EDWARD JAMES AND FARAH MENDLESOHN

Introduction

Fantasy is not so much a mansion as a row of terraced houses, such as the one that entranced us in C. S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew* with its connecting attics, each with a door that leads into another world. There are shared walls, and a certain level of consensus around the basic bricks, but the internal décor can differ wildly, and the lives lived in these terraced houses are discrete yet overheard.

Fantasy literature has proven tremendously difficult to pin down. The major theorists in the field – Tzvetan Todorov, Rosemary Jackson, Kathryn Hume, W. R. Irwin and Colin Manlove – all agree that fantasy is about the construction of the impossible whereas science fiction may be about the unlikely, but is grounded in the scientifically possible. But from there these critics quickly depart, each to generate definitions of fantasy which include the texts that they value and exclude most of what general readers think of as fantasy. Most of them consider primarily texts of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. If we turn to twentieth-century fantasy, and in particular the commercially successful fantasy of the second half of the twentieth century, then, after Tolkien's classic essay, 'On Fairy Stories', the most valuable theoretical text for taking a definition of fantasy beyond preference and intuition is Brian Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992). Building on his earlier book, *The American Fantasy Tradition* (1980), Attebery proposed that we view fantasy as a group of texts that share, to a greater degree or other, a cluster of common tropes which may be objects but which may also be narrative techniques. At the centre are those stories which share tropes of the completely impossible and towards the edge, in subsets, are those stories which include only a small number of tropes, or which construct those tropes in such a way as to leave doubt in the reader's mind as to whether what they have read is fantastical or not. This group of texts resolves into a 'fuzzy set' (a mathematical term), and it is the 'fuzzy set' of fantasy, from the core to the edge – that sense of more and less fantastical texts operating in conversation with each other – which is the subject of this book.

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Once we leave the project of defining fantasy, the most useful theoretical text is formed from the entries by John Clute in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (edited by Clute with John Grant, 1997). When read together, these construct a grammar of fantasy which draws together notions of structural and thematic movement in the text, of moods, and of tropes and metaphors which have become part of the conversation. Clute's most significant contribution to the language of criticism has been his definition of the 'full fantasy' in the entry Fantasy. In the full fantasy, a text (which may be a multi-volume work) passes through Wrongness, Thinning, Recognition and Healing (using the *Encyclopedia*'s typographic style). What becomes clear from the *Encyclopedia* as a whole, and from wide-ranging reading in the genre, is the degree to which an awareness of the conversation between authors and texts is one of the defining characteristics of the form.

The most recent contribution to the theoretical debate (and one which is referenced by many of the contributors to this volume) is Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008). Mendlesohn abandons the search for definition and accepts Attebery's fuzzy set and Clute's grammar, but argues that there are four distinct modes of fantasy, defined by the way in which the fantastic enters the text and the rhetorical voices which are required to construct the different types of worlds which emerge. The four categories are the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusion and the liminal. In the portal-quest, the protagonist enters a new world; in the immersive, the protagonist is part of the fantastic world; in the intrusion, the fantastic breaks into the primary world (which might or might not be our own); and in the liminal, magic might or might not be happening. What the schema offers is a way of considering fantasy on its own terms rather than in the terms used by critics of mimetic fiction. It may even offer a way of evaluating the quality of a particular fantasy: as just one example, an immersive fantasy that uses the rhetorical (and over-explanatory) voice of a portal-quest fantasy is, Mendlesohn argues, unlikely to be effective.

Fantasy's companion genre, science fiction, has been segmented relatively easily into subgenres that most fans, critics and writers recognize, even if only to argue about (such as space opera, cyberpunk, hard sf: see *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*). The study of fantasy, on the other hand, has only just moved on from attempting to define the form, and the subgenres that have emerged from the marketing of fantasy frequently feel transient and commercial ventures. This book endeavours to take the body of genre fantasy on a multiplicity of terms that recognizes academic, reader and commercial understandings of fantasy as equally valuable. This is reflected in the overall shape of the book.

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Introduction

Part I consists of five chapters which survey English-language, and to a lesser extent European, fantasy from the late seventeenth century through to the present day to build up a picture of the vibrant and diverse range of writing commonly grouped together under the rubric 'fantasy', or sometimes 'the fantastic'. It is in the seventeenth century that we can find the first critical awareness of the separate existence of a genre of 'fantasy'; this book therefore ignores those earlier fictions about the fantastical – *The Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Orlando Furioso*, *The Midsummer Night's Dream* and very many other texts – even though writers within the modern genre of fantasy have been inspired by them and have frequently reused and referenced them.

Part II is entitled 'Ways of reading' and consists of, first, five chapters focusing on the most common academic readings of fantasy fiction (structuralism, psychoanalysis, political readings, modernism and postmodernism, and thematic criticism). In this section we want to demonstrate the degree to which fantasy opens up to a number of critical responses. However, this is not solely an academic concern, or one bounded by formal theoretical responses. One of the most exciting aspects of the field has been the degree to which working writers have wished to engage with modes of reading the fantastic. The next three chapters begin with fantasy author Greer Gilman's chapter on the languages of the fantastic, which gets right down to the bones of the genre, beyond story, beyond character, beyond theme, to examine the way in which the fantastic is actually written. Kari Maund, an historian and novelist (as Kari Sperring), continues with a discussion of the pleasures of reading series fantasy, in which worlds and narratives can be extended across many volumes, and Gregory Frost completes the section by considering the reading strategies used in the fuzzy margins of the set called 'fantasy'.

One of the difficulties of teaching fantasy in the classroom is that there is very little consensus around a canon. Two people's understanding of the fantastic can be sufficiently different as to generate a list of texts with little overlap apart from Tolkien (and sometimes not even him). This is enormously liberating. There are no texts that one feels one *must* include. However, it does make a book of this type rather problematic. Rather than end this book with a series of author studies, we have chosen instead to offer studies of author-clusters that are intended to serve as discussion-openers. We hesitate to call these clusters 'subgenres' (although some will). Rather, the clusters selected have been chosen because between them they allow for a very broad coverage of recent authors worthy of discussion and demonstrate at the same time the way an individual author's works can be reconfigured to answer different questions. Furthermore, the sections in Part III have been deliberately selected to be in tune with the current market labels, and

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to avoid any suggestion that some modes of writing the fantastic are more worthy than others.

Part III – 'Clusters' – begins with Sharon Sieber exploring the works of magical realism, placing them in their original context and explaining why they have become such a vital wellspring for commercial fantasy. Nnedi Okorafor examines the very particular approach to fantasy of writers of colour, influenced both by their own literary traditions and by the experience of Western dominance. W. A. Senior continues with a consideration of the form of fantasy that has dominated the bookshop shelves for over thirty years: quest fantasies are often derided but, as Senior demonstrates, they can be sophisticated and complex. The next two chapters look at two other 'clusters' currently enjoying great popularity. Alexander C. Irvine, himself a writer of gritty and unusual urban fantasies, considers the development of the form and its new subversions. Roz Kaveney concludes with a discussion of the highly unstable label 'dark fantasy' and its latest offshoot, the 'paranormal romance'.

Children's fantasy, which, for reasons explored by Gary K. Wolfe and Maria Nikolajeva in Part I, has always had a semi-autonomous existence, came into critical prominence at the end of the twentieth century with the unexpected success of J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman. Catherine Butler, in her chapter, details the important innovations that can be found among writers of fantasy for children in the last few decades. Finally, in the last two chapters, we turn back to history, where we began, but this time history as viewed by fantasy writers. Veronica Schanoes considers the popularity and interpretations of different periods of history in works of fantasy and mulls on the role that ideologies of history and scholarship have played; Graham Sleight moves on to consider the ways in which fantasy has allowed iconoclastic thought-experiments in the area of history and religion.

PART I

Histories

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GARY K. WOLFE

Fantasy from Dryden to Dunsany

On 1 July 1712, in his magazine *The Spectator* – which, widely available in coffeehouses, was probably the closest thing eighteenth-century England had to what we would now think of as a popular blog – Joseph Addison introduced a topic of discussion that might sound familiar to modern readers of fantasy:

> There is a kind of writing wherein the poet quite loses sight of Nature, and entertains his reader's imagination with the characters and actions of such persons as have many of them no existence but what he bestows on them; such are fairies, witches, magicians, demons, and departed spirits. This Mr. *Dryden* calls *the fairy way of writing*, which is, indeed, more difficult than any other that depends on the poet's fancy, because he has no pattern to follow in it, and must work altogether out of his own invention.[1]

Addison, of course, wasn't thinking of anything like the fantasy novel in the modern sense – his main purview was poetry and drama – but his observations were pertinent enough that a contemporary scholar, David Sandner, has argued that Addison could be regarded as 'the first critic of the fantastic'.[2] Addison does not quite use the terms 'fantastic' or 'fantasy', however, speaking instead of 'the reader's imagination' and 'the poet's fancy' – both terms which would increasingly, over the next century or so, move to the foreground in discussions of the fantastic imagination.

In fact, of all the various terms we now employ to talk about fantasy literature, probably the first to evolve was this distinction between imagination and fancy, widely familiar to modern readers from its most famous formulation in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* in 1817. But, as Addison demonstrates, the debate over these terms – and indeed over the whole notion of fantasy as a mode of poetic creation – had been going on for more than a century prior to Coleridge's essay. In another issue of *The Spectator*, Addison wrote, 'There are few words in the English language which are employed in a more loose and uncircumscribed sense than those

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of the fancy and the imagination.'[3] In setting out 'to fix and determine the notion of these two words', Addison proposed the notion that both originally derive from sight. In other words, what we call imagination or fancy has to do with our reactions to or memories of objects of nature or art. Addison's view partakes of what was already a long-standing view of imagination as a 'mirror' of the external world, to use a metaphor from Yeats borrowed by M. H. Abrams in his classic 1953 study *The Mirror and the Lamp*. But in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this view of imagination, thanks largely to the Romantic movement, would come to be supplanted by a view of imagination as a 'lamp' illuminating unseen worlds beyond perceived reality – the 'fairy way of writing', to use the term from John Dryden that Addison borrowed.

This new view was already a topic of vigorous discussion by the mid eighteenth century. In 1741, the German critic, poet, and translator of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Johann Jakob Bodmer wrote:

> The imagination is not merely the soul's treasury, where the senses store their pictures in safe-keeping for subsequent use; besides this it also has a region of its own which extends much further than the dimension of the senses . . . It not only places the real before our eyes in a vivid image and makes distant things present but also, with a power more potent than that of magic, it draws that which does not exist out of the state of potentiality, gives it a semblance of reality and makes us see, hear and feel these new creations.[4]

By 1762 a similar definition of imagination had entered the English language with Lord Henry Home Kames writing in his *Elements of Criticism*: 'this singular power of fabricating images without any foundation in reality is distinguished by the name of *imagination*'.[5]

This shift in the theory of imagination led, predictably enough, to a new attitude toward the fantastic (which the German poet and critic Friedrich Schlegel already claimed in 1800 as a defining characteristic of Romantic literature), and in turn to a number of debates about the proper uses of the fantastic, including the relative merits of figures and images drawn from nature, and those that sought to go beyond nature. The brothers A. W. and Friedrich Schlegel, for example, devoted much of their influential journal *Das Athenaeum* from 1798 to 1800 to debates about the rules of fairy tales or *Märchen* and other forms of Romantic literature. In his 1810 'A Vision of the Last Judgment', William Blake equated imagination with 'Visionary Fancy' and set this apart from fable or allegory, 'a totally distinct & inferior kind of Poetry . . . Fable or Allegory is Form'd by the daughters of Memory, Imagination is surrounded by the daughters of Inspiration'.[6] Blake's distinction not only anticipates Coleridge (albeit with a different set of terms), but

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also anticipates a critical battle that authors of fantasy from George Mac-Donald to C. S. Lewis would wage: namely, that fantastic narratives are not necessarily allegories or fables.

But it was Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1817 distinction between fancy and imagination that set the stage for the critical debate that would occupy much of the nineteenth century and that arguably surrounded the birth of the modern fantasy narrative. Writing in the early chapters of *Biographia Literaria* about Wordsworth's poetry, Coleridge describes his growing conviction 'that fancy and imagination were two distinct and widely different faculties, instead of being, according to the general belief, either two names with one meaning, or, at furthest the lower and higher degree of one and the same power'.[7] Later he describes the imagination as 'the living Power and prime Agent of all human perception', the most godlike of human qualities, while the fancy 'has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space'.[8] In other words, the earlier concept of imagination – that it is essentially a mode of memory – Coleridge relegates to the secondary status of 'fancy', while the imagination represents something new and entirely different – what Coleridge was to call the 'esemplastic' power of the mind. More than seventy years later, the Scottish writer George Mac-Donald, nearing the end of his career as one of the Victorian era's leading fantasists, would return to this distinction between fancy and imagination, offering his own variation: speaking of literary forms, he wrote, 'When such forms are new embodiments of old truths, we call them products of the Imagination; when they are mere inventions, however lovely, I should call them the work of the Fancy.'[9]

In English literary discourse, Coleridge's famous distinction did much to establish the terms by which fantastic literature would be discussed for the rest of the century, and to give legitimacy to the notion of a vocabulary of the fantastic. Indeed, according to Stephen Prickett, 'by 1825 something very extraordinary had happened. From being terms of derision, or descriptions of daydreaming, words like "fantasy" and "imagination" suddenly began to take on new status as hurrah-words.'[10] But while Romantic poets and their critics could undertake debates about the nature of imagination as revealed through literary art, and while Romantic narrative artists such as Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Walter Scott could begin to construct theoretical examinations of the nature of their craft (a tradition continued by later fantastic authors from George MacDonald to J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Ursula K. Le Guin), critics in the major English journals remained sceptical of the uses of the fantastic in works of fiction, and within a few decades the currency of the fantastic had been devalued once again.[11] Fantasy

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elements were widely regarded as superstitious, to be tolerated only if supported by evidence of actual belief or if supported by didactic or moral purpose. This, at least was the argument addressed by 'Some Remarks on the Use of the Preternatural in Works of Fiction', an essay published anonymously in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in September 1818 but widely attributed to the Scottish critic John Wilson. Fantastic or supernatural elements, the author argued, 'should be sparingly used, in order to avoid monotony, and prevent the disgust which is always sure to be felt, when they are no longer regarded with astonishment'.[12]

Even Sir Walter Scott himself, discussing both E. T. A. Hoffmann's work and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) in his essay 'On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition' (1827), demanded that fantastic elements should be 'rare, brief, indistinct', yet characterized by 'philosophical reasoning and moral truth'.[13] Scott's essay is of interest not only because it represents one of the earliest critical discussions of a work now widely regarded as science fiction, but because it reveals an attitude that would become increasingly dominant in the later nineteenth century: that fantastic inventions, in an increasingly pragmatic and industrialized age, required some sort of extra-literary rationale for their legitimate employment in a work of literature. Scott's essay also proved influential in France: translated as 'Du merveilleux dans le roman' in the April 1829 issue of *La Revue de Paris*, it was later reprinted (in considerably truncated form, with references to Mary Shelley omitted) as the introduction to a French collection of Hoffmann's tales – though Scott's phrase 'the fantastic mode of writing' was translated by editor J.-B. Cefauconpret as 'genre fantastique'. Together with an earlier enthusiastic essay on Hoffmann by the philologist Jean-Jacques Ampère (son of the famous physicist and pioneer in electrical theory) in the magazine *Le Globe* in 1828, it helped give currency to *le fantastique* as a genre in French critical thought, a notion further advanced by Charles Nodier's 1830 manifesto in *La Revue de Paris*, 'Du fantastique en literature', which ranged from Homer and the Bible to Goethe and the German Romantics in a wide-ranging defence of the fantastic. Nodier himself was a pioneer of the *conte fantastique*, through such tales as 'Trilby, the Fairy of Argyll' (1822, written after a visit to Scotland during which he met Walter Scott) and the more Gothic-flavoured 'Smarra, or Demons of the Night' (1821).[14]

In England, though, fantasy clearly remained suspect. In an anonymous essay titled 'The Progress of Fiction as an Art', which appeared in the *Westminster Review* in 1853, the author (who may have been George Eliot, a subeditor of the magazine at that time) argued that art, like technology, progresses from more primitive to more sophisticated forms, and 'a scientific and somewhat sceptical age has no longer the power of believing in