories'), we could argue that the 'tree' constitutes the etymological genealogy of fantasy, while the 'leaf' constitutes its surface manifestation as narrative. Tolkien foliates the tree in the following manner:

> We read that *Beowulf* 'is only a version of *Dat Erdmänneken*'; that '*The Black Bull of Norroway* is *Beauty and the Beast*,' or 'is the same story as *Eros and Psyche*' . . . Statements of that kind [i.e. tree] express . . . some element of truth; but they are not true in a fairy-story sense . . . It is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details [i.e. leaf] of a story . . . that really count.[17]

In the context of more modern narratives Fletcher substitutes the word *leaf* with *ornamentation*, but with the proviso that, in this sense, ornamentation need not be aesthetically pleasing: 'The horrid scales and joints of the metamorphosed Gregor Samsa are . . . no less ornaments than the invented trappings of Swift's Flying Island . . . or the heraldic costuming of knights in *The Faerie Queene*.'[18] In other words, to ornament is to 'flesh out,' with all the beauty, gore, filth, or corpulence the average body can muster.

Phantasm Versus Fantasia

We know that a different relationship existed between literary representation, reality, and fantasy during the medieval period, largely due to the extensive faith held in the supernatural (both divine and

demonic) at the time. As Mark Philpott observes, 'In the Middle Ages the dead were universally present with the living,' to the extent that there was even legislation covering the walking of ghosts.[19] However, rather than revealing an atavistic fascination, via Augustine the Middle Ages conceived an understanding of haunting that meshes with far more recent debates about psychology than we find in, for example, many nineteenth-century narratives.

> For [Augustine] memory was vital to cognition, and fantasies were vital to the working of memory . . . Among the terms Augustine used for such images were 'phantasia' and 'phantasma' . . . Fantasies were mental images of objects perceived, products of sensory motion and counter-motion, and themselves motions of the mind . . . Phantasms, 'like images of images,' were the result of memory working on itself; they were the vital link between memory and the creative usage of the imagination . . .[20]

It is the word *phantasm* that enables the slippage between meanings here, for it can refer to either a phantom, an 'illusory perception,' or 'objective reality as distorted by perception.'[21] As we move through these three distinct nuances, we perceive that the sense of empirical reality lessens to accommodate a matching increase in creative cognitive function. As fantasia and phantasm progress, therefore, we return to a similar pattern to that identified with Louis Marin's 'fraying edge' in Chapter 1, namely 'a path or a passage, a way between two fields,' which may result in the two veering towards or away from each other without actually meeting.[22] Hence, in Philpott's quotation, *phantasia* and *phantasma* are treated as synonyms, though in fact *fantasia* is a term we more commonly associate with music.

Not so during the period of Romanticism, however, in which Samuel Taylor Coleridge returned to the term *phantasia* (deriving from the Greek) and compared it to another apparent synonym, the Latin term *imaginatio*. Just as I am arguing for a distinction between *phantasm* and *phantasia*, Coleridge saw *phantasia* and *imaginatio* as 'two distinct and widely different faculties.' Once we examine the nature of his distinction carefully, however, we realise it is not one of etymology but of perceived quality: 'Milton had a highly imagi-

native, Cowley a very fanciful mind.'[23] The distinction, then, lies in these two writers' respective relationships with the literary canon and, by inference, *imaginatio* takes precedence over *phantasia*. As we trace these two lines, we see that, whereas in the Middle Ages fantasy's etymological ancestry was derived from high philosophy, by the start of the 1800s it had been brought down to earth. Though Cowley is no more a writer of fantasy than Milton (in fact, rather less so), the linguistic affinity between *phantasia* and *fantasy* is as clear as the negative implications the latter carries.

In *Tree and Leaf*, Tolkien tries to reverse this negativity, combining within *phantasia* two further aspects, 'the Sub-creative Art in itself and a quality of strangeness and wonder in the Expression . . . a quality essential to fairy-story.' It is here that Tolkien's use of the terms *Primary* and *Secondary Worlds* comes to the fore, which he employs in association with a kind of vertical trajectory: 'That the images are of things not in the primary world . . . is a virtue not a vice. Fantasy (in this sense) is, I think, not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent.'[24] The terms *phantasia* and *fantasy* are not always direct or even indirectly synonymous, of course. D. H. Lawrence writes his *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) without making a single recourse to fantasy, but in his case the inheritance comes through Freud and equates with that understanding of phantasy we outlined in Chapter 1, namely 'a psychoanalytic term referring to that storehouse of fears, desires, and daydreams that inspire all fictions equally and that has its ultimate source in the unconscious.' In other instances, however, *fantasia* and *fantasy* have greater synergy.

Take, for example, Walt Disney's animation film *Fantasia* (1940), a film playing directly on the slippage between the musical nuances of the term and *fantasy* in the sense that we are tracing it in this book. Disney's animation is constructed around eight individual movements, many of which have a natural affinity with fantasy, such as Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* suite, Paul Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, and Ponchielli's 'Dance of the Hours.' Even, however, in the case of pieces that might have a more natural affinity with classical realism (such as Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony), Disney places a clear fantasy interpretation upon them. So Beethoven's composition is interpreted through a landscape of Arcadia, complete with

satyrs, unicorns, centaurs, winged horses, and a range of gods from Zeus to Hephaestus. *Whimsy*, then, becomes *fancy*, before effecting a slippage directly into fantasy. In fact, Disney's *Fantasia*—with its window onto fairy and folklore, magic and superstition, animal allegory, classical mythology, the Gothic, the ghost narrative, and epic fantasy—offers perhaps the closest parallel, within the boundaries of one single work, to the range of fantasy covered in this book. But irrespective of the manner in which fantasy—and its derivations—has shifted in perception, literary status, or terminology over the centuries, it cannot and does not exist at all until read. With that in mind, let us turn to the role of reading in fantasy.

Notes

1. Virgil, *The Aeneid*, W. F. Jackson Knight, trans. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), 104.

2. Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1984), 33.

3. The obvious exception to this rule, of course, is the Book of Revelation, in which fantasy is given free rein, it being a vision of an apocalyptic future.

4. Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, 6.

5. Flieger, *A Question of Time*, 96.

6. J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories,' in *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 1–81 (pp. 22–23).

7. Frank Kermode, 'Introduction' to William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (The Arden Shakespeare, London: Methuen, 1964), xi–xciii (p. lxiii).

8. Maureen Duffy, *The Erotic World of Faery* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), 89.

9. Margaret Kean, 'Dreaming of Eve: Edenic Fantasies in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*,' in *Writing and Fantasy*, Ceri Sullivan and Barbara White, eds. (London: Longman, 1999), 77–94 (p. 77).

10. Duffy, *Erotic World of Faery*, 185.

11. Duffy, *Erotic World of Faery*, 174.

12. See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991) and Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 1983).

13. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories,' 20–21.

14. According to Tom Shippey, 'Anglo-Saxon' was a term Tolkien disliked, preferring 'Old English.' *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), xii.

15. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings, Volume III: The Return of the King* (1955; London: HarperCollins, 1999), 357. Further quotations from this novel will be referenced within the main body of the text, accompanied by the abbreviation *RK*.

16. Adolf Katzellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art* (London, 1939), cited in Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), 133–134.

17. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories,' 18–19.

18. Fletcher, *Allegory*, 143–144.

19. Mark Philpott, 'Haunting the Middle Ages,' in Sullivan and White, *Writing and Fantasy*, 48–61 (p. 48).

20. Philpott, 'Haunting the Middle Ages,' 53.

21. *Collins English Dictionary, Third Edition*, 1991.

22. Louis Marin, 'The Frontiers of Utopia,' in *Utopias and the Millennium*, Krishan Kumar and Stephen Bann, eds. (London: Reaktion Books, 1993), 7–16 (p. 9).

23. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Biographia Literaria, Chapter 4,' in *The Portable Coleridge*, I. A. Richards, ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 465–481 (pp. 476, 477).

24. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories,' 47, 48.