Introduction

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In the early 1950s, while attempting to find a publisher for a long, complicated heroic romance he had been developing in various forms for several decades, J. R. R. Tolkien wrote to the editor Milton Waldman to try and explain his ambitions for his work:

[O]nce upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story – the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths – which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country. It should possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, to be redolent of our 'air' (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe: not Italy or the Aegean, still less the East), and, while possessing (if I could achieve it) the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic (though it is rarely found in genuine ancient Celtic things), it should be 'high', purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of a land now long steeped in poetry. I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many others only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama. Absurd.[1]

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[1] J. R. R. Tolkien to Milton Waldman, probably late 1951, Letter 131 in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. by Humphrey Carpenter (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), pp. 143–61 (pp. 144–5). Quotations

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In this letter to Waldman, Tolkien describes his old desire to make another world from art, constructing this world by stitching together a varied (yet specific) range of different forms and styles. In his projected conception, the mixed modes in which he proposed to work would operate synergistically to create both grandeur and verisimilitude. His creations would draw in characteristics he perceived in the world, but they would also engage with forms that only exist in art, compounding, iterating on and extrapolating from longstanding social and cultural traditions in a new imagined space. Tolkien was aware that creating a convincing world does not require making everything in it; in fact, he proposed deliberately to leave room for others to collaborate with him, using forms with which he himself was less adept. Nevertheless, he dreamt of a constellation of artworks that would cohere and connect in manners that would have both an internal aesthetic logic and a wider cultural value. He wanted to create legends that were self-evidently unreal, but which would hold real and powerful meanings for readers.

However, Tolkien's letter encodes a deep uncertainty about whether others would understand or care about the stories he wished to tell. In opening this passage, he frames his ambitions as having been necessarily scaled back. When evoking 'the fair, elusive beauty some call Celtic', he doubts his own ability to conjure this. In closing, he dismisses his dreams as absurd. While

throughout this book reproduce as closely as possible the spelling and punctuation of the original text, with the exception that where single quotation marks would appear within another set of single marks, these have been replaced with double quotation marks for clarity. Editorial amendments and elisions appear within square brackets.

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Tolkien had been encouraged by positive reviews of *The Hobbit* (1937) and supportive readings from his family and friends, after ambivalence from the publishing industry, he was sceptical whether his cherished legendarium could find purchase in the hearts and minds of mid-twentieth-century audiences. Was a plunge into the complexities of fabricated romance really something readers desired in the aftermath of war, amidst the burgeoning evidence of modernity? Tolkien was trying to activate and reconfigure resonances rooted in longstanding cultural traditions – including some that were extremely unfashionable at the time he was writing – but the stories he was preparing also sought to do things that were particular and strange. They asked their readers to trust Tolkien and work with him in animating the depths and unfamiliarities of an alternative world. He was unsure how people would respond to this.

The concerns Tolkien expressed were not unjustified; his impassioned account failed to persuade Waldman that Collins should publish the writings that later became *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–5) and *The Silmarillion* (1977). However, as readers of this book will doubtless know, once they were published, Tolkien's audiences found in his idiosyncratic legend-making both the constellations of wonder he had hoped to trace and space for their own imaginations to operate in concert with his richly considered creation. Nevertheless, his works were not universally praised. When the American literary critic Edmund Wilson reviewed *The Lord of the Rings* in *The Nation* in 1956, he denounced it as 'balderdash', describing it as a book that could only be admired by 'certain people—especially, perhaps, in Britain—[who] have a lifelong

appetite for juvenile trash'.[2] Wilson bounced off the book, seeing it as indulgent and inadequate by the cultural standards he had internalised and believed should be upheld. Other unsympathetic readers objected to Tolkien's work because they were ideologically uncomfortable with the influence they saw him exerting. One of Tolkien's most notable antagonists was the prolific New Wave fantasist Michael Moorcock, who worried that the models traced in *The Lord of the Rings* were restructuring and restricting what the fantastic imagination might achieve. In an essay entitled 'Epic Pooh', first published in a British Fantasy Society pamphlet in 1978, Moorcock accused Tolkien of promoting a 'fundamentally misanthropic doctrine' that sought to 'dignify the mood of a disenchanted and thoroughly discredited section of the repressed English middle-classes'.[3] For Moorcock, Tolkien's mythology was the wrong one for Britain, promoting complacent, consolatory conservatism, rather than challenging its readers to think better, as he felt the best Fantasy should do. While Moorcock hoped that Tolkien might 'inspire writers who will take his raw materials and put them to nobler uses', he was concerned that if the influence of *The Lord of the Rings* became too dominant, it would crowd out forms of Fantasy that he found more innovative and interesting.[4]

It might be fair to object to the way Moorcock pigeonholes Tolkien. While his is a valid perspective backed by

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[2] Edmund Wilson, 'Oo, Those Awful Orcs!', *The Nation*, 14 April 1956, 326–32 (pp. 331–2).

[3] Michael Moorcock, *Epic Pooh*, British Fantasy Society Booklet No. 4 (February 1978), [p. 6].

[4] Moorcock, *Epic Pooh*, [pp. 14, 15].

an evidenced reading, it is far from the only way of interpreting Tolkien's works, which are more complex and multivalent than their critics often admit. However, Moorcock's concerns about *The Lord of the Rings* determining audiences' expectations regarding Fantasy were justified to a certain extent by the genre infrastructures taking shape around the time 'Epic Pooh' was published. Someone like Tolkien pitching a work along the lines of *The Lord of the Rings* to someone like Waldman in the late 1970s would have had a far easier time of it, as they could have placed what they were doing within an increasingly prominent bookshop category that Tolkien's success had played a central role in popularising.

As Tolkien's reputation rose, publishers sought to address hungry audiences who wanted more books like *The Lord of the Rings*. To do this, they turned to new authors, but also to existing works that had the potential to be assembled into a more coherent tradition in light of Tolkien's success. After publishing an authorised United States paperback edition of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1965, Ballantine Books – a pioneering paperback publishing house founded by Ian and Betty Ballantine in 1952 – began seeking out other stories to reprint that might appeal to Tolkien's growing ranks of fans. The Ballantines' first selections included further fiction and poetry by Tolkien, but they accompanied these with major fantasies by E. R. Eddison, David Lindsay and one of Moorcock's own favourite writers, Mervyn Peake, along with two relatively recent novels by Peter S. Beagle: *A Fine and Private Place* (1960) and *The Last Unicorn* (1968).

The success of such works led to the formal inauguration in 1969 of the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series – the

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'Adult' in the title serving as both a piece of audience-focused branding and a slightly awkward defensive gesture against snobby dismissals penned by critics like Wilson. The series, edited by Lin Carter, reprinted a complex assembly of authors from a mixed range of backgrounds and traditions.[5] Carter selected fantastical novels by prominent Victorian writers, including George Meredith's orientalist *The Shaving of Shagpat* (1856) and George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895). He placed William Morris's pioneering secondary-world quest narratives alongside Lord Dunsany's fictional mythographies and his faerie romance *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924). James Branch Cabell's playful, ironic metafictions rubbed covers with William Hope Hodgson's dark horror stories and with Hope Mirrlees's delightful *Lud-in-the-Mist* (1926) – an arch, wise rendering of the dance between bourgeois respectability and fairy wildness. Evangeline Walton's books in the series reworked the early Welsh prose fictions of the *Mabinogion*. Walton had originally published her first volume as *The Virgin and the Swine* in 1936, but it had met with a relatively tepid reception. It was only when Ballantine Books republished it as *The Island of the Mighty* in 1970, unaware that Walton was still alive, that she reached out and offered to finish a continuation of the project she had set aside. She eventually contributed four successful volumes to the Ballantine series. Carter's early selections also drew on fantasies that had originally

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[5] Carter's canon-making is explored in far greater detail in Jamie Williamson's *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy: From Antiquarianism to the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

appeared in American pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* (founded in 1922), *Amazing Stories* (1926–) and *Unknown* (1939–43). Fletcher Pratt, L. Sprague de Camp, H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith and Hannes Bok all published much of their work in such magazines, albeit in very different styles ranging from rousing adventure fiction to playful metafictional comedy to cosmic horror. Carter himself was intimately familiar with the pulp milieu; he had written parodies of Lovecraft and worked on posthumous publications by Smith and Robert E. Howard, the latter most famous as the creator of Conan the Barbarian. Howard's stories appeared in several of the anthologies Carter assembled for the Ballantine series, which included among other things tales by Jack Vance and C. L. Moore and pieces by established literary greats including William Shakespeare, Robert Browning, Edgar Allan Poe and Oscar Wilde. As it built up steam, the Ballantine series brought new authors into print, publishing Katherine Kurtz's debut novel *Deryni Rising* (1970), the first in a long-running series of fantasies modifying historical materials drawn from the medieval British Isles. The series also included the first American edition of Joy Chant's intense, evocative *Red Moon and Black Mountain* (1970), a narrative that grew from a world Chant imagined in her childhood into a vivid story of wonder, balance and responsibility.

The Ballantine series could in some respects be seen as a medium for codifying the kinds of writing Moorcock was concerned about. Carter is name-checked in 'Epic Pooh' and addressed rather ambivalently as someone who 'expresses a distaste for fiction which is not predominantly escapist by charging it with being "depressing" or

"negative" if it does not provide him with the moral and psychological comforts he seems to need'.[6] However, Moorcock clearly had a certain amount of time for Carter, and he admired many of the authors included in the Ballantine series. While it commenced under the sign of Tolkien, Carter's editorial processing brought together a disparate range of writers and writing, much of it pre-dating *The Lord of the Rings* by decades or (in the case of some of the works Carter anthologised) centuries. Fantasy was being organised more definitively during the 1970s, in part due to Tolkien's catalysing influence, but it was evolving in manners that created complex social and cultural networks, rather than a single tightly defined lineage. While the fear that fantastic creativity might be reduced to predictable patterns is one that was (and still is) often expressed, in practice, diverse interlocking and jostling fantastic constellations have co-existed for an extremely long time, sometimes fractiously, but very often productively.

Some of the different directions Fantasy framings could take can be seen by glancing at the preoccupations of societies established in the 1960s and 1970s. The Mythopoeic Society was founded in 1967 to study fantastic literature in general, and while it took Tolkien and his fellow Inklings C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams as its 'three core authors', articles in the first ten years of its journal *Mythlore* discussed works ranging from Sumerian myth, Virgil's *Aeneid* and Arthurian material to more recent publications by T. H. White, Dorothy L. Sayers,

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[6] Moorcock, *Epic Pooh*, [p. 14].

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Lloyd Alexander and Richard Adams.[7] The British
Fantasy Society spun off from the British Science
Fiction Association in 1971, publishing a newsy *Bulletin*
and a magazine, *Dark Horizons*, that contained a fluctuat-
ing mixture of articles, fiction, poetry and art relating to
Fantasy and Horror.[8] The approaches fostered by the
British Fantasy Society often included grimmer visions,
vibrant parodies and more urgent forms of politics. As
well as Moorcock's essay, the Society's early booklets
included a centenary tribute to William Hope Hodgson,
a send-up of John Norman's intensely misogynistic Gor
books and a brief spoof of Conan-style adventures mag-
nificently entitled *Longbore the Inexhaustible* (1978).[9] In
1975, the World Fantasy Convention was held for the
first time in H. P. Lovecraft's hometown, Providence,
Rhode Island. At the convention's awards ceremony,
Patricia A. McKillip was presented with the inaugural
World Fantasy Award for Best Novel for *The Forgotten
Beasts of Eld* (1974), a wonderful story of kind creatures,
cautious connections and ambivalent magics that had
been published when its author was just twenty-six. The
award for best short story went to Robert Aickman, a

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[7] 'About the Society', *Mythopoeic Society*, http://www.mythsoc.org/about
.htm; *Mythlore Index Plus*, compiled by Janet Brennan Croft and Edith
Crowe (2012–), http://www.mythsoc.org/press/mythlore-index-plus
.htm.

[8] See David Sutton, 'A History of the BFS: The Early Years: 1970–1984',
in *Silver Rhapsody*, ed. by John Carter and Jan Edwards, British Fantasy
Society Booklet No. 23 (1996).

[9] David Sutton (ed.), *William Hope Hodgson: A Centenary Tribute
1877–1977*, British Fantasy Society Booklet No. 2 (1977); 'Norma
N. Johns', *Bodoman of Sor*, British Fantasy Society Booklet No. 1 (1977);
Adrian Cole, *Longbore the Inexhaustible*, British Fantasy Society Booklet
No. 3 (1978).

determinedly individual British writer of 'strange stories'.
He received his award for 'Pages from a Young Girl's
Journal' (1973), an elegant, creepy Gothic fiction set in
early-nineteenth-century Ravenna. This is a narrative
with self-consciously literary roots: Percy Shelley and
Lord Byron pass through, and the story plays with an
awareness that Byron was transformed into one of the
first literary vampires by John William Polidori. Best
Collection went to Manly Wade Wellman, a veteran of
the pulps. Wellman received the award for an anthology
of fantastical and horrific stories published by Carcosa, a
small press named after an 'ancient and famous' fallen city
that was invented by Ambrose Bierce, picked up by
Robert W. Chambers and incorporated into the weird
tradition by Lovecraft and his circle.[10] Ian and Betty
Ballantine won a special professional award for their
publishing work, and a lifetime achievement award was
presented to Robert Bloch, most famous as the creator of
Psycho (1959), but a longstanding author of fiction across a
wide range of genres.

Something was emerging or changing form in such
assemblies, and Tolkien and his works were certainly
parts of it, but, as the preceding discussion demonstrates,
when organisations began to brand themselves as being
concerned with Fantasy, they drew under that umbrella a
complicated array of authors, works, audiences and con-
cerns. Some parts of this array related closely to Tolkien –
his compatriots in the Inklings, elements of his scholarly

[10] Ambrose Bierce, 'An Inhabitant of Carcosa', in *Tales of Soldiers and
Civilians* (San Francisco: E. L. G. Steele, 1891), pp. 241–7
(pp. 244, 247).