

REALISING THE DREAM:  
THE STORY OF EPIC FANTASY

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i. Summary

Inspired by J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, epic fantasy was established as a commercially viable subgenre in 1977 with the publication of Terry Brooks' *The Sword of Shannara* and Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever*. While enormously successful in commercial terms, epic fantasy has faced persistent critical neglect. This thesis begins to redress this neglect by exploring the critical potential of epic fantasy. To that end, this thesis tells the story of epic fantasy, from its origins in *The Lord of the Rings*, to its establishment in the 1970s, to its status today as a successful and sophisticated subgenre. It traces both variations and continuities in narrative and theme as the subgenre develops, with a particular focus on the relationship between fantasy and reality, or, more specifically, the fantastic and mimetic narrative modes. Rather than attempt to survey the entire subgenre, this thesis instead focuses on a small number of some of the most well-known examples, in order to more thoroughly explore the different approaches taken by each author as they write into an established commercial subgenre. In part, the approaches taken in this thesis have developed in response to two of the major assumptions about epic fantasy: that it is escapist and that it is formulaic. So, the assumption that fantasy texts are inherently escapist, and that 'realism' thus equals relevance, led to a desire to explore the complex relationship between fantasy and reality in epic fantasy. And, the assumption that genre fiction is by definition formulaic led to a desire to explore the ways in which epic fantasists have worked within the narrow boundaries of generic expectations in order to produce something unique.

Along with analyses of *The Lord of the Rings*, *Sword of Shannara*, and *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, this thesis examines three other epic fantasies: David Eddings' *The Belgariad*, Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*, and Robin Hobb's *The Farseer Trilogy*. These texts have deliberately been chosen because they share a large number of generic features, which are themselves some of the most recognisable of the subgenre. However, this thesis demonstrates that even within the generic, some might say formulaic, strictures of one of the most common models of epic fantasy, there is room for significant creative expression. Furthermore, there is also a continuity in the subgenre that goes beyond the generic narrative features: certain themes have been consistently prominent in epic fantasy since its very beginnings, themes such as the fear of death and the desire for immortality, the responsibilities of power, the immutability of fate, and the role of stories in our lives and world. While the generic features of epic fantasy may tie the subgenre together at the surface level, it is these underlying thematic threads which truly tell the story of epic fantasy. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates that epic fantasy is capable of great narrative and thematic sophistication, and is thus deserving of further critical attention.

ii. Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Ashleigh Ward

### iii. Acknowledgments

While it is my name on the title page of this thesis, there have been many, many others who have contributed to getting it there.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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The story of epic fantasy is one of enormous commercial success coupled with persistent critical neglect. The subgenre has been consistently popular since its beginnings in 1977, when Terry Brooks' *The Sword of Shannara* became the "first modern fantasy to appear on the *New York Times* bestseller list" (Clute and Holmberg 142). Over three decades later, epic fantasy continues to attract an enormous readership: the last six books in Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* series, for example, debuted at number one on the *New York Times* hardcover bestseller list. Yet, despite the success, epic fantasy receives "little attention in the mainstream press" (M. Morrison), with one 2003 commentator calling them the "list of bestsellers whom most people have never heard of" ("Fantasy-the Final Frontier"). This lack of general coverage likely results from the perception that readers of epic fantasy are an immature minority, not representative of the general public. However, the sales figures do not support the notion that epic fantasy is read only by a "sad fanbase of obsessives": epic fantasy titles frequently sell hundreds of thousands of copies, and "you do not achieve those figures if your only readers belong to a minority cult" ("Fantasy-the Final Frontier"). As one commentator pointed out in 2010, there simply "aren't enough lonely geeks to account for the sales" (Schwartzkoff).

Indeed, the popularity of epic fantasy only seems to be increasing: in 2005, a buyer for Barnes & Noble reported that sales of epic fantasy novels in the previous five years had, on average, increased by 10 to 15 per cent every year (Memmott). In response to this persistent success, the publishing world began to reconsider its

perceptions of epic fantasy and its readers, realising that epic fantasy is not the exclusive domain of ‘lonely geeks’ and ‘sad obsessives’, but rather, as one 2009 commentator points out, is “read by people of all ages, both sexes, all education, vocation and income groups” (Dowling). Even earlier, in 2003, the HarperCollins imprint Voyager carried out market research into fantasy readers, and discovered that the profile of fantasy readers was broad-based in both age and gender, “spreading across the 20s to 50s and including men and women. Readers in this group were also interested in crime, humour, the classics, and contemporary and historical fiction” (Page). As the Voyager publisher noted, these statistics went “against the grain of the accepted wisdom that fantasy is a genre appealing to a small, dedicated group of readers who only read that fiction” (Page). In response to this survey, Voyager began to repackage its fantasy titles, “moving away from the traditional genre jacket covers towards a look that will not put off the general reader ... more stylish” (Page). Other fantasy publishers have adopted similar strategies in recent years: during the 1980s and 1990s, epic fantasy covers typically featured garish artwork depicting scenes from the story, appropriate for an immature and ‘cult’ readership; however, today epic fantasy covers generally feature understated and elegant graphic design that is more appropriate to a broader readership, a readership that has long existed but is only now being acknowledged by publishers.

However, this revaluation of epic fantasy and its readers has not yet reached the academic world. As is discussed further in Chapter Three, epic fantasy has received extremely little attention from literary critics: this is most likely a result of the subgenre being both ‘fantasy’ and ‘popular’, two qualities traditionally disparaged in literary criticism. Of the five epic fantasies discussed in this thesis, only one has received any noteworthy attention: Stephen R. Donaldson’s *Chronicles of Thomas*

*Covenant, the Unbeliever* has been the subject of at least two scholarly books and approximately a dozen articles. For the rest, while there have been a few scattered journal articles, most of the attention these texts has received has typically been cursory, little more than an appearance in a list of ‘post-Tolkien’ fantasies, accompanied by brief, and usually negative, commentaries. It is unsurprising that epic fantasy has struggled for serious critical attention: as Chapter Three will discuss, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, the inspiration for epic fantasy, has faced similar challenges throughout its critical history. But, while *The Lord of the Rings* may not yet receive the widespread academic respect that it deserves, there is nonetheless a significant amount of quality criticism, and ‘Tolkien studies’ is a flourishing field. It is hoped that by providing an in-depth analysis of five key examples of epic fantasy, and demonstrating that the subgenre is receptive to the rigorous demands of literary inquiry, that this thesis will help to contribute to a similar development in epic fantasy criticism.

## 1.1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF EPIC FANTASY

Epic fantasy was inspired, both creatively and commercially, by Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. Comprising six books published in three volumes between 1954 and 1955, *The Lord of the Rings* revolutionised modern fantasy. Tolkien began writing *The Lord of the Rings* in 1937 following requests from his publisher, Stanley Unwin, for a sequel to his successful children’s novel, *The Hobbit*. Initially, Tolkien submitted the ‘The Silmarillion’, a collection of stories and poems relating the history of Middle-earth, for consideration, but Unwin felt that what was needed was something more about hobbits. Although Tolkien was doubtful he had anything further to say about hobbits—“what more can hobbits do?” (*Letters* 26)—inspiration

struck in late 1937, and he began work on a sequel. In the first stages of writing, this sequel was much like *The Hobbit* in tone and content, but the “tale grew in the telling” (Tolkien *Lord xxii*), quickly becoming far more complex and adult, as well as drawing far more extensively on the mythology of the world that Tolkien had created.<sup>1</sup> Seventeen years later, *The Lord of the Rings* was finally published and met with significant commercial success, which reached an apogee in the 1960s when *The Lord of the Rings* first appeared in mass market paperback and became a cult object in America.<sup>2</sup> *The Lord of the Rings* has been consistently popular for the past 60 years: it “has never been out of print [and has] topped almost every poll of favourite books taken in the UK at the end of the twentieth century” (Mendlesohn and James 1). However, the critical response to *The Lord of the Rings* was mixed: this is discussed further in Chapter Three, which details the way negative assumptions about fantasy and popular fiction have influenced *The Lord of the Rings*’ critical reception. Chapter Four examines *The Lord of the Rings* itself, with a particular focus on the ways Tolkien combined fantastic and mimetic narrative techniques to completely revolutionise the modern fantasy genre. However, this chapter also considers the ways in which revolutionary narrative techniques are balanced by conservative values, especially those related to Tolkien’s religious beliefs: while *The Lord of the Rings* is not an overtly Catholic text, it is one in which Catholic sensibilities are deeply influential. This chapter draws primarily on the material found within *The Lord of the Rings* itself, including the Prologue and Appendices. There is today an abundance of supplementary material available to the

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<sup>1</sup> For further information about Tolkien’s creative process in writing *The Lord of the Rings*, Christopher Tolkien’s textual history, *The History of the Lord of the Rings*, is an invaluable resource.

<sup>2</sup> For detailed histories of *The Lord of the Rings*’ publishing history and commercial reception, see: Anderson; Hammond and Scull; and Ripp.

reader of *The Lord of the Rings*, with the ‘Legendarium’ of Middle-earth appearing in various posthumous works such as *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, *The Children of Húrin* and *The History of Middle-earth*. While this chapter will occasionally draw upon these texts when appropriate, the primary focus is on *The Lord of the Rings* as it first experienced by most readers.<sup>3</sup>

Following the enormous success of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1960s America, a number of efforts were made to capitalise on fantasy’s new-found commercial appeal. Between 1969 and 1974, Ballantine reissued around seventy ‘classic’ fantasies in their Adult Fantasy series, and a number of significant new fantasy authors, such as Ursula Le Guin, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Guy Gavriel Kay, and Katherine Kurtz, were also published in this period; however, none came close to matching the success of *The Lord of the Rings*. This was a state of affairs which the new editors at Ballantine, husband and wife team Judy-Lynn and Lester del Rey, were determined to rectify: “The del Reys took the view that fantasy, long a very small portion of overall fiction sales, could be a real mainstream success if packaged and promoted properly. Two authors were pulled out of the slush pile to prove their theory” (Anderson 307). These two authors were American novelists Terry Brooks and Stephen R. Donaldson: their respective fantasy novels, *The Sword of Shannara* and *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever*, both published in 1977, were deliberately marketed as books for ‘people who like *The Lord of the Rings*’. The del Reys proved their theory: both books were immediate bestsellers. Thus, in 1977 we can clearly identify the beginning of epic fantasy as a commercially viable

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<sup>3</sup> The publishing history of *The Lord of the Rings* is long and complex, and the tracing of textual variations has become a small field of scholarly inquiry in its own right. The text used for this thesis is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition, prepared by Hammond and Scull.

subgenre. Both *The Sword of Shannara* and *The Chronicles* are heavily dependent on *The Lord of the Rings*, with unmistakable similarities in setting, character and structure. Indeed, as is discussed in Chapter Three, such parallels to *The Lord of the Rings* have been one of the major hindrances to objective criticism of not only *The Sword of Shannara* and *The Chronicles*, but the entire subgenre of epic fantasy. However, as argued in Chapter Five, if we look beyond the similarities to *The Lord of the Rings*, it is possible to examine each author's struggle to establish their unique creative vision, as both respond to *The Lord of the Rings* in markedly different ways, with Brooks tending to condense and simplify, while Donaldson deepens and exaggerates. However, both are also representative of a transition from Tolkien's mythic and Catholic sensibility to a more modern American sensibility: it is with this, often uneasy, combination of old and new that the modern subgenre of epic fantasy was born.

The final three epic fantasies examined in this thesis are all very successful examples of the subgenre. Chapter Six discusses David Eddings' *The Belgariad*, which was published in five volumes between 1983 and 1985. Chapter Seven discusses Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*, the first volume of which was published in 1990: the series currently consists of thirteen volumes, with the final volume, *A Memory of Light*, to be published in March 2012. (The final three volumes of *The Wheel of Time* have been co-authored by Brandon Sanderson, following Jordan's death in 2007.) And Chapter Eight discusses Robin Hobb's *The Farseer Trilogy*, which was published in three volumes between 1995 and 1998.<sup>4</sup> All three authors are

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<sup>4</sup> In all cases, the authors have expanded beyond the original narrative in the form of sequels, prequels, short stories and guides, in essence creating a 'Legendarium' of their own. However, as with *The Lord of the Rings*, the primary focus is the original narrative, the first contribution to the subgenre, and discussion of information found in the Legendaria is minimal.

American<sup>5</sup>, and all three texts share a number of similarities in setting, character and structure. For instance, all feature a young orphaned male protagonist who has ties to a royal family, as well as magical abilities which must be learned and controlled, and all three protagonists are central figures in a prophecy which concerns the ultimate fate of the world. These texts were deliberately chosen because of these shared narrative features, which are themselves some of the most common in epic fantasy. For, despite the superficial similarities, all three are drastically different in execution. *The Belgariad* is a light-hearted and humorous epic fantasy, in which the subtle mocking of the generic conventions of the subgenre is balanced by a sense of earnestness and comfortable domesticity. *The Wheel of Time* is an expansive and convoluted epic fantasy, full of complex narrative layering and numerous replications of plot, theme and character. And *The Farseer Trilogy* is an elegant and introspective epic fantasy, one of the very few told in first-person, which allows Hobb to explore in depth the troubled psychology of her hero. Thus, this thesis demonstrates that even within the generic, some might say formulaic, strictures of one of the most common models of epic fantasy, there is room for significant creative expression. However, there is also a continuity in the subgenre that goes beyond the generic narrative features: certain themes have been consistently prominent in epic fantasy since its very beginnings in *The Lord of the Rings*, themes such as the fear of death and the desire for immortality, the responsibilities of power,

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<sup>5</sup> The shared nationality of all of the epic fantasy authors chosen for discussion was coincidental, and is simply a reflection of the dominant role American authors and publishers have had in the development of epic fantasy, especially in its early stages. However, as Chapter Five discusses, a number of interesting avenues for exploration open up when one considers the issue of ‘Americanness’ in epic fantasy. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore these matters in significant depth, especially when taking into consideration the complexities that arise in any discussion of national and cultural identity, it would undoubtedly be a valuable exercise to consider these issues further, and to question whether epic fantasy can be best understood as an American subgenre, or as having particularly American traits.

the immutability of fate, and the role of stories in our lives and world. These themes are explored in each chapter, and the Conclusion discusses the ways in which these themes have been addressed throughout the subgenre's development. While the generic features of epic fantasy may tie the subgenre together at the surface level, it is arguably these underlying thematic threads which truly tell the story of epic fantasy.

## 2. DEFINITIONS AND METHODOLOGY

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Epic fantasy is a subgenre of the fantasy genre, so in order to define epic fantasy it is first necessary to define fantasy. Historically, this has not been an easy task: fantasy is “remarkably hard” (Clute and Grant vii) and “notoriously difficult” (Sander 9) to define. Thus, the first section of this chapter begins with a brief historical survey of some of the different critical approaches taken towards this difficult-to-define genre. As Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is of particular importance to this thesis, special attention is given to the position Tolkien’s critical and fictional works have occupied within fantasy scholarship. This chapter argues that the key to creating a useful definition of fantasy is to distinguish between *the fantastic* as a narrative mode, and *fantasy* as a modern literary genre, and then discusses the definition of fantasy adopted for this thesis, which appears in Clute and Grant’s 1999 *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. We then turn to epic fantasy. As the most recognisable and well-known subgenre of fantasy, it is surprising that there have been so few attempts to develop a comprehensive definition for this subgenre. The attempts that have been made are often marred by a desire to differentiate between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ epic fantasy. Consequently, it has been necessary to develop a definition of epic fantasy for use in this thesis. The second section of this chapter addresses the methodological approach used by this thesis. Drawing primarily on narrative theory, this thesis conducts a close critical reading of a select few examples of the subgenre, with a particular focus on the use of the mimetic and fantastic narrative modes within each text. This is an approach which has been developed to ensure that the texts themselves remain always at the centre of the critical inquiry.

## 2.1. DEFINING EPIC FANTASY

### 2.1.1. FANTASY

Although the majority of Western narrative literature has made use of the fantastic mode in some form, fantasy only began to be recognised as a distinct literary genre in the eighteenth century, when realism as a novelistic mode gained popularity and respect: “Fantasy as a modern literary category”, Richard Mathews claims, “took shape through a dialectic with this new literature of realism” (2). Similarly, fantasy criticism was defined in relation to the surge in critical interest in the realist novel, forming, as David Sander describes it, an “inverse relationship ... each form requiring the other for self-definition” (7). Most of the pioneers of fantasy scholarship were authors who had written in the fantastic mode, and their discussions were generally speculations on the function and value of the fantastic in literature. One of the most influential was Samuel Coleridge’s theory of imagination in *Biographia Literaria* [1817], in which he coined the phrase ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ to describe a reader’s ability to accept as true the impossible or fantastic elements of poetry. However, much nineteenth century fantasy criticism “revolves around its importance as a literature primarily for children”, or, more specifically, literature *assumed* to be primarily for children, such as fairy tales (Sander 10). Charles Dickens’ “Frauds on the Fairies” [1853] mocks the moral didacticism of contemporary fairy tale collections, and defends the worth of fairy tales in their unbowdlerised form. Two other Victorian writers who had written in the fantastic mode, John Ruskin and George MacDonald, similarly defend the worth of fairy tales in their respective essays “Fairy Stories” [1868] and “The Fantastic Imagination” [1890]. Implicit in these and other similar essays, are “covert explanations” for

adults' continued interested in 'childish' fantasies (Sander 10); however, fantasy explicitly produced and/or consumed by adults was infrequently addressed. As Roger Schlobin notes in the introduction to his 1982 collection, *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art*, this trend would continue throughout much of the twentieth century: "Prior to 1970 ... examples of fantasy scholarship were scattered, infrequent, and often focused on so-called juvenile authors and works" (ix). It is generally agreed that "significant critical work on the genre only really becomes an on-going and organized inquiry in the late twentieth century" (Sander 9). But before moving onto this period, it is important to first address one example of the pioneer stage of fantasy criticism that has particular relevance to this thesis, Tolkien's essay, *On Fairy-stories*.

Originally presented as an Andrew Lang lecture at the University of St. Andrews in 1939, Tolkien's essay was subsequently expanded and published in various editions.<sup>6</sup> Broadly speaking, "On Fairy-stories" is a defence of fairy-stories as a literary art form, or, as Tolkien delineates in his essay: "What are fairy-stories? What is their origin? What is the use of them?" (27). Whereas the Victorian fantasists implicitly addressed adults' interest in childish fairy-stories, Tolkien explicitly challenges the assumption that "children are the natural or the specially appropriate audience for fairy-stories" (49), and argues that adults can and should enjoy fairy-stories for themselves, "neither playing at being children, nor pretending to be choosing for children" (58). But, from this initial premise, Tolkien takes his essay into a theoretical and philosophical discussion on the nature of fantasy, thus making "On Fairy-stories" his "defining study of and the centre-point in his thinking about the

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<sup>6</sup> See Flieger and Anderson's recent critical edition for a detailed textual history of *On Fairy-stories*.

genre, as well as being the theoretical basis for his fiction” (Flieger and Anderson 9). Tolkien uses the word ‘fantasy’ to describe both the act and product of ‘sub-creation’, a term coined by Tolkien to express his “profoundest view on the creative process, that the Prime Creator is God. His creation is the world of humankind who, following in God’s creative footsteps, both make and are made in God’s image, using – again, like God – the Word as the primary creative instrument” (Flieger and Anderson 102-03). The goal of sub-creation is to create Secondary Belief, not the ‘suspension of disbelief’ Coleridge posited, but true belief in the reality of a fantastic world: “you therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken, the magic, or rather art, has failed” (Tolkien “Fairy” 52). Tolkien’s use of the word ‘fantasy’ is thus not a definition of a particular type of literature, but rather an expression of his creative beliefs. And the text which would best express Tolkien’s understanding of ‘fantasy’, *The Lord of the Rings*, was yet to be written.

As Flieger and Anderson claim, “On Fairy-stories” is today “a canonical piece, a standard text in the criticism of fantasy literature, and one necessary for a full understanding of Tolkien’s own fiction” (128). But it would be some time before Tolkien’s critical and fictional works occupied such a central place in fantasy scholarship. The impact of “On Fairy-stories” was a gradual process: it was first used as a way of interpreting Tolkien’s own work, and then, as *The Lord of the Rings* became more central to the definition of the fantasy genre, it began to be used as a tool to understanding fantasy itself. But initial efforts at defining fantasy were often very narrow, excluding or marginalising many works, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, which would commonly be recognised as fantasy. In 1982, Schlobin, commenting on the recent flurry of fantasy scholarship, argued that the “most obvious positive

influence has been the Tolkien phenomenon and the dramatic popular and financial success of fantasy art and literature both in the United States and abroad” (ix-x). It is ironic that this rise in critical interest in fantasy may have been partly prompted by the enormous popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*, yet many of the early fantasy critics did not consider Tolkien’s work to be ‘fantasy’ at all.

As noted above, sustained critical inquiry into the fantastic gained momentum in the last third of the twentieth century. The French literary critic Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* [1970] was the first attempt to set boundaries on the fantastic. Todorov argues that the fantastic arises when the reader ‘hesitates’ between a natural or supernatural explanation for a strange event. The fantastic, then, “occupies the duration of this uncertainty” (25): if the event is explained, the fantastic resolves into the uncanny; if, however, it is decided that “new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena” the fantastic resolves into the ‘marvelous’ (41). Todorov’s understanding of the fantastic is most clearly applicable to a particular type of nineteenth century fantasy, of which Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* [1898] is the best exemplar; however, texts in which the fantastic occurrences are accepted as ‘real’ within the context of the narrative are consigned by Todorov to the realm of the ‘marvelous’. Todorov’s definition of the fantastic thus excludes many works, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, which are commonly regarded as fantasy. Although very influential in the early stages of fantasy scholarship, Todorov’s work is now generally recognised as “inadequate to the scope of works that clearly belong in the field” (Sander 135). It is likely, however, that Todorov never intended his definition to have such a broad application: Attebery argues that the “diverging meanings for the word *fantastic* in French and English” had “confused matters greatly” for early fantasy theorists

(*Strategies* 20). The dearth of alternative fantasy scholarship may have caused these theorists to seize upon Todorov's work as a starting point for their own studies, and consequently stretch his definition beyond its intended limits.

Despite its limited usefulness today, Todorov's work did succeed in breaking the ground for a new era of fantasy scholarship, prompting what Sander describes as "an unprecedented and sustained critical inquiry into the fantastic" (156). But many of these early studies were, like Todorov's, limited by "over-exact definition, giving the name fantasy to what is only a minor subtype of fantasy" (Attebery *Tradition* 3). For example, in Eric Rabkin's *The Fantastic in Literature* [1976], fantasy is characterised by "ever-changing ground rules" within the fantasy world (38), so the nonsensical and surreal world of Wonderland in Carroll's *Alice* tales is for Rabkin quintessential fantasy. Narratives which contain internally consistent fantastic worlds, such as the works of MacDonald or Tolkien, are classed by Rabkin as 'fairy-tales' and not explored further. A similarly narrow definition of fantasy is developed by W.R. Irwin in *The Game of the Impossible* [1976]. He argues that fantasy is characterised by an agreement between writer and reader to make "nonfact appear as fact", so that both "knowingly enter upon a conspiracy of intellectual subversiveness, that is, upon a game" (9). Unlike Rabkin, Irwin does class *The Lord of the Rings* as fantasy, arguing that Tolkien persuades readers of Middle-earth's reality through rhetoric: "The entire narrative and all the accompanying apparatus are determined by this game of persuasive historicity" (164). However, as Clute argues in his discussion of Irwin, because Irwin emphasises that the agreement between writer and reader be overt and game-like, Irwin's definition "cannot encompass, and indeed clearly excludes, most secondary-world texts" ("Irwin"). Indeed, Irwin's interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* is at odds with Tolkien's stated creative intentions. Tolkien

was not playing an intellectual and rhetorical game with his readers, but was rather endeavouring to inspire Secondary Belief through successful sub-creation, so the overt agreement on the part of the writer to enter upon an intellectual ‘game’ is surely lacking in *The Lord of the Rings*. A final example of an early narrow definition of fantasy is found in Rosemary Jackson’s *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* [1988]. Jackson defines fantasy as a ‘literature of desire’, which works to compensate for a “lack resulting from cultural constraints” (3): the fantastic elements are therefore subversive manifestations of the forbidden and taboo. As Clute argues, Jackson’s theory is “most clearly and generally applicable to the genre’s formative years (approximately 1780-1850) when the fantasy premise could be understood as an act of imagination that avowedly undermined the world” (“Jackson”). Jackson’s theory, however, is much less applicable to twentieth century fantasies, which have “an air more of refusal than subversion” (“Jackson”). In her limited discussion of *The Lord of the Rings*, Jackson concludes that it is a failed fantasy because it is “sentimental” and “nostalgic” instead of subversive (153), and thus belongs “to that realm of fantasy which is more properly defined as faery, or romance literature” (9). This brief overview of three early fantasy studies is indicative of the general critical trends of this period. Not only was there no consensus on what fantasy literature was, but many critics developed over-specific definitions of fantasy that frequently excluded, misinterpreted, or marginalised *The Lord of the Rings*, the most popularly recognised fantasy text of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

In Kathryn Hume’s *Fantasy and Mimesis* [1984], she describes the early fantasy theorists as the proverbial blind men describing an elephant: “Each observation is

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<sup>7</sup> Possible contributing factors to the curious position of *The Lord of the Rings* within early fantasy criticism are discussed in Chapter Three.

accurate for that part of the whole to which it applies, but none can stand as a description for the entire beast” (19). In an effort to counter these ‘exclusive’ definitions, Hume develops an ‘inclusive’ theory of fantasy. Rejecting the idea that fantasy can be limited to a generic definition, she instead argues that fantasy is the one of the two fundamental ‘impulses’ of literary creation:

These are *mimesis*, felt as the desire to imitate, to describe events, people, situations, and objects with such verisimilitude that others can share your experience; and *fantasy*, the desire to change givens and alter reality ... we have many genres and forms, each with a characteristic blend or range of blends of the two impulses. (20)

Hume argues that there are four basic literary response to reality—illusion, vision, revision, disillusion—and categorises the texts she examines accordingly, classing *The Lord of the Rings* as literature of illusion, or ‘escape’ literature.<sup>8</sup> Hume acknowledges that her definition would seem to class nearly all literature as fantasy to some degree, but she clarifies that that while she believes that “most literature includes fantastic elements, even as it includes mimesis”, that she also believes “some forms are not best served by using the idea of fantasy as a means for analyzing them critically” (22). So she limits her study not through definitional boundaries but through the appropriateness of her methodology towards the material. A similar approach is taken by Farah Mendlesohn in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* [2008]. Mendlesohn, explicitly states that her book is “not about defining fantasy” (xi), but rather is concerned to define and analyse “four categories within the fantastic: the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal” (xiv). Like Hume,

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<sup>8</sup> Hume’s assessment of *The Lord of the Rings* is discussed further below (66-68).

Mendelsohn's categorisation schema is based on the relationship between reality and the fantastic, but narrows the focus to the rhetorics of the relationship between author and reader, and how the author uses language to facilitate the reader's movement into the unfamiliar. Acknowledging the wide variety of definitions of fantasy available to the modern reader, Mendlesohn does not apply a "*system* of selection" to the texts she discusses; rather, she chooses texts based on either recommendations from others, or "works [she] had already read, and that had fascinated her" (xviii). This arbitrary nature of selection represents the difficulties that can arise when a critic attempts to address the entire field of fantasy.

Anne Swinfen's *In Defence of Fantasy* [1985] is one of the first examples of fantasy scholarship to use Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories" to develop a definition of fantasy. Acknowledging that current usage of the term 'fantasy' "varies widely", Swinfen draws on Tolkien's idea of the impulse of sub-creation to clarify what she understands fantasy to be:

In this study the term 'fantasy' will be taken to mean both the sub-creative art, with its quality of strangeness and wonder, and the kind of novels which such art produces. The essential ingredient of all fantasy is 'the marvellous', which will be regarded as anything outside the normal space-time continuum of the everyday world. (5)

Any study which attempted to examine every work which included 'anything outside the normal space-time continuum of the everyday world' could quickly become unmanageable: perhaps for this reason Swinfen limits her study to texts published between 1945 and 1975, dates which she acknowledges are "to some extent ... arbitrarily chosen" (1). Nonetheless, Swinfen's focus on modern fantasy was, as

Hume notes, an “unusual and welcome” change from previous studies, most of which had focused on narratives produced during fantasy’s formative years in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (15).

From the mid-1980s, a prevalent trend among fantasy criticism has been to use, like Hume, Mendlesohn and Swinfen, broad and inclusive definitions of fantasy, as two of the most recent examples indicate. Mathews’ *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* defines fantasy as “fiction that elicits wonder through elements of the supernatural or impossible” (2). The wide-ranging nature of this definition is reflected in Mathews’ introductory overview of the genre, which covers the entirety of Western literary history, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey* to the present day. Lucie Armitt’s *Fantasy Fiction* contains a similarly broad definition of fantasy: “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 ‘fantasy’” (1). In marked contrast to the over-specific definitions of Todorov, Rabkin, Irwin and Jackson, Armitt’s definition instead errs on the side of over-inclusiveness: her labelling of science fiction as ‘fantasy’ is particularly contentious, as it is generally accepted that “fantasy is a field of literature radically different from science fiction” (Clute and Grant vii). Armitt’s work illustrates one of the major problems with defining fantasy: it is almost impossible to formulate a definition that encompasses all instances of the fantastic in literature and still retains use as a generic classification. However, Attebery’s *Strategies of Fantasy* resolves this problem by creating a useful distinction between *the fantastic as a mode* and *fantasy as genre*.

Like Hume, Attebery argues that mimesis and fantasy are the two fundamental modes of narrative imagination, and that “most narrative literature ... has made use of the fantastic” (4). However, the fantastic mode is so vast that the term “threatens to become meaningless” (1): while there are some advantages to examining the entire mode of the fantastic, it “always seems larger than any theory that tries to encompass it” (5). Instead, Attebery finds the concept of ‘genre’ more useful when discussing fantasy, because it narrows the scope to a “particular period and discernable structure” (2). The fantasy genre exists, then, *within* the fantastic mode, as a specific narrative model that began to emerge in the eighteenth century and reached its definitive form in the twentieth century. In defining the fantasy genre, Attebery argues that the ‘fuzzy set’ model of generic categorisation is the most suitable approach: “meaning that [genres] are defined not by boundaries but by a center.... The category has a clear center but boundaries that shade off imperceptibly” (12). Attebery places *The Lord of the Rings* at the centre of the fuzzy set genre of fantasy, arguing that

with the publication and popular acceptance of Tolkien’s version of the fantastic, a new coherence was given to the genre....Tolkien’s form of fantasy, for readers in English, is our mental template, and will be until someone else achieves equal recognition with an alternative conception. One way to characterize the genre of fantasy is the set of texts that is some way or other resemble *The Lord of the Rings*. (14)

Admitting that ‘resemblance to *The Lord of the Rings*’ is somewhat imprecise, Attebery details three fundamental features common to *The Lord of the Rings* and the fantasy genre: impossible content, a comic and fairy-tale structure, and the effect of ‘wonder’ provoked in the reader. Although, as he acknowledges, Attebery’s

definition may eventually lose its usefulness if another fantasy, with ‘an alternative conception’, replaces *The Lord of the Rings* as the common mental template of fantasy, it nonetheless takes a significant step towards developing a definitional approach which appreciates the enormous scope of the fantastic mode, but also recognises the significant influence *The Lord of the Rings* has had on codifying the fantasy genre for modern readers.

Clute and Grant draw on Attebery’s approach when developing their definition of fantasy for *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, arguing that Attebery’s description of fantasy as a ‘fuzzy set’ well expresses their “sense of the way in which [*The Encyclopedia*] has been constructed” (viii). At the centre of their understanding of the fuzzy set of fantasy, Clute and Grant offer the following definition: “a fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, but stories set there may be possible in its terms” (viii). Because of its concise and accurate nature, but also in the interests of developing a consensus, this is the definition of fantasy adopted for this thesis. Certain features of the definition thus warrant further discussion. By describing fantasy as a ‘self-coherent narrative’, Clute and Grant highlight the fundamental role of ‘Story’ in fantasy. They argue that fantasy may be said to differ from other forms of the fantastic through its foregrounding of story-telling. While many fantastic texts are subversive of narrative structure, fantasies are transparently narrative-driven: “they do not conceal the fact that something is being told, *and then* something else, *and then* we reach the end” (Clute “Fantasy” 338). Clute also argues that the phrase ‘impossible in the world as we perceive it’ effectively demarcates fantasy as a modern genre, because

no genre of written literature, before about the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, seems to have been constituted so as deliberately to confront or contradict the ‘real’. Though fantasy certainly existed for many centuries before, whenever stories were told which were understood by their authors (and readers) as being impossible, it is quite something else to suggest that the perceived impossibility of these stories *was their point* – that they stood as a counter-statement to a dominant world-view. (338)<sup>9</sup>

The last key term of Clute and Grant’s definition is ‘otherworld’, which Clute defines as an “internally coherent impossible world” (“Fantasy” 338). The Otherworld, or more specifically the Secondary World, is of central importance to the definition of the subgenre of epic fantasy, and will thus be explored further below (37-37). Clute then expands on this core definition of fantasy to offer a description of the general structure of fantasy, which is essentially comedic in nature. It entails “an earned passage from bondage ... which may involve a profound metamorphosis of protagonist or world (or both) – into the eucatastrophe (338-39). ‘Eucatastrophe’ is a term coined by Tolkien in “On Fairy-stories”, to describe “the sudden, miraculous ‘turn’ from sorrow to joy that on the brink of tragedy rescues the story from disaster” (Flieger and Anderson 14). For Tolkien, the eucatastrophe has spiritual connotations, it “is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (“Fairy” 75). However, eucatastrophe is now typically used in a more general sense to describe the comedic/happy ending specific to fantasy.

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, ‘impossible’ is always going to be subjective to some degree: the ‘dominant world-view’ of what is possible, or what is ‘real’, is not going to be true for every person living in a given time. Hume argues that it is important to take into consideration the world-view of the both artist and audience when discussing ‘fantasy’ and ‘reality’ in any text: “These worlds of experience ... differ even if the artist and reader are contemporaries.... If artist and audience are separated by time, language, religion, culture, or class, the amount of shared reality may be small. The nature of what each considers significant reality will overlap even less” (9).

The eucatastrophe, as a manifestation of the “Story-driven urge to comedic completion” (Clute “Fantasy” 339), also reinforces the fundamental role of story in fantasy.

### 2.1.2. EPIC FANTASY

Within the genre of fantasy, one can identify a number of subgenres, such as Arthurian fantasy, urban fantasy, sword and sorcery, and comic fantasy. The subgenres of fantasy, like most subgenres, are fluid entities: as tastes change, some subgenres become obsolete, while new and hybrid subgenres emerge. However, one of the most stable subgenres of fantasy is epic fantasy. Inspired by Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, but firmly established as a commercially viable subgenre in 1977 (see above, 14), epic fantasy has been consistently popular for over three decades, and is the model of fantasy which dominates the market. But, despite its dominance and longevity, there is still no standard name for this subgenre: “epic, heroic, adventurer, ‘Genre’ or ‘mainstream’ Fantasy” are just some of the more common names given to this style of fantasy (Balfe 77). However, ‘epic fantasy’ seems most prevalent among readers, publishers and critics, and is thus the name adopted for this thesis. The multitude of names also reflects the lack of standard definition for this subgenre. This lack may be a result of the fact that in spite of the enormous popularity of the subgenre (or perhaps *because* of its popularity, see below, 58-59) epic fantasy has been relatively overlooked in academic circles. Furthermore, efforts to define the subgenre are often marred by a desire to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ examples of this type of fantasy.

In Clute and Grant’s *The Encyclopaedia of Fantasy* two types of fantasy with overlapping definitions are described: epic fantasy and high fantasy. Epic Fantasy is

any “fantasy tale written to a large scale which deals with the founding or definitive and lasting defence of a Land” (Clute “Epic Fantasy”). (‘Land’ in this definition refers to a type of Secondary World, see below, 37-38). Clute traces the history of Epic Fantasy back to epic poems such as *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *Beowulf*, classic prose tales such as *Moby-Dick* and *Finnegans Wake*<sup>10</sup>, as well as examples from the fantasy genre, such as the work of Tolkien, E.R. Eddison, and the more modern fantasy of Stephen Donaldson. The definition of High Fantasy is much shorter, and simply reads: “Fantasies set in Otherworlds, specifically Secondary Worlds, and which deal with matters affecting the destiny of those worlds” (Clute “High Fantasy”). Thus, for both types of fantasy, the role of the Secondary World is identified as the central distinguishing characteristic: Epic Fantasy is characterised by the ‘founding or definitive and lasting defence’ of a Secondary World, while High Fantasy is characterised by ‘matters affecting the destiny’ of a Secondary World. But despite the similarity in definition, Epic Fantasy and High Fantasy are not cross-referenced with one another in the *Encyclopaedia*. However, High Fantasy is cross-referenced with Genre Fantasy, a type of fantasy acknowledged as being “exceptionally difficult” to define, but one which can be recognised by its ‘familiarity’, a trait which robs Genre Fantasy of its status as ‘fantasy’:

In short, [Genre Fantasy] is not at heart fantasy at all, but a comforting revisitation of cosy venues, creating an effect that is almost anti-fantasy. An allied point is that GFs cater in large part for unimaginative readers who,

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<sup>10</sup> The historical development of epic poetry and prose literature is of course far more complex than the very brief summary offered by Clute, and a consideration of the contribution that the historical epic has played in the development of epic fantasy would be a valuable avenue of exploration. However, as discussed in the Methodology section, a deliberate decision was made to not take this approach for this thesis.

through the reading of a GF, can feel themselves to be, as it were, vicariously imaginative. (Grant “Genre Fantasy”)<sup>11</sup>

In his discussion of the *Encyclopedia*, Grant explains his reasons for creating the entry of Genre Fantasy: “My intention in creating such an entry, of course, was to use it as a means whereby Clute and I could clear away huge areas of weedy, pestiferous scrub in the forest that is *commercially* described as fantasy in order to see the trees we were actually interested in” (“Gulliver” 21). Essentially, Epic Fantasy and High Fantasy are the same thing: they both have as their central defining characteristic the role of the Secondary World within the narrative. But only High Fantasy is linked with Genre Fantasy, ‘the weedy, pestiferous scrub in the forest’; Epic Fantasy, on the other hand, is linked with respected classics of Western Literature, and encompasses the texts Clute and Grant are ‘actually interested in’. So it seems that Clute and Grant wish to distinguish between what they feel to be ‘bad’ and ‘good’ examples of this subgenre, leading them to create two overlapping definitions which have as their only differentiating factors a perceived level of quality and originality. The subjective nature of this type of categorisation can easily lead to confusion and disagreement, as the next example demonstrates.

Holly Ordway’s 2001 doctoral dissertation, “The Development of the Modern Fantasy Novel”, endeavours to classify the various subgenres of modern fantasy. One of these is epic fantasy; however, Ordway then distinguishes between ‘imitative’ and ‘innovative’ epic fantasy. Imitative, or ‘Tolkienesque’, Epic Fantasies draw heavily and obviously on Tolkien’s work, and do not demonstrate “strong influences” from

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<sup>11</sup> This condescending attitude towards readers of genre fantasy is not uncommon, and is explored further in Chapter Three.

any other sources (271); Innovative Epic Fantasy, in contrast, manages to capture the “scope and ‘feel’” of Tolkien’s work while avoiding direct imitation (272). Like Clute and Grant, it seems that Ordway wants to create a classification system which distinguishes between what she believes to be good and bad epic fantasy. But even between these two definitions, there is disagreement: while *The Encyclopedia* places Donaldson in the more highly regarded Epic Fantasy entry, calling him a “writer of central significance as an author of demanding and exploratory fantasy novels” (Clute “Donaldson” 282), Ordway places Donaldson in the list of authors of the Imitative Epic Fantasy, none of which, she argues, “contributes in any significant way to the development of epic fantasy” (287). While both recognise that Donaldson is part of the fantasy tradition stemming from Tolkien, they disagree about the quality and originality of his work, which in turn leads them to place Donaldson in different categories. The desire to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ epic fantasy may be linked to a desire to overcome the assumption that this type of fantasy is predominately derivative dross, by claiming that the more formulaic and badly-written examples belong to a different category, or are not even ‘fantasy’ at all. However, in order to create a useable definition for epic fantasy, it is important to avoid matters of quality and originality, at least in the first instance, and focus instead on the more objective distinguishing characteristics.

A more neutral definition of epic fantasy is offered by David Pringle in his *Ultimate Encyclopedia of Fantasy* [1998]. While acknowledging the complex and ever-changing nature of fantasy literature, Pringle argues that there are nine categories of fantasy which have been most “recongizable, and have meant the most, to most people” (19). Importantly, Pringle clarifies that his subgeneric definitions are “meant to be descriptive of what has been, not prescriptive of what should be” (19),

underscoring the objective nature of his subgeneric classifications. The final category of fantasy Pringle describes is Heroic Fantasy, also known as High or Epic Fantasy, which he argues have “as their chief characteristic the fact that they are set in a wholly imagined world” which is of “more importance, both to writer and to readers, than any individual hero” (35). While Pringle traces the history of epic fantasy back to the classic fantasies of William Morris, Lord Dunsansy, and E.R. Eddison, he argues that this subgenre is the “direct legacy” of *The Lord of the Rings*, and was firmly established in 1977 with Terry Brooks’ *Sword of Shannara* and Stephen R. Donaldson’s *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*: “The year 1977 marked the turning point....With the arrival of Brooks and Donaldson, we entered the era of the big commercial fantasy” (37). Pringle argues that in the course of a few decades, epic fantasy has become the dominant form of popular fantasy, that it is “simply what fantasy *means* to most people” (37). Pringle concludes his overview of epic fantasy with a list of authors who have “jumped successfully on the bandwagon”; but while he acknowledges that they “vary in their talents” (37), he makes no attempt to subdivide them into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ epic fantasy, thus avoiding the types of confusion and disagreements that can arise from more subjective distinctions.

### 2.1.3. EPIC FANTASY: A DEFINITION

The definition of epic fantasy developed for this thesis deliberately does not address matters of quality, originality, style, or tone, but simply describes the subgenre’s primary distinguishing features:

Epic fantasy is a subgenre of popular fantasy fiction. Epic fantasy narratives take place primarily in a Secondary World, and tell a story in which the

actions of the protagonist(s) will have a decisive effect on the destiny of the entire world.

Two aspects of this definition require further clarification.

“Popular Fantasy Fiction”

It is necessary to first acknowledge that epic fantasy, as it is most commonly recognised today, is popular fiction. This thesis adopts Ken Gelder’s definition of popular fiction as set out in *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* [2006]. Gelder argues that “popular fiction is best conceived as the opposite of Literature” (11); so ‘popular’ in this definition is not necessarily an indication of a bestselling book, but a way of defining a field of literature that has motivations, logics, and practices different to those of literary fiction. Whereas literary fiction is “ambivalent at best about its industrial connections and likes to see itself as something more than ‘just entertainment’” (1), popular fiction is generally open about its connections with industry and entertainment. And, perhaps most importantly, whereas literary fiction is associated with singular artistic endeavours, popular fiction has strong identifications with generic markers: “The entire field of popular fiction is written for, marketed and consumed generically: it provides the primary logic for popular fiction’s means of production, formal and industrial identification and critical evaluation” (40). By this definition, there is a clear difference between *The Lord of the Rings* and the other texts examined in this thesis. *The Lord of the Rings* is a bestseller, but Tolkien did not write it according to an established generic model, or with the intent to write in to an established commercial genre: “When it came out in 1954-5 *The Lord of the Rings* was quite clearly a sport, a mutation, *lusus naturae*, a one-item category on its own.... It is in fact hard to think

of a work ... written with less concern for commercial considerations than *The Lord of the Rings*" (Shippey *Author* xviii-xxiv). Thus *The Lord of the Rings* is better conceived of as a literary fiction that achieved mass popularity, rather than popular fiction. Epic fantasy, in contrast, is unambiguously popular fiction: it is commercially motivated, and written to a well-established and highly visible generic model.<sup>12</sup>

#### "Secondary World"

'Secondary World' is a term coined by Tolkien in "On Fairy-stories" to describe a fantasy world that is independent of the real or 'Primary' world, but which has a certain level of realism in its presentation. Secondary Worlds are self-coherent, have an "inner consistency of reality" ("Fairy" 59), and have logic and rules which are not arbitrary or unreliable. Clute and Grant distinguish between Secondary Worlds and Fantasylands: a Secondary World typically plays a significant role in the story, and there is a "constant metaphoric meaning-drenched interplay between setting and tale [in which] world (or landscape) and story are inherently intertwined: one cannot exist without the other, and each modifies the other; a Fantasyland, in contrast, is a simply a backdrop to the action, it is "inherently *immobile* [and] cannot be transformed" ("Fantasyland"). Epic Fantasy typically has multiple protagonists (although there is usually one protagonist who is of most significance), as well as multiple plots, which are woven together to form one central plot concerning an apocalyptic threat to the Secondary World. Thus, in epic fantasy, the fate of the Secondary World typically

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<sup>12</sup> The history of popular fiction and the critical assumptions surrounding it are discussed further in Chapter Three.

constitutes the central and unifying plot thread which ties all of the other threads together.

‘Epic’ is a particularly apt description of this type of fantasy: it is epic in scope because it concerns the fate of an entire world, and it is epic in scale because the telling of a tale of this complexity requires a long narrative. For this reason, epic fantasies are typically serial narratives: that is, a single narrative extending over multiple volumes, rather than discreet narratives in a series of connected novels. Like fantasy itself, epic fantasy is better understood as a fuzzy set rather than a category with rigid boundaries. The texts chosen for this thesis, however, sit firmly at the centre of the fuzzy set of epic fantasy.

## 2.2. METHODOLOGY

Textual analysis is the fundamental methodological approach of this thesis. As argued below (58-59), there is a tendency when studying popular texts to talk around them, that is, to examine them as objects of social interest rather than artistic endeavours. This is often a result of an underlying assumption, which assumes that anything popular is somehow lacking in quality, and therefore not worthy of serious critical analysis. Hence, there is an unfortunate predilection towards shallow readings, generalisations, misrepresentations and inaccuracies in studies of popular fiction. Consequently, this thesis deliberately places the texts themselves at the centre of the critical inquiry, exploring epic fantasy in depth rather than breadth through a close critical reading of a select few examples.

For this reason also, this thesis does not address the issue of historical and generic influences on epic fantasy in significant depth. While it would certainly be a valuable exercise to consider the influence of, for example, epic poetry, Medieval romance, or

early fantasy, on epic fantasy, or the ways that other contemporary forms of the fantastic, such as sword and sorcery, Arthurian fantasy, or science fiction, have developed in conjunction with epic fantasy, it was decided not to take this approach for two primary reasons. Firstly, and most pragmatically, the necessary discussion and analysis of these other works would have significantly reduced the room available for the analysis of the epic fantasy texts. And, secondly, there could perhaps be a temptation to ‘justify’ the analysis of epic fantasy by linking it with literature that is more commonly acknowledged to be worthy of critical attention; this thesis instead aims to demonstrate the worth of epic fantasy by examining it on its own merits.

The tools and concepts provided by narrative theory are particularly appropriate for the analysis of epic fantasy, because, as discussed above (29) the concept of Story is a distinguishing feature of the fantasy genre. Similarly, narrative theory recognises that stories are a “basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change” (Herman, Jahn and Ryan ix). According to narrative theory, narrative is a phenomenon which transcends formats and media, and can be recognised in all manner of human activity, from everyday conversation, to visual art, to myth and literature:

narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives....

Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural; it is simply there, like life itself.

(Barthes 109)

The ‘narrative turn’ in literary theory gained impetus in the 1960s following the work of French structuralist narratologists, such as Todorov, Roland Barthes, and A.J. Greimas, which had emerged from a “complex interplay of intellectual traditions, criticotheoretical movements, and analytic paradigms distributed across decades, continents, nations, schools of thought, and individual researchers”, including Russian Formalism and Anglo-American theories of fiction and the novel (Herman “Histories” 20). The work of theorists such as Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal, Seymour Chatman, and Gerald Prince developed and refined structuralist approaches towards narrative during the period that is generally known as “classical narratology”. In this period the major aspects of narrative—”narration and plot; time and space; character; dialogue; focalization; and genre” (Herman “Introduction” 16)—were identified and debated, providing scholars with a set of tools and methods with which to approach and discuss narrative. The field then entered the period of ‘postclassical narratology’, which has generally placed more importance on the context in which the narrative is both produced and received more importance than classical narratology: “Whereas structuralism was intent on coming up with a general theory of narrative, postclassical narratology prefers to consider the circumstances that make every act of reading different” (Herman and Vervaeck 450). With a greater awareness of the social, cultural, political, and psychological contexts that inform our understanding of narrative, narrative theory has grown into a cross-disciplinary approach towards stories that reflects the universality and complexity of narrative itself.

Combined with the tools of narrative theory, at the core of my approach is a recognition that the mimetic mode and the fantastic mode offer differing narrative strategies to an author. As discussed above (25-28), both Hume and Attebery identify the mimetic and fantastic modes as the two central impulses of literature, wherein

mimesis is the impulse to imitate reality, and fantasy is the impulse to change reality. When examining the products of these two impulses, Hume focuses on the motivations and responses of authors and readers, and leaves the central portion of her diagrammatic model, the work itself, relatively unexamined (24). But, as Attebery argues, a mode is not only a “stance, a position on the world” but “a means of portraying it.... A writer makes use of these modes, as he makes use of language, to construct ... a story” (*Strategies* 2-4). This thesis, seeking to retain the texts at the centre of the inquiry, therefore examines the way that the mimetic and fantastic impulses manifest *within* each work, and in particular the way they interact with the levels of narrative—‘story’ and ‘discourse’—and the elements of narrative—‘existents’ and ‘events’.

### 2.2.1. STORY AND DISCOURSE

Narrative theory distinguishes between two levels of narrative, ‘story’ and ‘discourse’: “the story is the *what* in the narrative that is depicted, discourse the *how*” (Chatman 19). An author can make use of both the mimetic mode and the fantastic mode in the story and discourse levels of narrative: at the story level, the use of modes determines whether the places, characters and events depicted seem ‘real’, and at the discourse level it determines whether the manner of presentation assists or disrupts the sense of realism. Although it preceded the narratologists’ insights into the story/discourse distinction by a number of years, C.S. Lewis’ *Experiment in Criticism* theorises about two types of ‘realism’ that correspond to story and discourse levels of narrative: ‘realism of content’, which refers to *what* is being told, whether it is “probable or ‘true to life’”; and ‘realism of presentation’, which refers to *how* something is told: it is “the art of bringing something close to us,

making it palpable and vivid, by sharply observed or sharply imagined detail” (57-60). In narratological terms, this distinction could be expressed as the difference between mimetic story and mimetic discourse. As Attebery argues, fantasy literature is able to make use of realism in presentation, or a mimetic discourse, in order to make the fantasy more believable:

[The author] can lighten the burden by depicting the setting and incidents of a story so vividly that we can support inner conviction with the evidence of the senses.... Each of these bits of realism helps nail its story to reality. By putting the imagined in a coherent framework of the known, we allow ourselves to exist briefly on a plane with it.... For the same reason, fantasies are usually told in a conservative manner, without the shifts in time and point of view, the verbal tricks, and the violations of illusion that characterize much modern literature. (*Tradition* 35)

It is unsurprising then that all of the texts examined in this thesis primarily make use of a highly mimetic discourse: the narratives are generally told in a matter-of-fact, descriptive, concrete, ordered, and naturalistic fashion, with few deliberate disruptions to the sense of place or time. Indeed, one of the most innovative aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* was Tolkien’s extensive and exaggerated use of the mimetic mode at discourse level (discussed further in Chapter 4). There are some minor exceptions. A fantastic discourse might be employed in a dream-world, or a realm of Faërie; however, this is disruption to the normal discursive mode and is generally recognised as such. It is also possible to argue that some authors employ a more fantastic discourse in terms of style. For example, Tolkien frequently uses a formal and archaic style of narration and dialogue that would not be considered ‘naturalistic’ by today’s standards. But Tolkien is the only author examined in this thesis who

makes extensive use of this less mimetic discursive style. Thus, for the most part, the ‘fantastic mode’ in this thesis refers to fantasy at the level of story, the fantastic content.

### 2.2.2. EXISTENTS AND EVENTS

At the story level of narrative, there are two basic components: *existents*, which can be further divided into setting and character; and *events*, the actions and happenings (Chatman 19). This basic division of narrative elements has proved a useful way of structuring each chapter.

The first section of each chapter therefore addresses *Setting*. As already established, the Secondary World is of fundamental importance to epic fantasy, so it is important to look at *Setting* separately to *Character*, the other existent. As the conventional fairy-tale beginning—‘Once upon a time, in a land far, far away’—indicates, early tales of the fantastic often took place in undefined temporal and spatial locations, “generic backgrounds divorced from a particular historical period or location” (Eilers 331). But when fantasy began to develop as a modern genre, it also began to incorporate mimetic narrative techniques, including those related to setting. So, instead of a “pre-realistic indifference to time and place”, fantasy stories began to feature specific “time scales consistent with historical and natural events”, as well as detailed descriptions of “landscapes, interiors and objects” (Eilers 331). However, while a number of pre-Tolkien fantasy worlds, such as Lewis Carroll’s Wonderland or Frank L. Baum’s Oz, possessed a level of complexity and realism beyond that of their fairy-tale antecedents, their landscapes were still, as Brisbois argues, “too disconnected, too symbolic to be comparable to modern maps and geography” (199). Not until Tolkien’s Middle-earth did a fantasy world exist whose level of realism

was comparable to that of the real, or Primary, world. However, the techniques pioneered by Tolkien are now standard in epic fantasy. The reality of each Secondary World is first established through a combination of mimetic narrative techniques, including a firm basis in Primary World reality, consistent and logical content, concrete and detailed descriptions, and the use of scholarly apparatus, such as prologues, maps and appendices.

Using mimetic narrative techniques to establish a strong foundation for each Secondary World then allows for believable ‘fantastic extension’, wherein the fantastic elements are just as convincing as the mimetic elements. Typically the most non-mimetic element of a Secondary World is the concept of ‘magic’: “the primary assumption is that magic is possible in the world of the fantasy, and the exact nature of this ambient magic strongly influences the narrative” (D. Jones 616). Magic is the epitome of the fantastic mode in regards to the Secondary World, representing a pure belief in the impossible. Each chapter examines the nature and representation of magic in each Secondary World, as well as asking what function magic serves within both the world and the narrative. The idea of magic is naturally tied to the idea of power, and thus magical power is often inextricably linked to political power. All of the Secondary Worlds examined in this thesis have strongly hierarchal social and political structures. While these structures frequently bear similarities to those of the Primary World, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to trace correlations in any detail; however, serving as a point of comparison is an examination of the attitude each Secondary World demonstrates towards inherited rulership, and how this relates to modern democratic ideals. Each chapter examines the ways both the mimetic and the fantastic modes are used to explore questions of power and responsibility, and the relationship between a ruler and the land they rule.

The second section of each chapter addresses *Character*. Narrative theory distinguishes between the ‘actant’ and the ‘actor’. Broadly speaking, actants are archetypal and defined by their function within the story, whereas actors are familiar from observed reality. Characters in fairy tales are typically actants: they “generally lack any psychological depth. They define themselves by means of their actions instead of their psychology” (Neeman 158). Thus, fairy tale characters are often nameless, identified only by their plot function—the King, the Princess, the Wicked Stepmother; any names are merely descriptive—Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella (Eilers 330). In contrast, characters in a modern novel are typically named and, furthermore, expected to display a recognisably individual personality and psychology. However, actant and actor are not mutually exclusive categories: as Prince writes, an actor can be understood as the “concretization of an actant at the level of narrative surface structure. The actor [is] individuated in such a way as to constitute an autonomous figure of the narrative world” (3). An actor develops when an actant is developed to a point where the individual qualities of the character are as important as, or more important than, their functional role in the narrative. Epic fantasy typically brings this duality to the surface, recognising that each character is both actant and actor, both an individual and a function. Indeed, as Attebery argues, one of the great pleasures of the fantasy genre is “in seeing believable analogs of humanity acting out the patterns of fairy tale or myth” (*Strategies* 86). In all of the texts discussed in this thesis, the primary impetus for the character development of the hero comes when they begin to transform from actor into an actant, from an ‘ordinary’ person into a figure of story or legend; and, the central tension in the hero’s psychology is their struggle to find a balance between the actant and the actor.

The fantastic mode is particularly useful in epic fantasy characterisation when addressing themes of immortality, evil, and the ‘other’. Such themes can achieve greater prominence and urgency because the authors are not limited to constraints of reality: characters can live forever, or be inhumanely evil, or not human at all. This particular trait—good, evil, immortal, monstrous—may be their defining feature as a character, making them archetypes in the Jungian sense of the word, embodiments of universal human fears and desires. More frequently however, especially as the subgenre develops, we find that even characters primarily recognisable as archetypes have an added level depth and complexity, which frequently serves to complicate our understanding of these archetypal traits. But, whether they are purely fantastic, or a balance between fantasy and mimesis, one of the primary functions of non-human characters in epic fantasy is to reflect, exaggerate, and bring into focus fundamental questions of what it means to be human.

The final section of each chapter addresses *Structure*. In narrative theory, narrative structure can refer both to the “(structured) relationship of narrative events within a story”—*what* happens—as well as to the “structure of narrative communication itself”—*how* the story is told (O’Neil 366). The narrative structure of epic fantasy has its roots in heroic legends and fairy tales, and may be usefully analysed with reference to Campbell’s monomyth, Propp’s morphology of the folktale, or Tolkien’s understanding of fairy-tale structure. But the primary influence on the narrative structure of epic fantasy is the complex interlaced plot of *The Lord of the Rings*, in which a number of separate narrative threads combine to form an overarching narrative structure that, as discussed above (37-37), concerns the fate of the Secondary World. This is a complex structure that naturally leads to complex stories, requiring a strong authorial hand to maintain control. These sections address the

ways in which each author has adapted, or attempted to adapt, the interlace structure to suit their particular creative vision.

These sections also discuss how the fantastic device of prophecy can affect narrative structure and manipulate reader response. Prophecy is a fantastic form of prolepsis—a flash-forward—but embedded *within* the events of the story instead of overlaid via the discourse. For the reader, prophecy functions to create anticipation and, in the more complex uses of prophecy, to create puzzles that invite solving. Prophecies are typically vague, often deliberately misleading, and can therefore also be used to create surprise. But beyond reader manipulation, the use of prophecy in epic fantasy is made more complex by the fact that this narrative foreshadowing occurs *within* the story, and that the characters themselves have similar insight into future events. The emotional response to prophecy is typically either hope or despair, or vacillation between the two, depending on the nature of the prophecy and the social and personal philosophies of the characters who are aware of the prophecy. The use of prophecy in epic fantasy thus creates a complex relationship between author, reader, and characters, with the crux of the relationship being knowledge: who has it, when do they have it, and how much can it be trusted.

Epic fantasy typically has a strong tendency towards metafiction. Metafiction is most often associated with postmodern literature, in which the text playfully or ironically calls attention to its own status as an artificial construct, breaking down the barrier between reality and illusion. In epic fantasy, metafictional recognition is typically more subtle, never violating the sense of realism, but instead manifesting as an acute awareness of the role of stories in human existence. As Clute and Westfahl argue, this tendency is not exclusive to epic fantasy, but is a defining feature of the fantasy genre itself: “Part of the definition of fantasy is that its protagonists tend to know

they are in a Story of some sort ... many fantasy texts are clearly and explicitly constructed so as to reveal the controlling presence of an underlying Story, and that the protagonists of many fantasy texts are explicitly aware they are acting out a tale” (901). Characters in epic fantasy are not aware that they are a part of the story that the reader is reading in the Primary World; however, they are frequently aware that they are a part of a story *within* their Secondary World. So while the wall between reality and illusion may remain intact for the reader, this wall often begins to deteriorate for the protagonist, as the lines between what is real and what is ‘only a story’ become increasingly blurred.

### 2.2.3. CONCLUSION

Overall, the methodological approach of this thesis is based upon two essential questions asked of each text: How does the author make use of the mimetic and fantastic narrative modes? And, how has the author worked within the boundaries of generic expectations? This dual approach has been developed, in part, as a response to two of the most common assumptions made about epic fantasy: that it is unrealistic, and therefore escapist and irrelevant to real life; and that it is formulaic and badly written. The origins of these two assumptions, and the effect they have had on the criticism of both *The Lord of the Rings* and epic fantasy, are the subject of the next chapter.

### 3. THE CRITICAL RECEPTION

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As observed in the Introduction, epic fantasy criticism is, as yet, an extremely underdeveloped field of study. In an article on Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*, Attrill notes the lack of criticism and speculates that the "sheer size" of series such as this has been off-putting to literary critics (37). While this has probably been a factor, this chapter will argue that the dearth of epic fantasy criticism is largely a result of two features of the subgenre: that it is both fantastic and popular. As we shall see in the first section of this chapter, both fantasy fiction and popular fiction have traditionally been considered undeserving of serious attention in the Western critical tradition: fantasy fiction because it has been assumed to be childish and escapist, and popular fiction because it has been assumed to be formulaic and lacking in quality. Consequently, when critics began to turn their attention towards fantasy and popular fiction in the late twentieth century, their studies were often marked by uncertainty and defensiveness, as they considered not only how to approach their chosen texts, but the value of doing so. Further exacerbating the negative critical attitude is the underlying, often unspoken, assumption that both fantasy and popular fiction rely too heavily on the 'primitive' device of story-telling. The stigmas and assumptions associated with fantasy and popular fiction have had a pervasive influence on criticism of *The Lord of the Rings*, as we shall see in the second section of this chapter. In the early stages, the belief that fantasy fiction was escapist and juvenile ensured that discussions of the value of *The Lord of the Rings* centred on the question of whether it was relevant to 'real' life. But the most significant hindrance to serious critical discussion occurred in the 1960s when *The Lord of the Rings* achieved cult

status in America, thus forever branding Tolkien's work with the stigma of popularity. Today, even though there is a significant body of quality Tolkien criticism, the literary value of *The Lord of the Rings* is still a matter of debate. The final section of this chapter briefly addresses the way in which the negative assumptions made of fantasy and popular fiction have similarly affected the limited criticism of epic fantasy; however, it also speculates that one of the principal challenges facing epic fantasy criticism is the overwhelming reputation of *The Lord of the Rings*. If epic fantasy criticism is ever to develop as a significant field of inquiry, it will first need to overcome the belief that the entire subgenre is little more than formulaic imitations of *The Lord of the Rings*, and recognise, instead, that there are many works within the subgenre deserving of serious and discrete critical attention.

### 3.1. CRITICAL ASSUMPTIONS

#### 3.1.1. FANTASY

Fantasy theorists and critics have long had to struggle against the assumption that fantasy literature is escapist and irrelevant, and therefore less worthy of critical attention than realist literature. Hume argues that the 'realist bias' has origins in Aristotle and Plato's assumptions that literature was, or should be, primarily mimetic, and fantasy in literature was to be distrusted and disparaged: "it is an astonishing tribute to the eloquence and rigor of Plato and Aristotle as originators of western critical theory that most subsequent critics have assumed mimetic representation to be the essential relationship between text and the real world" (5). However, for much of Western literary history mimetic literature belonged to "low art, and to low style: comedy, farce, certain kinds of satire" (P. Brooks *Realist* 7); not

until the eighteenth century and the rise of the novel as a form of literature did mimesis come to be the preferred literary mode. The representation of real, ordinary people and events as pioneered by authors such as Balzac, Dickens, Flaubert and Eliot, once a “radical” break with tradition, became the dominant literary mode in the nineteenth century, “so much the expected mode of the novel that even today we tend to think of it as the norm from which other modes—magical realism, science fiction, fantasy, metafiction—are variants or deviants” (P. Brooks *Realist* 5). For, as the realistic novel gained dominance and respect in the nineteenth century, fantasy was “consciously pushed to the periphery by the upholders of the realistic novel” (Hume 21). This is not to say that fantasy fiction disappeared entirely; it became, as Prickett argues, an undercurrent against the mainstream of realist fiction, the “underside, or obverse, of the Victorian imagination” (9). However, the change in expectations cemented the underlying realist bias in the Western critical tradition, as literary taste for realism relegated fantasy to the status of ‘mere’ escapist fiction. This was, as Lewis observes, a subtle but inexorable process:

The dominant taste at present demands realism of content. The great achievements of the nineteenth-century novel have trained us to appreciate it and to expect it. . . . No one that I know of has indeed laid down in so many words that a fiction cannot be fit for adult and civilised reading unless it represents life as we have all found it to be, or probably shall find it to be, in experience. But some such assumption seems to lurk tacitly in the background of much criticism and literary discussion. We feel it in the widespread neglect or disparagement of the romantic, the idyllic, and the fantastic, and the readiness to stigmatise instances of these as ‘escapism’.

(*Experiment* 60)

As well as escapist, fantasy came to be seen as a childish form of literature. Tolkien argues that this was a result of fantasy's increasing unfashionability, which caused it to become "relegated to the 'nursery', as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the play-room, primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused" ("Fairy" 50). But the association of fantasy with children is also likely a result of a simple logical conclusion: if fantasy is merely escapist and irrelevant fiction, then it is naturally suitable only for children, as adults should be devoting their attention to more serious and significant forms of literature.

The realist bias in Western critical tradition has had a pervasive influence in fantasy scholarship: the perceived greater worth of realism has been a "major deterrent to the appreciation of fantasy" (Schlobin xii). As discussed in the previous chapter, it was not until the late twentieth century that significant steps were made towards overcoming the general critical neglect of fantasy. Prior to this period, as we saw, the majority of pioneering criticisms tended to discuss fantasy primarily as a form of literature for children, because children were erroneously seen as fantasy's 'natural' audience. But some of the pioneer fantasy theorists also addressed the assumption that fantasy literature was 'merely' escapist. Of these, Tolkien's discussion in "On Fairy-stories" is one of the most comprehensive. Tolkien challenges the belief the Fantasy is opposed to reason or truth, instead positing a close relationship between reality and fantasy: "For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it" ("Fairy" 65). So fantasy recognises reality, but need not be bound to it: this, for Tolkien, is the true value of fantasy. For while he acknowledges that fantasy is, in a sense, escapist, he denies the negative connotations traditionally associated with the word in literary terms. He instead argues that escape is, in many

circumstances, a quite sensible and warranted desire. On a simple level, Tolkien finds the “rawness and ugliness of modern European life” (“Fairy” 72) so absurd and ‘unreal’, that the desire to escape to the more archaic, beautiful, and natural worlds common to fantasy seems, to him, inevitable. But on a deeper level, Tolkien also argues that the desire to escape from grim realities such as “hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice” is a desire as old as human-kind, and should not be so easily dismissed (“Fairy” 73). Tolkien sees in fantasy the “imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires”, in which we are able to escape the limitations of our existence, including the “oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death” (“Fairy” 74-75). This last escape holds, for Tolkien, deep spiritual significance: he does not refer to deathlessness, or immortality, but rather escape “through death to eternal life” (Flieger *Splintered* 28). And, as we will see in Chapter Four, this is one of the central themes of Tolkien’s creative works.

As fantasy scholarship gained momentum in the 1970s and 1980s, one of its first objectives was, as we saw in the previous chapter, to define fantasy as a literary field. But another, underlying, objective was to defend fantasy’s worth as an object of critical study. Characteristic of many of these early studies is an awareness that it will probably be assumed that fantasy literature is escapist and irrelevant, and thus undeserving of serious critical attention. Each critic is therefore concerned to reassure the reader that fantasy is, in fact, relevant to reality. The first two chapters of Rabkin’s *The Fantastic in Literature* reflect the dual objectives of the early fantasy theorists: the first chapter is concerned to define fantasy, while the second chapter addresses the issue of ‘escape’ and fantasy. Rabkin recognises that ‘escape literature’ is conventionally seen as indicative of “a general evasion of responsibilities on the part of the reader who should, after all, spend his time on ‘serious literature’” (43-

44). However, Rabkin, like Tolkien before him, defends escape in literature on two grounds: he not only challenges the assumption that escape necessitates an “indiscriminate rejection of order”, but also challenges the belief that ‘escape’ inherently lacks value (44). Jackson’s *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, also addresses the issue of escapism and fantasy, but rather than defending the value of escapism, she instead challenges the assumption that fantasy is escapist at all. She introduces her study by observing that the ‘value’ of fantasy has always “seemed to reside ... in its ‘free-floating’ and escapist qualities”, and that fantasy has “appeared to be ‘free’ from many of the conventions and restraints of more realistic texts” (1). Her study is, however, an attempt to “militate against escapism or a simple pleasure principle” in order to argue for a more ‘theoretical’ understanding of fantasy, in which fantasy should not be seen as ‘transcending’ reality, because it is invariably determined by its social context, and is thus never “free” or escapist (2-3). Shifting direction from social reality to psychological reality, Apter begins his tellingly titled *Fantasy Literature: An Approach to Reality*, by declaring that the “aim and purpose of fantasy in literature are not necessarily different from those of the most exacting realism” (1), and goes on to state that he purposes to use psychoanalytic theory to demonstrate that the use of fantasy in the modern novel “must be understood not as an escape from reality but as an investigation of it” (2). But of these early fantasy studies, Swinfen’s *In Defence of Fantasy* is most direct in addressing the assumptions of the realist bias:

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of undertaking a serious critical study of the fantasy novel results from the attitude of the majority of contemporary critics – an attitude which suggests that the so-called ‘realist’ mode of writing is somehow more profound, more morally committed, more

involved with 'real' human concerns than a mode of writing which employs the marvellous. The contention of this defence of fantasy is that this is far from being the case. (10-11)

The crux of Swinfen's 'defence' of fantasy is thus a refutation of the assumption that fantasy is escapist and irrelevant. Her introductory chapter concludes with a brief argument for fantasy's relevance to reality, which is then reiterated and expanded in the conclusion. Swinfen contends that modern fantasy, "far from being the escapist literature which it is sometimes labelled", is often characterised by a "heightened awareness" of 'empirical' reality and a concern with exploring "transcendent reality" (234). While each of these critics puts forward different arguments, their objectives are identical: to challenge the assumption that the 'unreal' nature of fantasy literature is somehow indicative of its lack of worth as an object of critical study.

As fantasy scholarship has developed, it has grown more confident of the worth of its subject matter: today one is far less likely to come across the defensiveness and self-consciousness that marked many of the fantasy studies of the 1970s and early 1980s. Instead of apologising for or justifying the unreal aspects of fantasy literature, critics are more likely to celebrate fantasy's ability to achieve "a sense of possibility beyond the ordinary, material, rationally predictable world in which we live" and its capacity to "consciously break free from mundane reality" (Mathews 1-2). However, the influence of the realist bias is still evident. For example, Armitt begins her 2005 genre study, *Fantasy Fiction*, by claiming: "'Fantasy' is a word commonly disparaged by literary and nonliterary voices alike [and] literary realism is certainly the type of fictional writing adopted by canon, seen as most fitting for serious or weighty subject matter" (1). Armitt, like so many critics before her, immediately challenges the perceived greater worth of literary realism, in this case by arguing that

“there is no more a genuinely direct connection between realism and the real than there is between fantasy fiction and the real” (2). Even though fantasy scholarship has long since demonstrated the many and varied ways in which fantasy fiction can be seen as relevant to real life, the realist bias is so deeply ingrained in Western zeitgeist that, even today, some fantasy critics still believe it necessary to begin a study of the fantasy genre by, yet again, challenging the assumption that fantasy fiction is ‘merely’ escapist. And, as we shall see in the second and third sections of this chapter, the realist bias has been a persistently disruptive influence in criticism of both *The Lord of the Rings* and epic fantasy.

### 3.1.2. POPULARITY

The concept of ‘popular fiction’, like fantasy fiction, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Resulting from a combination of increasing literacy levels among the middle and lower classes along with the growth of industrialisation, the phenomenon of popular fiction emerged during the mid to late nineteenth century. During this period, publishing began to transform from a ‘high-brow’ artistic endeavour to a predominately commercial enterprise, associated with industry and entertainment. The commercialisation of publishing in turn created, as Bloom observes, “an unprecedented form: truly *popular* literature” (12): that is, literature that was created for, and read by, a mass audience. However, the commercial nature of popular fiction contributed towards negative assumptions being made about the authors, readers, and objects created by this new industry. Thus, authors of popular fiction were seen as entrepreneurs rather than artists, concerned more with production and income than with creative aspiration: “For aristocratic and upper middle-class authors in the nineteenth century, fiction-writing was little less than trade and little more than a

diversion with a possible hint of immoral earnings to boot” (Bloom 11). The readers of popular fiction were also held in low esteem, seen as ignorant ‘consumers’, as Henry James’ speculation on the ‘Future of the Novel’ in 1900 demonstrates: “The sort of taste that used to be called ‘good’ has nothing to do with the matter; we are so demonstrably in presence of millions for whom taste is but an obscure, confused, immediate instinct” (13). This in turn led to the assumption that popular fiction must be, by nature, “bad art” (Stowe 646), because the mass reading public lacked the education and sophistication to appreciate quality literature. As popular fiction has developed as an industry, the negative assumptions have lingered, aided and abetted by the growing links between popular fiction and genre. As discussed in the previous chapter (36-37), popular fiction is distinguished from literary fiction by its unambiguous generic identifiers: this is the way the entire field is produced, marketed and read. However, the visibility of genre in popular fiction leads many to assume that the entire field is nothing more than a matter of formula, and that it is read by people who are reassured by its sameness, as Gelder illustrates in his sketch of a typically ‘elitist’ view of popular fiction and its readers:

Literature is singular ... so the reading experience here is also singular: one emerges ‘satisfied’ from the literary text. Popular fiction, on the other hand, is generic – which compels readers continually to go in search of the next example of the genre they happen to be reading. The singularity of Literature means that its readers are politely restrained creatures: one text by one author is quite enough to be getting along with, and rewarding enough to be ‘re-read with even deeper appreciation’ later on. The reader of popular or genre fiction, however, is an ‘addict’ who ‘devours’ one work after another....

Satisfaction therefore would seem to escape these poor folk entirely as they give themselves up to the constant lure of their genres. (41)

The negative assumptions made of popular fiction—that it is formulaic, lacking in quality, and thoughtlessly consumed by unintelligent readers—have, in turn, influenced the way popular fiction has been approached in academia.

Traditionally, popular fiction has been approached by critics as cultural artefact, rather than an object of aesthetic worth. For example, in Sutherland's *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction of the 1970s*, one of the first comprehensive surveys of popular fiction, he argues that the

utility of bestsellers lies in the very fact that they often have no literary merit to distract us. We are not therefore detained by a respect for their sanctity as 'texts'....What is useful about such culturally embedded works is what they tell us about the book trade, the market place, the reading public and society generally at the time they have done well. (5)

Thus, Sutherland sees popular fiction's lack of aesthetic value as advantageous, because it means that there is nothing to distract us from its real value as a sociological tool. And, because critics thought of popular fiction as formulaic—"an undifferentiated, composite construct" (Ashley 1)—in which one instance of a particular genre is the same as any other, early critical studies of popular fiction are often characterised by a "failure ... to engage with specific texts" (Ashley 5); instead, critics often made broad generalisations about entire genres based on the few examples they had read. Moreover, the perception that popular fiction is more valuable for what it can tell us about the social and cultural context in which it was produced than for its distinctive aesthetic qualities has led to an unfortunate tendency

towards shallow and inaccurate analysis—assumedly because it is supposed that the particulars of an individual text are of little importance.

This sociological approach towards popular fiction is also indicative of a desire to maintain a critical distance between academia and popular culture. The reader of popular fiction is classified a ‘fan’, passive, over-enthusiastic, and uncritical; whereas the academic is, in contrast, discerning, objective, and analytical. Thus, in this scenario, the reader of popular fiction remains a safely contained ‘Other’, to be observed and explained. However, some recent studies have challenged this division, arguing that not only is the difference between the academic and the fan less clear than might be thought, but that it is possible to be both an academic and a fan. Jenkins’ ground-breaking study of fan culture, *Textual Poachers*, argues that “organized fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism, a semistructured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated” (86). In this way, Jenkins argues, fan activity often mirrors academic activity: both are concerned with critical evaluation and interpretation of cultural artefacts. However, as Hills argues, fandom and academia approach this common goal in different fashions, guided by competing “discourses and ideals of subjectivity” which affect their respective attitudes (8). Hills claims that the ‘scholar-fan’—an academic who also claims a fan identity—is still often anxious to disguise any ‘fannish’ enthusiasm because “respect is aligned with, and given to, the imagined subjectivity of the ‘good’ and rational academic who is expected to be detached and rational, even about his/her own investments in popular culture” (12). While the activities of an academic may be similar to those of a fan, there is still level of anxiety about revealing too much investment in popular

culture, for fear of being perceived as a 'mere' fan, and thus compromising one's status as an objective academic.

Despite the anxieties surrounding the critical study of popular fiction, the endeavour has gradually become more accepted. In 1989, Ashley wrote that although the "silence on popular fiction *has* been broken", it seemed to him that it still "is not easy to study popular fiction; much resistance persists, as do the old prejudices of the mass-culture debate" (3). However, ten years later, Browne and Marsden claimed that "'Popular' is no longer a four-letter word. The study of everyday culture is commonplace" (2): this was, they argue, a radical change from 1970, when the Popular Culture Association was founded, and popular culture was still "anathema" (2). Nonetheless, even though the serious study of popular culture objects is today more respectable in academia, negative assumptions about both the quality of popular fiction and the type of people who read it are still very influential, as we shall see in the remainder of this chapter.

### 3.1.3. STORY-TELLING

There exists an interesting commonality between fantasy fiction and popular fiction, which has undoubtedly contributed to the negative critical attitude towards both: they are both, first and foremost, concerned with story-telling. As discussed in the previous chapter, the fantasy genre can be thought of as distinct from other forms of fantastic literature through its foregrounding of story (29). Popular fiction is also primarily narrative-driven, elevating entertainment over aesthetics, story over style: this is one way popular fiction can be seen to differ from literary fiction: "Literature doesn't need a story or a plot, but popular fiction couldn't function without one" (Gelder 19). Or, as Bloom articulates the difference: "Art fiction highlights its style,

delights in it and makes of style a fetish. Popular fiction neutralises style, seems only interested in narrative, content and convention, and delights in making language invisible in order to tell a tale” (21). However, story-telling has traditionally been undervalued, even disdained, in modern literary criticism, which “has tended to take its valuation from study of the lyric, and when it has discussed narrative has emphasized questions of ‘point of view,’ ‘tone,’ ‘symbol,’ ‘spatial form,’ or ‘psychology’. The texture of narrative has been considered most interesting insofar as it approaches the density of poetry” (P. Brooks *Reading* 4). Modernist literary criticism, in particular, cemented the contemptuous attitude towards story-telling, when, in what Kroeber claims was one of Modernism’s “most revolutionary acts”, story-telling was relegated to a ‘primitive’ activity (2). In a much-quoted passage, Forster articulates the Modernist view of story:

Yes—oh, dear, yes—the novel tells a story. That is the fundamental aspect without which it could not exist. This is the highest factor common to all novels, and I wish that it was not so, that it could be something different—melody, or perception of the truth, not this low atavistic form. For the more we look at the story ... the more we disentangle it from the finer growths that it supports, the less shall we find to admire. It runs like a backbone—or may I say a tapeworm, for its beginning and end are arbitrary. It is immensely old—goes back to neolithic times, perhaps to Paleolithic. Neanderthal man listened to stories, if one may judge by the shape of his skull. (27-28)

Although ‘revolutionary’ at the time, the disdain for narrative “is now so embedded in our thinking that only through drastic self-criticism can we perceive the form of this prejudice” (Kroeber 2). Fortunately, contemporary literary theory has begun to turn its attention back towards narrative; however, as discussed in the previous

chapter, this is a relatively recent critical concern (40-41). It is thus unsurprising that this subtle prejudice against narrative can still be detected in criticism of both fantasy and popular fiction, as an underlying, tacit awareness that both rely obviously on narrative drive for effect and meaning, thus lessening their critical worth. And in forms of literature, such as epic fantasy, which are both fantastic *and* popular, the reliance on story-telling is reinforced, as is the critical disdain. While, as this thesis will demonstrate, the role of story in epic fantasy is complex and varied, often manifesting in particularly sophisticated and self-aware ways, the blatant nature of story's presence within the subgenre is often reason enough for academics to dismiss epic fantasy as mere escapist entertainment.

### 3.2. THE LORD OF THE RINGS

When *The Lord of the Rings* was first released it received a few particularly hostile reviews. In these reviews can be seen the assumptions of the realist bias: because *The Lord of the Rings* was fantasy, it was assumed to be juvenile and escapist. Wilson begins his notorious 1956 review by admitting that he is puzzled by Tolkien's assertion that *The Lord of the Rings* was a fairy tale written for adults: "It is essentially a children's book—a children's book which has somehow got out of hand" (327). He could only explain the extremely positive reactions the book had already received from other critics by concluding that "certain people ... have a lifelong appetite for juvenile trash" (331-32). Muir's 1955 review damns *The Lord of the Rings* with faint praise, characterising it as an "extraordinary" and "brilliant" story in the style of a "boys' adventure story", full of "boys masquerading as adult heroes", and with a requisitely simplistic happy ending: "The good boys ... emerge at the end of it well, triumphant and happy, as boys would naturally expect to do"

(11). And, in his 1956 review, Roberts states that he finds it “unusual” for a modern writer to attempt a tale of this sort, “children’s tales apart” (450). Grading the book against Tolkien’s qualities of fantasy in “On Fairy-stories”—Recovery, Escape, Consolation—Roberts gives the book “high marks” for Escape:

In all the three volumes there is nothing drab or everyday. Joys and disasters are alike on a satisfactorily heroic scale. Nor are we troubled by one of the drabbest aspects of real life, the way that people’s characters are not simply black or white but various shades of grey: here the good are very, very good and the bad are simply horrid. (455)

Roberts concludes his review with the definitive statement that what is “ultimately wrong” with *The Lord of the Rings* is that it is “all a matter of contrivance. It doesn’t issue from an understanding of reality which is not to be denied; it is not moulded by some controlling vision of things which is at the same time its *raison d’être*” (459).<sup>13</sup> In their recent appraisal of Tolkien criticism, Drout and Wynne survey some of the reasons given to explain the early critical hostility directed towards Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings*, including Tolkien’s position outside the literary ‘establishment’, his religious sensibility, and his political views (113-17). But whatever the reasons for their hostility, critics such as Wilson, Muir and Roberts often based their criticisms on what fantasy fiction was *assumed* to be: as many have pointed out, their accusations are easily refuted by reference to the facts of the book. In fact, Drout and Wynne complain that too much time has been given to disproving these early shallow criticisms: “Tolkien scholars point out the same tired fallacies by the same

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<sup>13</sup> Tom Shippey would later single out this accusation as “possibly the single most imperceptive statement ever made about Tolkien” (*Author* 308).

foolish critics and make the same points in refuting them” (116). But the reason criticisms such as these are so provocative is because they are rooted in the pre-existing negative assumptions about fantasy fiction: they seem plausible criticisms, and thus seem necessary to refute.

Perhaps for this reason, many of the positive reviews of *The Lord of the Rings* made a point of highlighting the book’s complexity and relevance, thus pre-emptively defending the book against readers’ negative assumptions. For example, Kepert’s 1954 review begins by acknowledging that most people would consider this ‘fairy-tale’ an “absurd” endeavour for a “modern novel”, and of little interest to “intelligent adults” (11). But Kepert pleads readers to give *The Lord of the Rings* a chance: “One opens it in amused condescension and closes it enthralled” (11). Nicholls begins his 1954 review by declaring that this ‘fairy tale’ is “not for children. It is too big for children, too mature, on too grand and epic a scale” (16). As well as assumptions of childishness, Nicholls dissuades assumptions of escapism: “Some might say that it will be a foolish work, because of its unreality. But it is not unreal. The closeness of its analogy to the human situation gives it a dreadful reality and relevance” (11). As Reilly observes in his 1968 article, most of the early criticism of *The Lord of the Rings* “comes down to the question of whether the book is relevant to life.... It is almost as if Tolkien had held up a mirror, not to life, but to critical attitudes” (136). When *The Lord of the Rings* was published, the dominant critical attitude held that fantasy was an escapist and childish form of literature: some critics used this to their advantage, as solid ground from which to base an attack; while others felt obliged to defend *The Lord of the Rings* against such assumptions. And, as we shall in the rest of this chapter, *The Lord of the Rings* has “attracted such criticism consistently since it was first published” (Ripp 267): the crux of public and academic debate about *The*

*Lord of the Rings* is usually whether the book is ‘merely’ escapist and juvenile, and, consequently, whether it is worth talking about seriously at all.

*The Lord of the Rings* gained another obstacle to serious critical discussion when it became a cult object in 1960s America: since then, *The Lord of the Rings* has had to contend with the dual stigmas of fantasy *and* popularity. The negative critical attitude towards popular literature was immediately attached to *The Lord of the Rings*, as can be seen in the newspaper and magazine articles published in response to the cult movement. As Ripp observes, the “essential feature” that marked most of these articles was “the fact that the articles spent very little time (apart from brief synopses) discussing the book at all” (263). Instead, most of the articles were concerned to discuss the activities of the Tolkien fans, typically in a “mildly condescending” manner (Ripp 264). For example, Resnick’s 1966 description of the Tolkien fans, or ‘Tolkien people’ as he terms them, depicts them as over-enthusiastic youths driven by unconscious impulse:

although the Tolkien people wince at the word ‘fad’ as if it were sheer blasphemy; even they will admit that their enthusiasm has gone—perhaps inevitably—beyond all reason.... Although the Tolkien fans rarely show herding instincts and never scream, they are driven by the same subtle urge that produces water guns at the first breath of spring, gives rise to the sudden, unexpected yo-yo, and squeezes crowds of students into telephone booths.

(91)

Mathewson seems similarly bemused by Tolkien fans in his 1968 article, and takes great pains to convey his position as ‘perplexed outsider’ when describing a fan gathering:

There was, at the outset, something cliquish about the reading of Tolkien, a hint of the secret society.... A Yankee set down in the drawing room full of Southerners ... could be no more at a loss than one who has never read Tolkien placed in the midst of a fan chat. If he formed an opinion at all, it would probably be that the conversation was fatuous in its single-minded devotion to the most minute details; for a true appreciation of the books seems to require that they be absorbed *in toto* and taken with perfect seriousness. (131)

In these, as in other articles, the attitude of the journalist is of an ethnographer, keen to describe the curious habits of the ‘natives’, but steadfastly maintaining the boundaries between the observer and the observed. We can see the influence of the popular stigma in the journalists’ desire to distance themselves from the fans, thus reinforcing their own position as a serious and rational critic. Moreover, the belief that popular fiction is more valuable as a sociological tool than as a literary object is reflected in the primary aim of most of these articles: to assess what *The Lord of the Rings*’ popularity “said about American youth” (Ripp 275). The *fact* of the book’s popularity was seen as more important than the content of the book itself: thus, most articles only offer a brief summary with terse evaluations: “The books are essentially an adventure story” (Resnick 91); or Mathewson’s more negative assertion that *The Lord of the Rings* is “in essence nothing more than fairy tales, grown up and grown exceedingly lengthy, escapist and nonintellectual” (131). However, the Tolkien cult would have far more significant effects than a few condescending magazine articles. As Ripp notes, *The Lord of the Rings*’ popularity in the 1960s would influence critical attitudes for years to come: “Without the sudden explosion of attention, it

seems doubtful that *The Lord of the Rings* would still attract such hostility in some circles” (275).

The hostility towards *The Lord of the Rings* is evident in some of the early fantasy scholarship discussed in the previous chapter (23-26). We have already seen the curious position held by such an influential text as *The Lord of the Rings* within the fledging field of fantasy criticism: marginalised, misread, defined as ‘not fantasy’ at all. As Attebery notes, it seems that many fantasy scholars “turned to Tolkien only because he could not be avoided in discussing twentieth-century uses of the fantastic” (*Strategies* 36). And the fact of *The Lord of the Rings*’ popularity prompted various responses. While some few critics did not mention it at all, most critics made at least some passing reference. Jackson, for instance, clarifies that she will not be addressing “some of the better known authors of fantasy (in the popular sense)” at any length, because these “best-selling fantasies” do not fit her definition of ‘fantasy’ (9). Interestingly, Jackson accuses *The Lord of the Rings* and other examples of ‘romance literature’ of providing only “wish fulfilment” and an “escape ... from present material conditions” (154-56), thus directing the assumption that fantasy literature is ‘escapist’ towards a particular type of popular literature that, according to Jackson, is not ‘fantasy’ at all. Some other critics show self-consciousness about addressing a popular novel, but still give *The Lord of the Rings* due consideration. For example, Irwin prefaces his positive reading of *The Lord of the Rings* with a disclaimer: “Soon after publication, *The Lord of the Rings* became the center of a popular cult. Even so, it is a work of great learning” (161). But, unlike Irwin, some critics appear unable to forgive *The Lord of the Rings* its popularity, and, in some cases even seem to allow the fact of *The Lord of the Rings*’ popularity affect their analysis and evaluations. Hume’s *Fantasy and Mimesis*, like many other early

fantasy studies, challenges the assumption the fantasy is irrelevant, arguing instead that “departure from reality does not preclude comment upon it: indeed, this is one of fantasy’s primary functions” (xii). However, in her categorisation schema, Hume puts *The Lord of the Rings* in the category of ‘literature of illusion’, or ‘escape’ literature. According to Hume, escapist literature is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is not as significant as other types of literature because, while it can provide emotional satisfaction, it “rarely challenges us to think” (81). Thus Hume, like Jackson, channels the negative assumptions made of fantasy towards one particular type of fantasy, which is depicted as less valuable than other forms of the fantastic. Hume then generalises, without any evidence, about the readers of this type of fantasy: “Their most enthusiastic readers would like to think of themselves as crippled heroes, forced to operate in a materialistic universe which has lost its myths and its monsters. Trekkies and Tolkien fans clearly find bourgeois life deeply unsatisfying” (66). It is not surprising then that Hume claims that readers of *The Lord of the Rings* “identify with the aristocratic Aragorn ... not the untalented masses. Readers can glory vicariously in competence and the accompanying self-confidence, qualities that come to the stories’ heroes with little unpleasant effort and may even be inherited” (66-67). Clearly, Hume has ignored the Hobbits, the primary narrative focalisers and surely examples of the ‘untalented masses’ rising to unexpected and demanding heroism: indeed, it is generally agreed that one of the most innovative and appealing aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* is the very ordinary and relatable nature of the Hobbits. But Hume presupposes that the people who read *The Lord of the Rings* are all of a type: enthusiastic but passive, alienated from contemporary society, but finding pleasure in being part of an “elite fellowship” of likeminded people (67), and accepting the “aristocratic values” of the story because they do not

fully understand their implications (195). It is likely that Hume's image of a Tolkien reader has been heavily influenced by the negative assumptions made of readers of popular fiction in general, as well as the condescending magazine articles about the Tolkien cult discussed above. Unfortunately, rather than alter her assumptions based on the evidence offered by the text, Hume instead drastically misrepresents the text to make it correspond to her assumptions.

Brooke-Rose is another fantasy critic whose hostility towards *The Lord of the Rings* appears to be influenced by her negative perception of Tolkien fans. Brooke-Rose's lengthy analysis of the way Tolkien combined the rhetorical modes of realism and fantasy in *The Lord of the Rings* is an important insight into understanding the originality of his work, and as such will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four (91-92); however, it is interesting to note that Brooke-Rose's judgement of *The Lord of the Rings* is ultimately negative, finding Tolkien's combination of narrative modes clumsy and unsuccessful. In his discussion of her work, Shippey seems puzzled by her negative evaluation, observing that despite her perceptive analysis, her "comments on Tolkien mostly strike [him] as prejudiced to the point of wilful blindness" (*Road* 321). A clue may lay in the openly contemptuous attitude Brooke-Rose demonstrates towards Tolkien fans when she argues that *The Lord of the Rings*' "histories and genealogies" are unnecessary to the narrative, but "have given much infantile happiness to the Tolkien clubs and societies, whose members apparently write to each other in Elvish" (247). Unlike Hume, Brooke-Rose does give a reasonably accurate representation of the text; even though, as Attebery notes, she demonstrates the "remarkable carelessness with detail" (*Strategies* 27) so common to studies of popular fiction. However, her evaluation of *The Lord of the Rings* appears to have been negatively influenced by her hostile attitude towards both the text and

its fans: as Shippey suggests, “she resents her subject too much to read it fully” (*Road* 320). Even though Hume and Brooke-Rose are sympathetic towards fantasy literature in general, both seem to have a critical blind-spot concerning Tolkien’s work. For early critics of modern fantasy, it was difficult to overlook *The Lord of the Rings*; however, it also appeared difficult for some critics to overlook its popularity. But other critics, convinced of *The Lord of the Rings*’ literary value, began to take the first steps towards establishing what would eventually become a significant body of scholarship. In 1968, Isaacs and Zimbaro gathered some of the best examples of early *The Lord of the Rings* criticism in the milestone collection, *Tolkien and the Critics*. Throughout this collection, one can see the influence of the stigmas of fantasy and popularity, as the critics find themselves in the difficult position of praising a work that, according to contemporary literary taste, has none of the qualities of ‘great literature’. Most palpable is the self-consciousness some of the critics exhibit over addressing such a popular text: Isaacs in fact introduces the entire collection by noting that it is “surely a bad time for Tolkien criticism” because “Tolkien’s enormous current popularity itself acts as a deterrent to critical activity” (1). While many of the articles were written before the height of Tolkien’s popularity, some of the later-written articles demonstrate a desire on the part of the critic to separate their aims from those of the fans. For instance, Spacks argues that the existence of the Tolkien cult “suggests the power of Tolkien’s work”; however, she distances herself from the fans by claiming that while Tolkien encourages a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’, “the cultists try to maintain that suspension beyond the limits of the book” (97). Similarly, Sale argues that the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* is indicative of its worth; however, a more objective critical assessment is required, “because the enthusiasts as yet are more excited than articulate” (247).

While clearly not wanting to dismiss the significance of Tolkien's popularity, these critics are keen to clarify that they themselves are not 'cultists', and that their appreciation of *The Lord of the Rings* will therefore be of a more serious and 'academic' nature.

As well as the stigma of popularity, one can see the influence of the realist bias in Isaacs and Zimbardo's collection, and in particular the considerable influence exerted by the shallow criticisms of the early hostile Tolkien reviews discussed above:

Wilson's 1956 review, for example, is referenced (and challenged) sixteen times, by five different critics. Reilly discusses the critical controversy surrounding *The Lord of the Rings* at some length, arguing that the fact that it is "certainly not a realistic novel" is the "sharp edge of the razor which both friendly and hostile estimators have had to get over" (132-33). And, using Tolkien's defence of fairy-stories as a starting point, Reilly defends *The Lord of the Rings* against accusations of escapism by arguing that, "far from being irrelevant to reality", fantasy literature is "relevant to moral reality" (146), and, moreover, that escapism is not a "refusal to face reality", but rather an opportunity to find solace, respite, and consolation. But one of the most interesting articles in the collection is Raffel's "*The Lord of the Rings* as Literature". In Raffel's contention that *The Lord of the Rings* is "magnificent" but "not literature" (246), we can see the pervasive influence of Modernism's disdain of story-telling, its elevation of aesthetics over narrative. While Raffel's definition of 'literature' is rather vague, it seems that his central criticism is that all of the features of the text—style, character, incident—serve the narrative rather than existing for their own sake. Therefore, *The Lord of the Rings* cannot be defined as 'literature' because "making stories, even wonderful stories, is not the same thing as making literature" (219). As Attebery argues, throughout the collection one senses that the critics "are struggling

to affirm the excellence of Tolkien's text against the weight of a received tradition of critical thought" (*Strategies* 18). *The Lord of the Rings* was a fantasy; it achieved massive popularity; it clearly and unashamedly told a story. Twentieth century critical traditional told critics that these were not the hallmarks of great literature. And yet many believed that Tolkien's work was great literature, and worth serious consideration. But establishing *The Lord of the Rings*' literary value required a massive shift in perception, a broadening not only of "horizons" but of "definitions" (Isaacs 11), and a need to challenge deeply-entrenched beliefs about what constituted 'great literature'.

Since Isaacs and Zimbardo's collection, Tolkien scholarship has gradually increased in authority and confidence, becoming more certain about not only how to approach his work, but the value of doing so. But the defensiveness has been difficult to leave behind: as Drout and Wynne observe, "nearly every Tolkien critic has worked to some degree or another on the problem of defending Tolkien against his detractors" (113). However, Shippey's 2000 study, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, will, hopefully, come to be seen as the definitive defence of Tolkien. The title of Shippey's study is a direct reference to the controversial nomination of *The Lord of the Rings* as the 'book of the century' in a number of polls conducted towards the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (discussed further below, 74). Shippey clarifies the purpose and tone of his work in the Forward: "The continuing appeal of Tolkien's fantasy ... cannot be seen as a mere freak of popular taste, to be dismissed or ignored by those sufficiently well-educated to know better. It deserves an explanation and a defence, which this book tries to supply" (ix). Shippey develops a three-fold defence of Tolkien's status as 'author of the century': popular consensus, as indicated by sales and polls; impact and influence, as indicated by the establishment of a new, wildly

successful, subgenre of fantasy; and the quality of Tolkien's work and the reasons for its particular appeal to the twentieth century, with this last argument constituting the bulk of Shippey's study. Throughout the book, Shippey defends Tolkien's work against the criticisms most frequently directed towards it. For example, accusations of escapism are countered by demonstrating how Tolkien's war experiences manifest in his work, as well as the universal relevance of the 'mythic dimension' of *The Lord of the Rings*; accusations of moral simplicity are countered with discussions of Tolkien's complex combinations of Boethian and Manichean views of evil; and accusations of stylistic ineptitude are countered with evidence of Tolkien's profound knowledge and control over language. Having addressed the openly articulated criticisms of Tolkien, Shippey concludes by addressing the "general phenomenon of intense critical hostility to Tolkien, the refusal to allow him to be even a part of 'English literature'", which he argues is more difficult to refute because "while the hostility is open enough, the reasons for it often remain unexpressed, hints and sneers rather than statements" (305). But Shippey suggests that Tolkien provoked such hostility because he threatened the authority of "the arbiters of taste, the critics, the educationalists, the *literati*" (316). Interestingly, Shippey argues that Tolkien's literary ideals were not necessarily so far removed from some of the Modernist ideals of literary taste; however, Tolkien took these ideals seriously "instead of playing around with them" (315-16), and then, moreover, proceeded to undercut the elitist tendencies of Modernism by proving to have widely popular appeal. Shippey concludes his 'defence' by arguing that the hostility towards Tolkien may have resulted from the fact that a work of fantasy has proven to be so relevant to the modern world:

I believe that it is our ability to read metaphorically which has made Tolkien's stories directly relevant to the twentieth century.... It may indeed be the readiness with which these points are taken which has made Tolkien seem, not irrelevant, but downright threatening, to members of the cultural Establishment. (328)

In their review of *Author*, Drout and Wynne, finding that the defence of Tolkien's works has "become rather tired", suggest that "critics begin to act as if Shippey's work has provided the definitive 'defense' of Tolkien" (116-17). Ideally, Shippey's thorough and persuasive argument would be the 'last word' on defences of Tolkien; this may even be the case within the relatively narrow field of Tolkien scholarship, where the defensiveness and uncertainty that characterised the Isaacs and Zimbardo collection is much less prevalent. Unfortunately, however, in the wider academic world and the general public arena, the "decades-old dispute over whether Tolkien's work counts as serious literature is still alive" (McLemee).

In 1997, the Waterstone bookstore chain and BBC 4 conducted a poll to discover the 'greatest book of the century': *The Lord of the Rings* was a "runaway winner" (Pearce 2). This result provoked horrified reactions among the 'literati', such as Howard Jacobson's acerbic response: "Tolkien – that's for children, isn't it? Or the adult slow.... It just shows the folly of these polls, the folly of teaching people to read.... It's another black day for British culture" (qtd in Jeffreys). There was even speculation that Tolkien fans had "conspired to orchestrate mass voting" for *The Lord of the Rings*; these speculations were silenced when other organisations conducted similar polls with identical results (Pearce 2-4). Not silenced, however, was the outrage of the intellectual elite, as "a critic's chorus hailed the results as a terrible indictment on the taste of the British public, who'd been given the precious

gift of democracy and were wasting it on quite unsuitable choices” (Prachett 76).

One of the most virulent responses came from Germaine Greer, who wrote that ever since she had arrived at Cambridge University in 1964 and seen “full-grown women wearing puffed sleeves, clutching teddies and babbling excitedly about the doings of hobbits”, it had been her “nightmare” that Tolkien would become the most influential writer of the twentieth century:

The bad dream has materialized.... Novels don't come more fictional than that. Most novels are set in a recognisable place at a recognisable time; Tolkien invents the era, the place, and a race of fictitious beings to inhabit it. The books that come in Tolkien's train are more or less what you would expect; flight from reality is their dominating characteristic. (Greer 3)

Like so many hostile Tolkien critics before her, it seems that Greer bases her assessment of *The Lord of the Rings* on her assumptions about fantasy fiction and popular fiction, and the people who read them: she allegedly admitted in a later panel discussion that she had never actually read *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>14</sup> Evidently, decades of Tolkien defenders have done little to dissuade many critics of their belief that *The Lord of the Rings* is ‘juvenile trash’, read by those “burrowing an escape into a nonexistent world” (Jeffreys).

It is thus unsurprising that there is still doubt as to whether Tolkien and his works are deserving of serious critical study. In a 2006 *Narrative* article on *The Lord of the Rings*, Bowman notes that while specialised Tolkien scholarship is flourishing, there

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<sup>14</sup> “The Big Read Debate with Andrew Marr” screened on BBC4 on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2003. Efforts to obtain a copy or transcript of the program have been unsuccessful, but discussion of Greer’s admission appeared in various blogs and forums soon after the program screened, for example: <http://crookedtimber.org/2004/08/06/our-germs-gets-a-gong/>; <http://www.thetolkienforum.com/archive/index.php/t-11791.html>; <http://www.council-of-elrond.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-4008.html>

has been a “general neglect of *The Lord of the Rings* among scholars of fiction”, citing as evidence the lack of articles on Tolkien in journals with broad scholarly audiences such as *Narrative*, *ELH* and *PMLA* (272). Bowman speculates that the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* has “led some to suppose that the work can appeal only to relatively naive readers, that it would not reward the kind of critical analysis that more sophisticated fiction receives” (272). Two articles which appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2006 and 2001 also reflect on Tolkien’s ambivalent position within academia. The first discusses Tolkien scholars’ “quest for legitimacy in academe” and the establishment of *The Tolkien Journal*, the first academic journal dedicated solely to Tolkien and his works. The stereotypical image of a ‘Tolkien fan’, first established forty years ago, is still demonstrably a negative influence: the reporter notes that descriptions of the journal’s editorial activities immediately calls to mind

the image of a group of Tolkien enthusiasts (possibly dressed as hobbits or orcs) gathering at a photocopy shop to assemble a fanzine. Even a glance at the journal reveals how unfair such assumptions are.... But academics working on Tolkien inevitably fall under suspicion of being fans, distinguished from Trekkies only by their taste for the quasi-medieval.  
(McLemee)

The second *Chronicle* article, “Deconstruct This: J.R.R Tolkien”, asks Tolkien scholars Tom Shippey, Jane Chance, Verlyn Flieger, and Brian Rosebury why Tolkien “gets no academic respect” and why his novels have been “dismissed by critics as juvenile, moralistic, and escapist (not to mention, badly written)”. All four cite ideological opposition as a primary factor, especially Tolkien’s position as ‘other’ within the accepted norms of the literary ‘establishment’. But the stigmas of

fantasy and popularity are also given as significant contributing factors. Chance suggests that conservative academics “suspect fantasy and anything popular.” Rosebury argues that Tolkien’s work is unpopular among literary critics because it does not appear to “directly or indirectly represent ‘contemporary social and political realities’”. He also speculates that some of Tolkien’s fans, the “naive enthusiasts”, have contributed towards the negative assumptions made of his works, and worries that “the forthcoming movie is likely to renew this effect, unfortunately.” Similarly, Flieger suggests that over-enthusiastic fans contribute to the assumption that the books are “whimsical and overimaginative, not to be taken seriously by serious readers.” But Flieger was also optimistic that this attitude would change: “There has been already a slight but perceptible shift in academic attitudes toward Tolkien and his work ... overdue and to be welcomed.” However, seven years later, in another interview, Flieger says that she still finds sceptical attitudes towards Tolkien’s critical worth prevalent at the University of Maryland, where she has established a number of courses on Tolkien: “My colleagues – not all of them but many of them – do not take the material I teach seriously” (Hoyt). Here, when asked the reasons for the disdainful attitude towards Tolkien, Flieger responds succinctly: “Snobbery.”

The effects of the stigmas of fantasy and popularity that have so long plagued criticism of *The Lord of the Rings* show little sign of disappearing. Within the narrower critical fields of fantasy, popular fiction, and Tolkien scholarship, hostile or defensive attitudes towards *The Lord of the Rings* are today infrequent; however, in the broader academic world and the general public arena, Tolkien scholars are still required to defend his work against assumptions that it is childish, escapist, a ‘freak of popular taste’, and thus unworthy of serious critical attention. But throughout its critical history, *The Lord of the Rings* has always avoided one accusation that is

frequently directed towards popular fiction: formula. On the contrary, Tolkien's work was so innovative that a great deal of early criticism was dedicated to defining exactly what type of book it was, because "when early readers opened *The Fellowship of the Ring*, essentially no context existed in which to place the book" (Ripp 269). In effect, as Shippey observes, *The Lord of the Rings* was required to create "its own genre" (Author 221). This new genre is now, of course, a hugely successful and widely recognised subgenre of popular fiction: epic fantasy. As popular fiction, epic fantasy is unambiguously generic, which leads many to assume that it is also formulaic. Criticism of epic fantasy must therefore not only struggle against the same assumptions associated with fantasy and popular fiction that have beleaguered Tolkien criticism, but it must also contend with the assumption that the entire subgenre is little more than formulaic imitations of *The Lord of the Rings*.

### 3.3. EPIC FANTASY

In a 1998 article discussing the recent successes of epic fantasy, Dowling aptly describes the general perception many have of the subgenre:

To non-fans, put off by the garish, cookie-cutter covers showing mighty-thighed warriors swinging battleaxes and armoured Amazons fighting dragons, it's just self-imitating, formula escapism, an irreverent and often heavy-handed plundering of history and legend churned out as derivative, mindless adventure to snatch the disposable income of people who don't know any better.

This description contains all of the negative assumptions fostered by the stigmas of fantasy and popularity discussed thus far in this chapter: epic fantasy is assumed to be "escapism" and "irreverent"; it is assumed to be read by "people who don't know

any better”; and the books are assumed to be “self-imitating”, “formula” and “derivative”. While Dowling’s article counters these assumptions, noting that “there does seem to be more to it than this”, many other articles not only maintain this negative perception of epic fantasy, but seem particularly hostile towards the subgenre. Grant, for example, describes genre fantasy as “whatever bloated trilogy the publishers’ presses choose next to excrete into the toilet bowl of the book trade” (“Gulliver” 23). He does concede, however, that genre fantasy is not entirely without purpose:

For these ghastly, unnecessary, and derivative books clearly do fulfil a function: people do not read them because they are stupid, and nor are they necessarily stupid to do so.... The reader of generic fantasy requires to bolster his or her self-image as an imaginative person ... and hence turns to that form of literature that has the FANTASY label on the spine. (“Gulliver” 23)

Grant contends that readers of genre fantasy would be threatened by ‘full fantasy’, which is subversive and experimental; genre fantasy, on the other hand, is conservative and formulaic, which its readers find reassuring. This negativity towards epic fantasy and its readers can also take on some odd forms depending on the preconceptions of the critic. Sutherland’s 2005 article on the best-selling Robert Jordan novel, *Knife of Dreams*, claims that it “caters to hard-core initiates of fantasy fiction” and that it is an allegory about Creationism with appeal to ignorant religious fundamentalists: “Darwinists should be apprehensive about the popularity of this series.” Finally, in possibly the most damning statement of all, Sutherland claims that “George Bush could conceivably be a fan.... Jordan’s vision of a final decisive battle clearly coincides with aspects of the president’s world view” (“Into the Lists”).

Similar to the accusations of escapism and childishness directed towards *The Lord of*

*the Rings* by Wilson, Muir, and Roberts (discussed above, 62-63), Sutherland's claims are clearly based on his preconceptions about the subgenre and its readers rather than on a careful analysis of the actual text: as we shall see in Chapter Seven, *The Wheel of Time* is specifically critical of fundamentalism in any form (253, 270).

Like the first reviewers of *The Lord of the Rings*, who were keen to dissuade preconceptions of childish irrelevancy, reviewers offering a more positive perspective on epic fantasy often make a point of countering the negative assumptions surrounding the subgenre. For example, Rothstein's 1996 article on epic fantasy, Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* in particular, notes that it is "odd that such attempts at [social] realism should be combined with so thorough a determination to avoid earthly history", but argues "that is part of the genre's point": that is, Rothstein argues, epic fantasy combines a nostalgic yearning for an idealised, even magical, past, with a sombre recognition of the inevitable realities of the modern world. Rothstein also demonstrates the continuing influence of Modernist criticism's suspicion of story-telling when he acknowledges that *The Wheel of Time* is more concerned with narrative than aesthetics, noting that there is a "practical quality to these books – their job is to tell a story"; he, however, argues that "even a reader with literary pretensions can be swept up in Mr. Jordan's narrative of magic, prophecy and battle". A similar tentative tone can be found in the few academic studies of epic fantasy, which, like *The Lord of the Rings* criticism in its early stages, is often defensive and self-conscious. The introductory chapter of Senior's *Stephen R. Donaldson's Chronicles of Thomas Covenant: Variations on the Fantasy Tradition*—the first academic book dedicated to a single epic fantasy—addresses the negative assumptions surrounding both fantasy and popular fiction at some length. Echoing the defences made by early fantasy scholars, Senior notes that there are a

number of “cultural preconceptions or prejudices” which have led many to assume that fantasy is escapist, childish and irrelevant (5), before arguing that the “lack of realism lies in the form, not in the meaning or application”, for it is through its relationship *with* reality that fantasy gains its significance (9). Senior also addresses the stigma of popularity, describing it as the “peculiar but widespread belief that works which achieve financial success and attract a large reading (or at least purchasing) audience must be in some way inferior” (2). After pointing out the number of financially successful works which have made it into the literary canon, Senior also challenges the perception that epic fantasy is by definition formulaic: “The list of modern fantasy that departs from the stereotypical or twists the stereotypical into new forms is an extensive, if neglected, one” (17). Overall, there is little that is new in Senior’s defences of fantasy and popular fiction; however, given the aforementioned highly negative attitude towards epic fantasy, it is unsurprising that Senior felt it necessary to reiterate these arguments. As Thomas notes in her article discussing the benefits of teaching epic fantasy, the stigmas associated with the genre have been “identified and debunked by literary critics for quite a while now, yet the genre itself continues to be dismissed as escapist fluff” (60). Indeed, the best indicator of academic attitudes towards the subgenre is the distinct *lack* of criticism: despite decades of cogent defences of both fantasy fiction and popular fiction, the predominant belief still seems to be that epic fantasy is simply not worth talking about.

### 3.3.1. THE INFLUENCE OF *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

Serious appreciation of epic fantasy is even further hindered by the overwhelming reputation of *The Lord of the Rings*. As the inspiration for the subgenre, it is not

surprising that Tolkien's work still features heavily in any discussion of epic fantasy. Countless reviews and book covers inform readers that this author is the 'next Tolkien', the 'American Tolkien', 'the Australian Tolkien'; that this book 'rivals *The Lord of the Rings*', that this world 'evokes Middle-earth', that this series has come to 'dominate the world Tolkien began to reveal'. Although tiresome, this is not necessarily problematic: associations with Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* serve as an easily understood generic identifier for readers. Problems do, however, emerge when these types of superficial comparisons infiltrate academic criticism.

Comparisons to Tolkien in epic fantasy criticism are both expected and justified. As is discussed in subsequent chapters, all authors addressed in this thesis have acknowledged Tolkien's influence in their lives and works. As fantasist George Martin writes in his introduction to *Meditations on Middle-earth*, "Most contemporary fantasists happily admit their debt to the master (among that number I definitely include myself), but even those who disparage Tolkien most loudly cannot escape his influence" (3). Whether they are inspired, guided, or challenged by it, any author writing into the epic fantasy subgenre will at some level be influenced by *The Lord of the Rings*. Unfortunately, however, epic fantasy criticism has rarely given the matter of the intertextual influence of Tolkien's work full consideration; rather, comparisons to *The Lord of the Rings* are too frequently generalised and oversimplified. A typical approach is to group epic fantasy into one category, and then make generalisations about the entire subgenre's quality as compared to Tolkien. This approach is validated by the assumption that because popular fiction is generic, it is also formulaic, and thus can be discussed as "an undifferentiated, composite construct" (Ashley 1). These sorts of generalisations often appear as a coda or epilogue in discussions of Tolkien, serving the dual purpose of demonstrating

Tolkien's lasting cultural influence, while also reinforcing his perceived literary superiority. For example, the final chapter of Rosebury's *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon* discusses the 'cultural afterlife' of Tolkien. Under the heading of 'Imitation', Rosebury describes the "tidal wave of published fiction" resulting from the success of *The Lord of the Rings*, which is dominated by

the innumerable works of Terry Brooks, David Eddings, Robert Jordan, J.V. Jones ... Anne McCafferey, and other purveyors of Tolkien-derivative secondary worlds. Though entertaining enough if you can get past their mechanical prose, [they are] lacking most of the qualities which ... make Tolkien an important literary artist.... The maps, the magic, the monsters, the races, the talismans, the names ending in *-ath* and *-eth* and *-or*, the Lords of this and the Masters of that are all there; what one misses are Tolkien's adequately motivated characters, diversity of dialogue styles, eye for three-dimensional landscape, leisurely but assured management of narrative, and combination of effectively realised character-perspectives with an underlying 'objective' vision. (203)

Ironically, Rosebury seems to be falling in to the trap of 'assimilation' that he identifies in criticisms of *The Lord of the Rings*: "In assimilation, the distinctive features of the original work, instead of forming the basis of an application to some new context, tend rather to be erased or eroded, in order to locate the work within some more familiar category" (196). Assimilation, Rosebury argues, has often resulted in "a kind of glib dismissiveness" towards *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as superficial analyses, in which critics overstate Tolkien's "indebtedness or affinity to other texts" (199). So when Rosebury later dismisses the entire subgenre of epic fantasy in single paragraph, with no attempt to discover any of their 'distinctive

features', it is difficult to see this as anything more than a 'glib dismissiveness', and a locating of these texts within the 'familiar category' of poor Tolkien imitations.

But even critics who look in more depth at individual epic fantasies often still give too much weight to Tolkien, assuming that similarities are imitations and differences are deficiencies, thus finding themselves in the contradictory position of simultaneously criticising a work for being too similar to *The Lord of the Rings* but also for not being similar enough. Kaveney, for example, argues that the 'long journey' common to epic fantasies is one of the "much copied elements of *The Lord of the Rings*" (169), seemingly overlooking the fact that the 'long journey', or 'quest', motif has been a mainstay of the epic tradition since *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Homer's *Odyssey*. Clute in fact argues that the quest motif is a fundamental component of the telling of a story and, as story is integral to the fantasy genre, it is therefore "not surprising that almost all modern fantasy texts are built around, or incorporate a quest" ("Quests" 796). But Kaveney, like many other critics, does not acknowledge the possibility that epic fantasists, like Tolkien himself, may be drawing upon the older epic tradition, and that this is the reason that "certain plot components will inevitably appear" (Spellar 175). And while Kaveney praises the moral and spiritual significance of journeying in Tolkien, she claims that in

many of the imitative epics which derive from Tolkien, journeying is a plot device with little in the way of moral content.... In David Eddings, in particular, it largely lacks emotional content.... Where that sense of potential doom is lacking, as it is in Eddings' *Belgariad* sequence, it is not enough to be travelling through difficult terrain. (170)

This is a valid observation: Eddings' long journeys do not have the moral and emotional depth of Tolkien. However, Kaveney does not take advantage of the potential avenue for exploration which opens up if we ask, 'What *is* the narrative function of Eddings' long journeys?' As we shall see in Chapter Six, the entire tone of Eddings' work is dramatically different from Tolkien's, so it is not surprising that the epic motifs are used in a different fashion; however, this does not necessarily mean they are less valuable or effective. One of the most striking elements of *The Lord of the Rings* is the way Tolkien drew on older plots, characters and motifs and presented them in an original and creative fashion: it is unconstructive to assume that other authors are incapable of doing the same.

A more productive approach can be seen in Senior's study of *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*. Along with addressing the stigmas of fantasy and popularity, as noted above (80-81), Senior argues in his introduction that one of the greatest deterrents towards objective appreciation of modern fantasy is the fact that it "lies under the Valinorean shadow of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*" (15). Senior dedicates an entire chapter to comparing *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Chronicles*, but unlike so many other critics, does not assume that the *Chronicles* is an inferior imitation; instead, he examines the differences between the two texts, taking into account Tolkien's and Donaldson's differing social and cultural backgrounds, and provides an insightful comparative analysis. However, Senior does perhaps overstate some claims in order to create more distinction between *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Chronicles*. For instance, he argues that the difference between the "British and American perspectives" can be seen in the forward-looking "historical intent" of the *Chronicles*, which is contrasted with the more nostalgic perspective of *The Lord of the Rings*, which has "no direct connection to our day-to-day world" (64)—this last

statement is somewhat contentious, especially when one takes into account the many ways *The Lord of the Rings* can be seen to comment on the modern world, some of which are discussed in Chapter Four (94-95, 111, 128). Similarly, Senior later argues that the difference between Tolkien's and Donaldson's worlds are reinforced by the nature of the respective "armies of evil": in Tolkien, Senior argues, these armies consist of "Orcs, trolls, Shelob the great spider, Wargs, the carrion-bred steeds of the Nazgûl", all of which have "bestial connotations and belong to the realm of the goblins, wicked wolves, and flying monsters of folklore and myth"; in contrast "many of Foul's sickening creatures are human in form, the product of horrible mutations and mutilations" (83). While this comparison is true to a point, Senior does not mention the human Southrons and Easterlings of Tolkien's world, who, along with the Orcs, make up the bulk of Sauron's armies: it could even be argued the Orcs themselves are 'human in form, the product of horrible mutations and mutilations'. Senior makes a number of similar comparisons between Tolkien and Donaldson throughout this chapter, and it is interesting to note that, in general, Senior seems to emphasise the mythic, fairy-tale aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* in order to contrast them with the more human and realistic aspects of the *Chronicles*. Perhaps we can see here the subtle influence of realist bias, in that Senior asserts the worth of the *Chronicles* against *The Lord of the Rings* by arguing for the *Chronicles*' greater realism.

### 3.4. CONCLUSION

The biggest hindrance to serious critical discussion of epic fantasy seems to be the preconceptions associated with the subgenre. Although decades of critics have defended both fantasy fiction and popular fiction against the negative assumptions

made of both forms of literature, this seems to have done little to dissuade academia of its scepticism towards the critical worth of epic fantasy. For this reason, this chapter has been more concerned to discuss the reasons behind these negative assumptions and the influence they have already had in the criticism, rather than to mount yet another defence of fantasy fiction and popular fiction. As we saw in the first section, other scholars have already successfully countered the assumption that fantasy fiction is childish and irrelevant, and that popular fiction is formulaic, poorly-written and consumed by unsophisticated readers. And, on a more fundamental level, narrative theory has brought attention back to the value of story, which has been traditionally viewed with suspicion in twentieth-century literary criticism. But even though critical attitudes have significantly changed in the past few decades, these negative assumptions have been a persistently disruptive influence in Tolkien scholarship, as the second section of this chapter demonstrated. It has taken some time for Tolkien scholars to overcome the defensive and self-conscious attitude characteristic of the earliest critical responses, and in the meantime too much time has been given to defending Tolkien against his detractors, as critics repeat the same arguments over and over again. Fortunately, while the general academic world may not yet be convinced of Tolkien's value, Tolkien scholars have developed a significant body of quality scholarship that has only increased in authority and sophistication over the years: indeed, this fact alone should be enough suggest the critical worth of Tolkien. It is to be hoped that a similar future exists for epic fantasy scholarship; however, as yet, this is a significantly underdeveloped area of inquiry, seemingly affected by the same problems that have beleaguered Tolkien scholarship for so many years. That is, the negative assumptions associated with fantasy fiction and popular fiction are automatically associated with epic fantasy, and appear to

hinder many critics from objective analysis, or from seeing the potential avenues of critical exploration. Furthermore, epic fantasy criticism is further hindered by the overwhelming reputation of Tolkien, which seems to lead many critics to assume that the entire subgenre of epic fantasy is nothing more than poor imitations of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The negative assumptions associated with epic fantasy have, in turn, prompted some of the directions this study has taken. The assumption that the presence of fantastic elements makes a text less relevant to reality, and that the true value of a text is measured by its level of mimesis, was, in part, responsible for the decision to explore the narrative functions of the mimetic mode *and* the fantastic mode in epic fantasy. While not disregarding the fundamental importance of mimesis in epic fantasy, this thesis will also bring attention to the equally important fantastic elements, and explore the ways in which the *combination* of the two narrative modes work to reflect on reality in each text. Similarly, the assumption that popular fiction is more valuable for its sociological implications than for its artistic qualities prompted my decision to explore epic fantasy in depth rather than breadth via close critical readings of a select few examples of the subgenre. This thesis is also concerned to acknowledge the fundamental role Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has played in the establishment and evolution of epic fantasy, but also to address each work in its own right, moving beyond simple comparisons to *The Lord of the Rings* to ask whether the authors have succeeded in their goals of giving a unique voice to the subgenre. And, finally, one of the most basic motivations behind this study was the desire to contribute towards the establishment of epic fantasy criticism as a serious field of inquiry. The current dearth of criticism is not due to a lack of complex, original or provocative epic fantasy; rather, the preconceptions critics have of the subgenre may

have prevented them from seeing its critical potential. Therefore, assuming that the best method of defending the critical worth of any text or genre is the production of quality criticism, the remainder of this thesis is, in essence, my 'defence' of epic fantasy.

## 4. THE REVOLUTION OF FANTASY:

### J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

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It is difficult to overestimate the impact Tolkien has had on the fantasy genre. With *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien re-imagined what a fantasy story could be, and in doing so, forever altered the way the modern world perceived fantasy. As modern fantasist George R. R. Martin writes:

Fantasy had existed long before him, yes, but J. R. R. Tolkien took it and made it his own in a way that no writer before him had ever done, a way that no writer will ever do again.... Tolkien *changed* fantasy; he elevated it and redefined it, to such an extent that it will never be the same again.

("Introduction" 2-3)

Tolkien's particular innovation was to introduce a level of realism never before seen in a fantasy work. But Tolkien's innovation did not emerge in a vacuum; rather, he was building upon techniques that had been inherent in the fantasy genre since its beginnings. As discussed above, fantasy as a modern literary genre developed alongside the new novelistic mode of realism (19), and the fantasy genre has always drawn to some degree on the narrative techniques of the realist novel. "Modern fantasy", Eilers claims, "emerged when authors began utilizing the techniques of literary realism to compose stories about the extranatural" (319). And it was the use of these literary techniques, Eilers argues, which distinguished modern fantasy from its predecessors (329). Similarly, Attebery claims that the classic works of modern fantasy represent the fairy-tale's transition from an oral to a literary form, and that the classic fantasists, such as Ruskin, MacDonald, Morris and Lewis, needed to

therefore take into consideration modern readers' expectations of greater realism: "Readers of novels had come to expect the fuller documentation that gives weight to fiction" (*Tradition* 5). Attebery argues that Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is an "extension" of the work of the classic fantasists, but that compared to the work of his predecessors, "is an achievement of such magnitude and assurance that it seems to reshape all definitions of fantasy to fit itself" (*Tradition* 10). So, while the fantasy genre has always drawn upon the narrative techniques of realism to some degree, Tolkien took it to a new level with *The Lord of the Rings*.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien combined the narrative techniques of the fantastic mode with those of the mimetic mode to an unprecedented degree. One of the most detailed analyses of Tolkien's pioneering narrative technique appears in Brooke-Rose's *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*. Brooke-Rose's study examines the ways in which various forms of fantastic literature, such as science fiction and the ambiguous tale, employ the rhetorical strategies of the realistic novel. In her extensive discussion of *The Lord of the Rings*, Brooke-Rose argues that the novel's primary rhetorical mode is that of the marvellous: that is, it is an extension of the folk-tale, a story built around a series of structural elements and functions, as for example those documented in Propp's morphology of the folk-tale. But Brooke-Rose argues that from this traditional beginning, *The Lord of the Rings* "slowly becomes, a very different book, weighed down, not only by mechanisms inherent to the Marvelous, but also by the mechanisms of the realistic novel" (233). For example, she argues that Tolkien dwells upon the psychological motivations of his characters more "than is usual in the Marvelous" (248), and that this level of psychological detail is unnecessary and intrusive in a Marvelous tale, because its characters are (or should be) solely functional. Similarly, Brooke-Rose argues that the "vague setting" and

“unspecified time” of a Marvelous tale is in *The Lord of the Rings* replaced with a detailed “mega-story” of history and geography, which while “wholly invented” is “treated *as if it existed*” (243). But again Brooke-Rose contends that this ‘mega-story’ is unnecessary and intrusive, because instead of “allowing an economy of description and ensuring a general effect of the real, it needs on the contrary to be constantly explained” (243). For Brooke-Rose, the ‘infiltrations’ of realism in *The Lord of the Rings* are the novel’s primary flaw: “The techniques of realism, when invading the Marvelous, have a very curious effect. For they not only weigh down and flatten out the narrative like an iron, they actually change its genre” (254). It is interesting that Brooke-Rose, as Shippey observes, so “strangely wraps a true perception in error” (*Road* 319). For, if, as Attebery suggests in his analysis of Brooke-Rose, we filter out her negative evaluation, “which is a matter of taste masquerading as analysis” (*Strategies* 26), we are left with an important point: that Tolkien did, as Brooke-Rose suggests, ‘change the genre’ by using the rhetorical techniques of realism within an essentially marvellous tale. Perhaps, as suggested in Chapter Three (69-70), Brooke-Rose has allowed her negative assumptions about *The Lord of the Rings* and its readers to affect her evaluation, thus causing her to characterise innovation as failure.

Even though Tolkien’s use of the narrative techniques of the mimetic mode is innovative, it is important not to overlook his use of the fantastic mode. As this chapter will discuss, Tolkien uses the mimetic mode to firmly establish the reality of his imaginary world; this means that when fantastic elements are introduced, they are grounded in this same reality. This ‘fantastic extension’ creates a world that is both mimetic and fantastic, and wholly believable. However, when discussing the fantastic elements of *The Lord of the Rings*, it is critical to recognise the important

role Tolkien's religious beliefs played in his creative works. Tolkien famously wrote that *The Lord of the Rings* is "fundamentally a religious and Catholic work" but that the religious elements were not overt, rather "absorbed into the story and the symbolism" (*Letters* 172). Therefore, as Flieger argues, the "seeker after explicit Christian reference, as distinct from Christian meaning, will find little ... to get a grip on" (*Splintered* xx). This chapter discusses how Christian meaning manifests in *The Lord of the Rings* via the constant movement between hope and despair, redemption and fall, light and darkness. Flieger argues that Tolkien's religious life was characterised by a concurrent sense of optimism and pessimism, of hope and despair, that emerged in his creative works as an enduring concern with the "contrast and interplay of light and dark", a polarity that "operates on all levels—literal, metaphoric, symbolic" (*Splintered* 4). Thus, throughout *The Lord of the Rings* there is a symbolic association of light with hope, as Middle-earth wages a battle against the growing power of darkness and despair. As this chapter argues, Christian meaning in *The Lord of the Rings* is most strongly manifested via the fantastic mode; thus, there is an interesting reversal taking place, in that the more fantastic elements of *The Lord of the Rings* are frequently reflections of Tolkien's religious beliefs, which were, for him, the profoundest reality.

## 4.1. SETTING

### 4.1.1. MIMETIC BEGINNINGS

In his 1954 review of *Fellowship of the Ring*, Lewis described Tolkien's Middle-earth as an "utterly new" achievement:

Probably no book yet written in the world is quite such a radical instance of what its author has elsewhere called 'sub-creation'.... Not content to create

his own story, he creates, with an almost insolent prodigality, the whole world in which it is to move, with its own theology, myths, geography, history, palaeography, languages, and the order of beings. (“Gods” 112-13)

Despite the magnitude of his sub-creation, Tolkien does not immediately overwhelm the reader of *The Lord of the Rings* with the full scale of Middle-earth. Instead, the story begins in the Shire, which is easily recognisable as an analogue of the English countryside, as Tolkien acknowledged: “‘The Shire’ is based on rural England and not any other country in the world.... The toponymy of The Shire ... is a ‘parody’ of that of rural England” (*Letters* 250). There are many points of similarity between the Shire and England, in terms of its history, geography, and character, so that even though it is a fantasy world, the particular section of Middle-earth in which the story begins is reassuringly familiar. And before the narrative proper even commences, Tolkien provides a large amount of paratextual material to support the reality of the Shire. This material takes the form of scholarly apparatus, as Tolkien adopts the guise of translator and editor of an ancient text, the ‘Red Book of Westmarch’. As West argues, the narrative device of the ‘found manuscript’ lends authenticity to imaginary world of Middle-earth through an appeal to the “modern mystique of ‘scholarly research’” (92). *The Lord of the Rings* begins with an editorial prologue, which, as the ‘editor’ states, is mostly “concerning Hobbits” (*Lord* 1), and provides a detailed history of the Hobbits and the Shire. The history of the Shire also, as Shippey points out, has a “very careful, point-for-point resemblance ... to the traditional history of England” (*Author* 60), thus reinforcing the sense of familiarity. As well as the editorial prologue, *The Lord of the Rings* concludes with a series of appendices, which are “annalistic, calendrical, narrative, palaeographical, and linguistic” in nature (Flieger *Interrupted* 138), and include an extensive discussion of

the complexities of translating the Red Book into a “history for the people of today to read” (*Lord* 1133). Completing the scholarly apparatus are a series of maps, which as discussed below, correspond precisely to information given within the narrative proper. All of this extensive paratextual material is presented in a sober and conscientious manner, helping to give the Shire the illusion of scholarly authenticity. The illusion of authenticity is further supported by the depiction of the Shire in the narrative proper, in which the landscape is both familiar and meticulously described. Middle-earth, as a whole, is broadly similar in “climate, geology and vegetation, as well as scale, to Europe” (Rosebury 11), and the Shire bears a strong resemblance to the English countryside, replete with “well-tended fields and meadows” and “hedges and gates and dikes for drainage” (*Lord* 91). Tolkien reinforces the sense of familiarity by providing the specific names of English flora: there is rarely a generic ‘tree’ in the Shire, but rather “alder-trees”, “fir-trees”, or “oak-trees” (*Lord* 71-76). As Shippey notes, names are “isomorphic with reality”, which means that “they are extraordinarily useful to fantasy, weighing it down as they do with repeated implicit assurances of the existence of the things they label” (*Road* 101). To this end, *The Lord of the Rings* has an extensive and elaborate nomenclature, with approximately 2000 named people, places and objects, all of which are linguistically supported in the appendices. Tolkien also pays particular attention to matters of direction and distance, giving specific details about the characters’ locations at certain points, all of which correlate to the provided maps. A frequently used technique is to describe the surrounds as viewed from a high vantage point, thus providing a full compass outlook. For example, on top of a hill in the Barrow-downs, the narrator describes the view to the West, over the forest to the “valley of the Brandywine”, to the South, “over the line of the Withywindle”, to the North “beyond the dwindling downs”, and

to the East, where the “Barrow-downs rose, ridge behind ridge into the morning” (*Lord* 136). The characters, too, “have a strong tendency to talk like maps” (*Shippey Road* 100): for instance, Merry’s topographical lecture in the Barrow-downs: “that is the line of the Withywindle. It comes down out of the Downs and flows south-west through the midst of the Forest to join the Brandywine below Haysend. We don’t want to go *that way!*” (*Lord* 113). Because both the narrator and the characters provide such concrete information about where things are located, what their names are (often in different languages), and what their history is, and because all of this information is corroborated by the maps and appendices, the reader is given ample reason to accept the geographical reality of the Shire.

The narrative proper of *The Lord of the Rings* begins with description of the events leading up to Bilbo’s ‘long-expected party’. This festive beginning serves two purposes: it provides a familiar entry-point into the Secondary World, as a birthday party is an occasion recognisable to most readers, and it is also an effective way to introduce hobbit society. Within a few pages, Tolkien establishes the hobbit love of gossip, eating, and presents, as well as their suspicion of outsiders, and ‘queer’ or ‘outlandish’ events and behaviours. The focus in these early chapters is on the small, domestic details of Shire society, such as descriptions of housing, eating and bathing habits, or trivial legal and governmental procedures. And what we see of everyday hobbit life is recognisable: hobbits spend their leisure time having dinner parties, exchanging gossip and gardening tips over fence, and drinking ‘pints of beer’ and swapping stories in local pubs (*The Green Dragon*, the name of the Hobbiton pub, is also a common British pub name (Hammond and Scull 76)). Hobbit food is identical to that of the Primary World: apples, corn, honey, mushrooms, bread, bacon and sausages. Even the songs they sing resemble common folk ditties, such as Frodo’s

‘ridiculous’ song at the Sign of the Prancing Pony, which is “obviously indebted to the nursery rhyme ‘Hey Diddle Diddle’” (Hammond and Scull 156). Overall, the Shire is the most mimetic location in *The Lord of the Rings*. While the same mimetic discursive techniques—scholarly apparatus, extensive and specific descriptions, and recognisable details—are used to depict the rest of Middle-earth, they are not used to the same degree, and the locations they describe are not as recognisable as the Shire, grounded as it is in its specific ‘Englishness’. The time spent in the Shire thus acts as a comfortable and leisurely introduction to Middle-earth, easing the reader into accepting the reality of this world. The narrative stays located in the Shire and the surrounding area for ten chapters, so by the time that the hobbits leave Bree-land with Aragorn, thus crossing the threshold into Middle-earth’s more fantastic realms, the reality of Middle-earth has been firmly established.

#### 4.1.2. FANTASTIC EXTENSION

The more fantastic elements of Middle-earth are introduced gradually. While still in the Shire, Tolkien establishes the deep-seated hobbit suspicion of magic and fantasy, as epitomised by Ted Sandyman’s dismissive attitude towards walking trees, Elves and dragons: “There’s only one Dragon in Bywater, and that’s Green” (*Lord* 44). To most hobbits, magic and fantasy belong to the “world outside” (*Lord* 43), matters of stories and legends. But magic and fantasy soon begin to infiltrate hobbit society, and Frodo’s life in particular. Firstly via the intermittent appearances of Gandalf, who not only brings news of the outside, but is himself a being of great magic, although most hobbits are unaware of any magic beyond that of his “legendary” firework displays (*Lord* 25). Gandalf, too, tells Frodo the truth of Bilbo’s ring, which transforms the name of Mordor, once only a matter of “the legends of the dark past” (*Lord* 44), into

a sudden and undeniable reality in Frodo's life. The most unsettling intrusion is that of the Nazgûl, a shadowed and ominous figure, who inspires "unreasoning fear" in Frodo, unreasoning because Frodo feels his safety is assured while he is "still in the Shire" (*Lord* 75). The frightening Nazgûl intrusion is balanced by the appearance of the Elves, who arouse wonder and joy in the hobbits, a "waking dream" (*Lord* 82). Throughout these early chapters, magical objects, beings, and events, whether terrifying or wonderful, are something clearly out of the ordinary in the Shire landscape. But the narrative gradually shifts position, so that the hobbits become the intruders, strangers infiltrating a fantastic world. They first take a brief excursion into the Old Forest, a fantastic realm *within* the Shire, where fear—the Barrow-wight—is balanced by wonder—Bombadil and Goldberry. However, they soon return to the furthest edge of the familiar hobbit world in Bree-land, which acts a transitional location between the mimetic and fantastic landscapes. For Bree-land, while full of Men, Dwarves and other elements of the 'outside' world, still has enough similarities with the Shire to make the hobbits feel "quite at home" (*Lord* 156). The hobbits' experience in Bree-land is thus similar to the readers' experience of the Shire: it is strange, yet somehow familiar. The hobbits only enter the fantastic realm proper when they leave Bree-land with Aragorn. This moment is symbolised by leaving the Road for the "pathless wilderness" (*Lord* 182): the hobbits are leaving civilisation (as they know it) for the unknown wilds, and crossing the threshold from the familiar to the unfamiliar.

The hobbits thus act as our bridge into the fantastic world, which is why they are the primary narrative focalisers of *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>15</sup> As Shippey argues, one of the main functions of the hobbits is “to bridge the gap between the ancient world and the modern one” (*Author* 48). Because the world they come from is so like our own, the hobbits are made easy to identify with. So, as the hobbits travel from the ‘modern’ world of the Shire to the ‘ancient’ world of the rest of Middle-earth, the reader is able to relate to the hobbits’ sense of dislocation, ignorance, fear and wonder. This sense of “internal wonder” is also, as Senior argues, an essential component to the creation of a successful secondary world, for if “the inhabitants of Faerie stand in wide-eyed astonishment at the rivers, mountains, creatures, battles, or magical events of their world”, this surely “heightens and deepens” the readers’ own experiences of wonder at the Secondary World (“Oliphaunts” 118). And because the story begins in the ‘portal-world’ of the Shire, a corner of Middle-earth which is “small, safe, and *understood*” (Mendlesohn 2), the fantastic realms of Middle-earth are therefore, by contrast, rendered even more strange and wondrous.

From its mimetic beginnings in the Shire, the landscape of Middle-earth undergoes fantastic extension, becoming less and less recognisable as the narrative progresses. Middle-earth is at its most purely fantastic in the realms of the Elves: Rivendell and Lothlórien. In “On Fairy-stories”, Tolkien speculated on the difficulties of describing the realm of Faërie: “the Perilous Realm itself... I will not attempt to define that, nor to describe it directly. It cannot be done. Faërie cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible” (32).

Lothlórien, in particular, is Tolkien’s Faërie realm within Middle-earth. However,

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<sup>15</sup> In scenes where there are no hobbits present, Tolkien typically foregoes a narrative focaliser, with only an occasional zeroing in on a particular character’s responses to events.

the hobbits remain our guide into the Perilous Realm, and thus the experience of entering Lothlórien is Frodo's:

A light was upon [Lothlórien] for which his language had no name.... He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful. (*Lord* 350)

Frodo's language has 'no name' for the light of Lothlórien, and the colours seem to have 'names new and wonderful': Lothlórien, though not imperceptible, is somehow elusively indescribable. Also elusive is the sense of time in Lothlórien. Countless fairy tales tell of travellers spending three nights in the Faërie realm, only to find years have passed in the outside world. Likewise, while the Fellowship only remembers a few nights in Lothlórien, they find an entire month has passed when they leave. However, this is not the result of Faërie magic, but rather an effect of the Elvish perception of time, which differs from mortals, so while in Lothlórien "time flowed swiftly" by for the Fellowship (*Lord* 388). For, despite all its Faërie wonder, Lothlórien must still abide by the same rules of reality that govern the rest of Middle-earth: it is still a part of this Secondary World. Tolkien uses the same mimetic narrative techniques to verify Lothlórien's reality as he does for the Shire. Scholarly authenticity is provided by the maps and appendices, and the landscape and society are described in concrete detail. How Lothlórien differs from the Shire is in its level of familiarity. While the landscape is meticulously described, recognisable trees and plants are supplemented by fantastic foliage: elanor and niphredil flowers, and mallorn trees. Like hobbits, Elves spend time eating and singing, but Elves eat lembas bread, which is "more strengthening than any food made by Men" (*Lord* 369), and sing Elvish songs, which are solemn, sad and in "words that they [the

hobbits] could not understand” (*Lord* 359). While descriptions of Lothlórien contain the same certainty of detail, the objects and events described do not have the element of recognisability of those in the Shire. Fantastic extension is occurring at the story level of narrative: the world itself is far removed from reality as we perceive it, but the *discourse* used to describe it remains mimetic. And because the reality of Middle-earth has already been so well established, by using the same mimetic narrative techniques Tolkien is able to carry that illusion of reality through into the realm of Faërie, making it a place that is wondrous but still believable.

#### 4.1.3. MAGIC AND HOPE

The fantastic realms of Middle-earth are full of subtle magic, but like the Faërie realm itself, magic in Middle-earth is often elusive and imperceptible, for it is often left to the reader to decide whether strange phenomena are magical or natural. For example, Elven rope seems to have magical properties: it seems to glow, returning sight to Frodo in a storm, and it appears to detach itself when Sam says Galadriel’s name (*Lord* 608-11). But as Flieger states, it is noteworthy that Tolkien leaves these phenomena “deliberately inexplicit”, allowing for ‘natural’ explanations of both: while readers are able to assign metaphorical and magical significance to these events, “the rope itself acts like rope” (“Fantasy” 8). And while there are events described which are clearly magical, even these more overt occurrences are left relatively unexplained, for magic lacks the textual support and detail of other aspects of Middle-earth. We witness Gandalf’s efforts to magically open the doors of Moria, and use his staff to fight off Wargs in spectacular fashion; but there is no appendix detailing words of power, or the magical properties of Gandalf’s staff. And, significantly, we never see magical moments from the perspective of someone with

innate magical ability (as opposed to someone using a magical object): we see the effects of magic, but we never see, for example, Gandalf's perspective as he is casting a spell. Zanger and Wolf argue that this is characteristic of British fantasy, in which the 'good' magicians act in ancillary roles, leaving the non-magical hero, with his "human courage and decency" to battle the "opaque power of evil" (33-34). It is also an important narrative decision for, as we shall see in later chapters, witnessing magic from a practitioner's perspective dramatically changes the way magic is perceived, as it instantly makes it less mysterious and more knowable. In a unsent letter to Naomi Mitchison, Tolkien admitted that he thought he had "been far too casual about 'magic' and especially the use of the word" (*Letters* 199), and followed with a brief discussion of magic, in which he distinguished between *magia*, which produces physical effects, and *goetia*, which produces illusion, both of which can be used for 'good' and 'bad' purposes. But, aside from this one unsent letter, Tolkien made little effort to classify and explain Middle-earth magic.

This lack of detail regarding magic can perhaps be explained by the fact that while magic does play a practical role within the world of *The Lord of the Rings*, its symbolic import within the narrative is far more significant. As stated above (93), the more fantastic aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* are frequently connected to Tolkien's Christian beliefs, and magical objects in particular are often associated with the Christian virtue of hope. For example, the Phial of Galadriel has practical uses as both a torch and a weapon, but, as Flieger argues, it is much more than this:

It is an object whose meaning is greater than the sum of its parts.... Beyond the story it is a metaphor for hope, and in this respect its light must be seen as at once literal and symbolic. It is both a light and the Light, and as such it is

without a doubt the most explicitly Christian reference to be found in the whole story. (“Fantasy” 10-11)

When Frodo uses the Phial to relieve the despair of Shelob’s Lair, the careful phrasing indicates that the light of the Phial and Frodo’s level of hope are mutually causal events, each working to affect the other, until both light and hope reach their apogee: “as its power waxed and hope grew in Frodo’s mind, it began to burn, and kindled to a silver flame, a minute heart of dazzling lights” (*Lord* 720). Thus the Phial’s practical use, to provide light, is transformed into a something of much greater significance, to provide light *through* hope, as well as hope *through* light. In a similar fashion, the One Ring has symbolic meanings which far outweigh its practical uses as a weapon and a tool for invisibility. The Ring’s far more important role in *The Lord of the Rings* is to act as a spiritual benchmark for the characters: those who are able to maintain hope in the midst of darkness are also most able to resist the temptation of the Ring, while characters who succumb to despair are also most tempted by the Ring’s power. For example, Galadriel, who tells the Fellowship that “hope remains” (*Lord* 357), is able to refuse the Ring, while Saruman, who tells Gandalf “there is no hope left” (*Lord* 259), is ruined by his desperate desire to claim the Ring. Furthermore, the Ring, like the Phial, seems to have a causal effect on the bearer: when Frodo tells Sam that he has “not much” hope now, his next statements suggest that the Ring may be blocking his capacity to hope: “And the Ring is so heavy, Sam. And I begin to see it in my mind all the time, like a great wheel of fire” (*Lord* 919). And of course, Frodo ultimately loses his long battle with despair when he claims the Ring for his own (discussed further below, 132-133). Moreover, for all their power, both Galadriel’s Phial and the One Ring are used relatively few times within the narrative, which, when combined with the relative lack of detail about

their specific operations, further enhances their symbolic qualities. Perhaps because magical objects such as these were so often closely connected with Tolkien's Christian beliefs, he felt that they could not, or should not, be explained, but rather taken on faith.

#### 4.1.4. A SACRAMENTAL LAND

Christian meaning in *The Lord of the Rings* is also found in the fantastic representation of landscape, which can be seen as a manifestation of Catholic sacramentality. The sacramental perspective is one that sees material reality as a way of glimpsing the presence of the divine truth in all aspects of the world: it “sees God in and through all things: other people, communities, movements, events, places, objects, the world at large, the whole cosmos. The visible, the tangible, the finite, the historical—all these are actual or potential carriers of the divine presence” (McBrien 1180). This connection between material reality and spiritual truth can be seen in the way that all of the senses are stimulated in Catholic Sacraments, via the use of iconography, water, oil, incense, bells, bread and wine. Tolkien felt strongly about this element of Catholicism, recommending the Eucharist, the Blessed Sacrament, as the “only cure for sagging of [sic] fainting faith” (*Letters* 338) and the “one great thing to love on earth” (*Letters* 53). Through Communion, Tolkien wrote that he could sense “a fleeting glimpse of an unfallen world” (*Letters* 67). One obvious manifestation of sacramental belief in *The Lord of the Rings* is of course the lembas bread, a link which Tolkien did not deny (*Letters* 288). But other, less explicit, links between spirituality and sensory experience can be found throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. Consider, for example, the healing power of athelas, which is administered through scent alone, and has the power to fill a room with “living freshness ... as if

the air itself awoke and tingled, sparkling with joy” (*Lord* 865). Or, the rejuvenating effects of drinking from the Entwash, which has the power to cheer hearts, heal injuries and renew vigour (*Lord* 461-63). In both instances, natural objects have the power to not only heal the body, but to revitalise the soul.

A more subtle, yet more pervasive, manifestation of sacramental thought is the way in which entire locations in Middle-earth can act as either windows or barriers to the divine. The divine exists in its purist form in Valinor, Middle-earth’s Eden, “the Earth unspoiled by evil” (Tolkien *Letters* 328). Valinor is a physical location, yet inaccessible to mortals in Middle-earth; however, there are places in Middle-earth where a glimpse of Valinor can be found, such as Lothlórien. For, the Elven Rings have the power to preserve the “memory of the beauty of old” and maintain “enchanted enclaves of peace where Time seems to stand still and decay is restrained, a semblance of the bliss of the True West” (*Letters* 157). Thus, Lothlórien, due to the power of Galadriel’s ring, is a haven of purity in a fallen world: “No blemish or sickness or deformity could be seen in anything that grew upon the earth. On the land of Lórien there was no stain (*Lord* 350-51). And in this uncorrupted, unstained world, inhabitants of Middle-earth are able to find a glimpse of the divine. The reader’s first experience of Lothlórien is focalised through Frodo, who enters this realm blindfolded, which has the effect of deepening Frodo’s gradual sensory awakening. Lacking vision, Frodo finds “his hearing and other senses sharpened” (*Lord* 349), and discovers a new appreciation of colour, sound and texture. And when his sight is returned, Frodo’s sensory experience is overwhelming: “Frodo stood awhile still lost in wonder. It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanished world. A light was upon it for which his language had no name” (*Lord* 350). Because light is so strongly associated

with the divine in *The Lord of the Rings*, vision is the most important of the senses; as Frodo has been deprived of his sight, he is now more responsive to the purity of light that is visible in Lothlórien. He has undergone Recovery, a “regaining of a clear view ... seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them” (Tolkien “Fairy” 67). Thus, in Lothlórien, Frodo, and the rest of the Fellowship, are able to find physical and spiritual renewal, to be “healed of hurt and weariness of body” (*Lord* 359), and find consolation for their grief, doubt and despair. We can see echoes of Lothlórien’s sensory and spiritual health in varying degrees in those parts of Middle-earth which are not yet fallen to corruption and evil, such as the Shire, Rivendell, Rohan, Fangorn and Ithilien: these locations are natural, full of life and vigour, and replete with pleasurable sensory experiences. There is a mutually causal effect at work here, in that the fact that the inhabitants of these lands have resisted evil is reflected in the state of the land, which in turn helps the land to have positive effects on its inhabitants.

However, this mutually causal relationship between the landscapes and the people of the Middle-earth can also be negative and destructive. Contrast, for example, the wonder of Lothlórien with the bleakness of Shelob’s lair, wherein Frodo and Sam are deprived of sensory stimulation:

Here the air was still, stagnant, heavy, and sound fell dead. They walked as it were in a black vapour wrought of veritable darkness itself that, as it was breathed, brought blindness not only to the eyes but to the mind, so that even the memory of colours and of forms and of any light faded out of thought. Night had always been, and always would be, and night was all. (*Lord* 717-18)

This is an inversion of Frodo's experience in Lothlórien. Here, he is first deprived of sound, and then of vision, and finally even of memory of vision, 'of colours', 'of forms' and 'of any light'. Whereas Lothlórien is a clear window to the Light, Shelob's Lair is a barrier, an opaque and darkened window. And, just as sensory awakening leads to spiritual renewal, sensory deprivation leads to spiritual deterioration, as both Frodo and Sam almost succumb to a "blackness of despair and anger" in this dark place (*Lord* 719). Shelob's lair is the antithesis of Lothlórien: it is corrupted, fallen, and blocks those who enter from the hope and light of the divine. And, Mordor as a whole is a land of negative sensory stimulation, full of decaying and dying nature. Most importantly, Mordor lacks purity of light. It is not a land entirely without light; however, its light is corrupted, like the light of Minas Morgul, which is "a corpse-light, a light that illuminated nothing" (*Lord* 703). Mordor's appearance, "dreary, flat and drab-hued" (*Lord* 933), reflects the corrupted state of the land itself, "a land defiled, diseased, beyond all healing" (*Lord* 631-32).

In this land of corrupted light and life, glimpses of natural light can have powerful effect. It was discussed above (103) how the Phial, a symbol of hope and Light, has some power to drive away the darkness in Shelob's Lair; indeed, throughout their journey, hope and light remain the hobbits' best weapon in Mordor. In an oft-quoted scene, Sam's weariness and despair is momentarily relieved by a fleeting glimpse of starlight: "There, peeping among the cloud-wreck above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the Forsaken land, and hope returned to him" (*Lord* 922). The causal sequence is clear: Sam sees the star, and 'hope returned to him'. Like the Phial, a glimpse of Light, reflected through starlight, helps to replenish waning hope. But even the Phial loses power against the atmosphere of despair in Mount Doom, "a

dead land, silent, shadow-folded”: here the Phial remains “pale and cold”, throwing “no light in that stifling dark” (*Lord* 945). The overwhelming corruption of the land of Mordor intensifies Frodo and Sam’s mental and spiritual battle, because it blocks them from the hope that light can bring. And the greater danger is that the whole of Middle-earth could fall to the same state of corruption as Mordor, and, consequently, block all of the people of Middle-earth from Light and hope. This danger is represented most explicitly by the Black Wind that covers Gondor in the last days of the war, which brings with it feelings of despair: “All the lands were grey and still; and ever the shadow deepened before them, and hope waned in every heart” (*Lord* 805). Thus, the battle for Middle-earth is more than a battle to save the people from slavery and death; it is a battle to save the land itself from decay and corruption, and thereby to preserve for its people the ability to perceive, through the land, a “fleeting glimpse of an unfallen world” (*Letters* 67).

#### 4.1.5. THE HEROIC REALM

Frodo and Sam’s journey in Middle-earth takes them from the natural realms of Elves and forests to the dying lands of Mordor. The remaining members of the Fellowship travel into the heart of the heroic and mythic lands of Men: Rohan and Gondor. Like all other areas of Middle-earth, these realms are grounded in reality through mimetic discursive techniques: specific geographical detail and documentation, and comprehensive annalistic and linguistic histories, which are documented both in the narrative proper and in the scholarly appendices. However, unlike the Shire, the lands of Gondor and Rohan do not have immediately recognisable counterparts in the modern Primary World. Although the realms of Gondor and Rohan do seem in some ways familiar, it is a much more intangible

sense of familiarity, a distant memory of history and legend, than the more easily recognisable modern 'Englishness' of the Shire. The cultures and histories of the realms of Men are evocative of those of the ancient world, which are remembered in the present day through a mixture of history and myth. Thus, while both Gondor and Rohan recall certain cultures of pre-industrial Europe in the Primary World, they are more closely aligned with the stories and legends of and about these cultures, rather than the historical reality. As Shippey notes, "the Rohirrim are not to be equated with the Anglo-Saxons of history, but with those of poetry, legend" (*Road* 124). Further, the heroic realms of Middle-earth recall more Primary World cultures than those of medieval Europe: Gondor, for example, is reminiscent of the ancient empires of Byzantium, Egypt, and Rome (Tolkien *Letters* 157, 281, 376). As Flieger argues, while it is very easy to "lump all aspects of Tolkien's Middle-earth together under the umbrella term 'medieval' or 'pseudo-medieval'", the world contains so many elements that lay outside of the already loose modern definition of 'medieval', that when "all these elements ... are acknowledged as being part of the fabric of *The Lord of the Rings* it becomes more difficult to characterize the book as being any period except its own, the Third Age of Tolkien's distinctive Middle-earth" ("Postmodern" 19). Thus, with Middle-earth, Tolkien creates a world that mixes history, legend and pure invention, a world that has a distinct reality of its own.

One unifying factor in the disparate cultures of Middle-earth is "a faith in a highly structured society culminating in the king as the ultimate authority" (Oberhelm 103). As Burns notes, "Tolkien was a man who believed in rank and hereditary rule" (139); even the lowly realm of the Shire is subject to definite class distinctions, though not

to the same degree as the more elevated realms of Men.<sup>16</sup> For, in Gondor and Rohan the status of the king is reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon and early Germanic ideals, in which “kingship was sacral, that is, it was grounded in a religious purpose”, so that the king became a semi-divine figure, and was seen as the “embodiment of the well-being of his people” (Ford and Reid 72). In the Arthurian legends, this idea is most explicit in the figure of the Fisher King, or the Maimed King “whose wound ... is a wounding of virility extending from him to his kingdom” (Flieger “Concept” 134). In *The Lord of the Rings*, this metaphysical connection between King and land is more subtly manifested. Gondor, lacking a King, has relied on its Stewards to maintain hope and virility for the kingdom; however, the line of Stewards has gradually declined in stature and nobility, succumbing instead to a fascination with death and a predication to despair, culminating in Denethor, for whom the knowledge gained through the Palantír only served to feed “the despair of his heart until it overthrew his mind” (*Lord* 856). And, in a reflection or response to the long decline of the line of Stewards, Gondor too is showing “unmistakeable signs of long decay” (Ford 59). The city of Minas Tirith, the heart of Gondor, is barren, with “too few children” (*Lord* 764) and “too little ... that grows and is glad” (*Lord* 872). The ultimate sign of Gondor’s decline is the White Tree of Gondor, standing dead in the courtyard, with “barren and broken branches” (*Lord* 753). However, the return of the King of Gondor symbolises an imminent renewal. For as Ford notes, it is clear that one of Aragorn’s primary narrative functions in *The Lord of the Rings* is “to serve as the agent of Gondor’s renewal” (59); this function is inherent in one of his names,

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<sup>16</sup> However, as Burns also notes, Tolkien does somewhat undermine the hierarchal system in *The Lord of the Rings* through his belief that “honour and reward are owed to the meek” (139), and particularly his claim that *The Lord of the Rings* is “primarily a study of the ennoblement (or sanctification) of the humble” (*Letters* 237), a claim that will be discussed further below (113-14).

“*Envinyatar, the Renewer*” (*Lord* 863). Thus, Aragorn’s planting of a new White Tree, which grows “swiftly and gladly” (*Lord* 972), and his subsequent marriage to Arwen, signifies the impending rejuvenation of Gondorian culture, as the natural order of hereditary rule is reaffirmed, and fertility is returned to the kingdom, and Minas Tirith is “made more fair than it had ever been ... and all was healed and made good” (*Lord* 968). Appropriately, another of Aragorn’s names is Estel, “that is, ‘Hope’” (*Lord* 1057); as the King returns, Hope is thus returned to Gondor.

#### 4.1.6. RETURN TO THE SHIRE

The Shire undergoes a similar renewal to Gondor, but on a much smaller scale, with the epilogue acting as a mimetic echo of the entire narrative. For the Shire, like much of Middle-earth, has become corrupted. However, its corruption is not the spiritual bleakness and despair of Shelob’s lair and Mordor, nor the barrenness and decline of Minas Tirith; rather, the Shire’s corruption is of a much more modern nature, as Saruman’s Men invade the Shire and destroy natural resources for the sake of industry.<sup>17</sup> Despite Tolkien’s denials, the situation in the Shire at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* reflects post-World War II England in many ways (Shippey *Author* 166-68). The reader is thus returned to the sense of familiarity discussed earlier in this section, as the narrative undergoes a mimetic contraction, a gradual retreat from the fantastic realms of Middle-earth and a return to the mimetic world of the Shire. The hobbits once again act as a bridge, guiding us back to familiar settings, except that their role has become inverted: Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin are now fantastic incursions into this mimetic world. In a mirror of the beginning of the narrative, the

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<sup>17</sup> It will be discussed further below (126-27) how Saruman, who is responsible for the decline of the Shire, represents a particular kind of ‘modern’ evil in *The Lord of the Rings*, an evil of rampant technology, industry and politics.

journey back into the mimetic world of the Shire takes us first through Bree-town, where the hobbits' conversation with Butterbur highlights just how far beyond the ordinary their journey has taken them: "most of the things which they had to tell were a mere wonder and bewilderment to their host, and far beyond his vision" (*Lord* 991). And, upon their return to the Shire, the hobbits' outlandish clothing and commanding mannerisms signal them as outsiders: "It's a hobbit by the size of it, but all dressed up queer" (*Lord* 1007). For the hobbits, the process of returning to the Shire requires them to come back to 'reality', as their time in the fantastic realms of Middle-earth become less and less tangible: "It seems almost like a dream that has slowly faded" (*Lord* 997). This is true for all of the hobbits except for Frodo who, as is explored below (115), has been too changed by his journey into the Faërie, and is unable to settle back in to the mimetic world: "To me it feels more like falling asleep again" (*Lord* 997). Reality and fantasy have, for Frodo, become inverted.

With the experiences gained from the outside world, the hobbits are well equipped to drive out evil and restore peace to the Shire. The return of the hobbits is similar in many ways to Aragorn's return to Gondor. As Burns notes, despite the more informal nature of the hobbit community, they still have "well-defined class distinctions and hereditary roles" (145). As heirs to the titles of Master of Buckland and the Took and Thain, Merry and Pippin's departure and return to the Shire is a diminutive echo of the heirs of Isildur's long exile from Gondor. While their titles are less glorious and their absence less significant, Merry and Pippin's return to the Shire likewise signals an imminent renewal of a land that has fallen to ruin and evil. Interestingly, however, while Merry and Pippin lead the battle to drive out Saruman's forces, it is Sam who most clearly echoes Aragorn's role of renewer of the land. Like Aragorn, Sam plants a tree, a symbol of the Shire's rejuvenation, and marries the woman he longed for

throughout his journeying, a symbolic act of renewed fertility. Thus, the Shire is healed from its hurts, and remains unchanged expect, perhaps, for being more magical and bountiful: “1420 in the Shire was a marvellous year.... There seemed something more: an air of richness and growth, and a gleam of beauty.... The fruit was so plentiful.... And no one was ill, and everyone was pleased, except those who had to mow the grass” (*Lord* 1023). Ultimately, the Shire is largely unaffected by its brushes with the fantastic world: the invaders are driven out, Frodo departs for the West, and “King Elessar issues an edict that Men are not to enter the Shire” (*Lord* 1097), thus reinforcing the boundaries between the mimetic world of the Shire and the fantastic world that surrounds it.

## 4.2. CHARACTER

### 4.2.1. MIMETIC BEGINNINGS

Like the setting, the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* undergo fantastic extension. The narrative begins with the most mimetic characters, the hobbits. As discussed above (98), the hobbits act as a bridge into Middle-earth, taking the reader from the mimetic world of the Shire into the fantastic realms of Middle-earth, and back again. It is not just the mimetic, familiar nature of the Shire that enables reader identification, but the hobbits themselves, and their recognisable and ordinary personalities. As Shippey notes, in the context of Frye’s categorisation schema<sup>18</sup> the hobbits “are very clearly *low mimetic*” (*Author* 222). Their speech is characterised by

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<sup>18</sup> In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye proposes five literary modes—myth, romance, high mimetic, low mimetic and ironic—which are defined by the nature of the protagonist to the other characters and the world around them. For instance, if the protagonist is “superior in *kind* both to other men and to the environment of other men”, than the story will be a myth; but if the protagonist is “superior neither to other men nor to his environment” they are “one of us” and this “gives us the hero of the *low mimetic* mode, of most comedy and of realistic fiction” (33-34)

informality and light-hearted banter, and their actions are, throughout the narrative, dominated by elements of the everyday, such as bathing in Frodo's new house, or Sam making rabbit stew in Ithilien: such moments of hobbit domesticity punctuate the narrative, acting as a counterpoint to the mythic grandeur of the events occurring around them. Indeed, one of the hobbits' predominate characteristics, their overwhelming love of food, can be seen as the smallest imagining of sacramental thought, a mimetic diminution of a sacred belief. Further increasing reader identification is the fact that the hobbits act as the primary narrative focalisers, for as Jahn notes "when readers negotiate a reflector-mode text [a text that is focalised through one or more 'reflector' characters] and become privy to the working of the reflector's mind, they have a natural inclination to empathize and identify with the person concerned" (103). Tolkien has noted that the hobbits' diminutive stature is a deliberate reflection of their character: "They are made *small* ... mostly to show up, in creatures of very small physical power, the amazing and unexpected heroism of ordinary men 'at a pinch'" (*Letters* 158). A key term to note here is 'ordinary': hobbits are not destined to be heroes, graced with superhuman powers; rather, they are recognisably ordinary in both their weaknesses and strengths. In short the hobbits are more actors than actants: they are recognisable from observed reality, and are defined more by their individual personalities than by their functional roles in the narrative.

The difference between actant and actor can be seen when we compare Frodo and Sam's character development: whereas Frodo is transformed from an actor into an actant, Sam remains throughout the narrative an actor. Tolkien has claimed that the primary thematic structure of *The Lord of the Rings* is "'hobbito-centric', that is, primarily a study of the ennoblement (or sanctification) of the humble" (*Letters* 237).

And while Merry and Pippin (and to a lesser extent Sam) are all examples of the ‘ennoblement of the humble’, it is Frodo who is most dramatically changed by his journey. Although he begins the narrative much like the other hobbits, a recognisably ordinary character, he is gradually taken out of the mimetic sphere of the hobbits’ world and becomes something more, a sacrificial and tragic hero, a figure of story and myth. As Attebery argues, “Tolkien underscores Frodo’s uncomfortable transformation from realistic character to story function with a few magical clues” (*Strategies* 72), such as Sam’s momentary vision of Frodo as “a figure robed in white, but at its breast it held a wheel of fire” (*Lord* 944). Here, Sam has a glimpse of what Frodo is transforming into, a being whose inner self is indicated by his external appearance: as is discussed further below (117-118), this is a character trait reserved for the more fantastic characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. Thus, Sam is able to *see* Frodo’s essential goodness, signified by his white clothing, as well as the psychological burden he bears in the Ring, the ‘wheel of fire’ held at his breast. Attebery describes this as a moment of ‘seeming’, a brief glimpse of “an underlying reality” (*Strategies* 72). As discussed below (IR), Frodo’s guilt over his failure to deny the Ring, as well as his persistent longing for it, lead him to leave Middle-earth for the Undying Lands. However, he also leaves because he no longer belongs in the mimetic world of the Shire: his character has been taken over by his functional role in the story, he has become more actant than actor: “his proper milieu is no longer a setting but a story, and his story is over” (Attebery *Strategies* 73). Frodo is unable to bear the narrative burden of his fantastic role without changing essentially a character. Thus, there is a sense of tragedy inherent in Frodo’s transformation, for as Burns notes, in Tolkien’s fiction “modifications in status and recognition of the meek rarely come without some form of loss” (139). Frodo has become something far

beyond his beginning stature, the humble has become sanctified, and for this a price must be paid: as Frodo explains to Sam, “I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me” (*Lord* 1029).

In stark contrast to Frodo, Sam is, out of all of the hobbits, the least changed by his journey into the fantastic realms of Middle-earth. In a letter to his son mid-way through the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien speculated that the “book will prob. end up with Sam. Frodo will naturally become too ennobled and rarefied by the achievement of the great Quest, and will pass West with all the great figures” (*Letters* 105). Indeed, we can see throughout the narrative a gradual transition from Frodo to Sam as primary focaliser: as Frodo transforms from actor to actant, Sam takes over as the main point of identification for the reader. Indeed, in the very early outlines and drafts of the climax on Mount Doom, Frodo acts as focaliser (*Tolkien End* 3-7); however, by the time Tolkien actually came to write this scene, Frodo had become too fantastic, too far removed from ordinary humanity, for such narratory intimacy, and so it is from Sam’s perspective that the climax is written (*Lord* 945-47). And it is Sam who, as Tolkien wrote, is perhaps the “most closely drawn character” in *The Lord of the Rings* (*Letters* 105). Unlike the other hobbits, who varied widely in terms of number, names, relationships and personalities in the early drafts, Sam emerged fully formed as ‘Sam Gamgee’, “too particularly conceived from the outset” to undergo any change of identity (C. Tolkien *Return* 323). Indeed, Tolkien commented that Sam was the “chief hero” of *The Lord of the Rings* (*Letters* 161), despite Frodo’s more dramatic role. Frodo is transformed from an average hobbit into a fantastic hero, and as a result becomes disconnected from everyday reality. But with Sam, Tolkien created a mimetic hero in a fantasy world, whose heroism remains ordinary, humble, and recognisable: his is a coming-of-age journey,

a growth in self-worth and confidence. It is notable that of the four hobbits, Sam is the only one elected to a position of authority: Merry and Pippin inherit their titles, and Frodo's elevation is of a mythic nature, but Sam becomes Mayor through recognition of his strengths and qualities, a far more modern sensibility. And, as the end of *The Lord of the Rings* is, as discussed above (111-112), characterised by a gradual mimetic contraction, it is entirely appropriate that the narrative concludes, not with Frodo's departure to the West, but Sam's return to his everyday life.

#### 4.2.2. FANTASTIC EXTENSION

As the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* progresses, it gradually introduces more fantastic characters and characterisations. This section will focus on the Elves and the Nazgûl as two examples of fantastic character types: both are primarily actants, defined by their function within the story and not recognisable from observed reality. As noted above (98), both Elves and Nazgûl are first introduced as fantastic incursions into the Shire: they are seen as strange and otherworldly by the hobbits, who are our guides as to what is expected and normal. When they first appear, the narrative focus is on the response they evoke in the hobbits: the Nazgûl arouse "unreasoning fear" (*Lord* 75) and the Elves inspire joy and wonder, a "waking dream" (*Lord* 82). This focus on the hobbits' responses to the Nazgûl and Elves is maintained throughout *The Lord of the Rings* because the focalisation is maintained primarily through the hobbits, which in turn guides reader response to these fantastic beings. And, because we are rarely privy to Nazgûl or Elven perspective, they remain mysterious; as later chapters will demonstrate, narrative focalisation has the effect of lessening the mystery of more fantastic characters. As the narrative progresses, we do receive more detail about the Nazgûl and the Elves, their individual histories and

personalities, and even some small glimpses into their thoughts and perspectives. Most noticeable is Legolas, who as a member of the Fellowship, becomes much more of a personality. However, much of the insight into Legolas' character serves to remind the reader of his otherness: his immortality, superhuman sight, and ability to sleep while walking, "if sleep it could be called by Men, resting his mind in the strange paths of Elvish dreams" (*Lord* 429). Even less is revealed of the Nazgûl. Hints are given about their origins, and there are some small moments of insight, such as a glimpse of Lord of the Nazgûl's thoughts when facing defeat at Minas Tirith (*Lord* 839). But for the most part, the Nazgûl remain throughout mysterious and other, beings who arouse 'unreasoning fear' in those around them. As Huxley argues, while characters such as the Elves and Nazgûl are not "observed personalities in the novelist's sense", because *The Lord of the Rings* deals with "the numinous", 'personality' has "a quite different part to play" (587). Their most important character trait is their otherness, their unrecognisable, fantastic nature. Unlike the hobbits, it is difficult for readers to identify with Elves and Nazgûl. But this does not mean they bear no relationship to ordinary humanity; indeed, it is through their differences, their otherness, that characters such as Elves and Nazgûl are able to reflect on and exaggerate the concerns of human existence.

The Elves and the Nazgûl act as embodiments of good and evil, fantastic archetypes of human morality. *The Lord of the Rings*, especially in its earliest reviews, has often been accused of moral simplicity, of being the type of story in which "Black is Black and White is White, and something can be done about it" (Walters 60). But statements such as this are a simplification of the complex opposition between light and dark (or, more accurately, absence of light) that takes place in *The Lord of the Rings*, in which characters' internal nature is indicated by external appearance, they

“have the insides on the outside; they are visible souls” (Lewis “Dethronement” 15). We saw above how the spiritual state of the land is indicated through sensory cues and how landscapes can act as either windows or barriers to the light of the divine (105-107). Similarly, the spiritual status of many beings in Middle-earth is indicated through their relationship with light. Thus, because the Elves are one of the ultimate embodiments of ‘good’ in *The Lord of the Rings*, they are characterised by shining lights and celestial imagery, such the Elves encountered in the Shire, who have “starlight glimmering on their hair and in their eyes”, and even seem to produce a light of their own: “a shimmer, like the light of the moon ... seemed to fall about their feet” (*Lord* 80). Likewise, the depth of Galadriel’s temptation when Frodo offers her the Ring is made external, visible to Frodo, through a vision of Galadriel’s changed relationship to light: although she remains “beautiful beyond enduring”, the “great light” that surrounds her “illuminated her alone and left all else dark” (*Lord* 366). This vision of Galadriel’s wilful denial of the wide-ranging effects of the Light, which resonates with the description of corrupted Minas Morgul, lit with “a light that illuminated nothing” (*Lord* 703), thus indicates that accepting the Ring would be an irrevocable step towards her spiritual corruption. In contrast, the final vision of Galadriel before she departs Middle-earth—“robed all in glimmering light, like clouds about the Moon ... she herself seemed to shine with a soft light” (*Lord* 1028)—indicates that Galadriel, despite her temptation, remains a force for good.

In contrast, the Nazgûl are marked by an absence of light and form. They are characterised by darkness so complete that it negates the effects of light, “so black ... that they seemed like black holes in the deep shade behind them” (*Lord* 195). They are amorphous, needing to wear robes to “give shape to their nothingness” (*Lord* 222). As Fliieger notes, the Nazgûl’s invisibility indicates a particularly damaged

relationship to the light: “to be invisible is to be neither light nor dark. In terms of light, it is not to be at all” (*Splintered* 157). The Nazgûl were not always this way; once they were mortal men, but they have long since fallen to the corruption wrought by Sauron and the Rings of power: their invisibility is not only indicative of their spiritual corruption, but a direct result of it. Indeed, Shippey argues that we can see the same process at work with both Frodo and Gollum, a ‘wraithing’, a fading away into intangibility caused by the burden of the One Ring (*Author* 125). And, as the ultimate embodiment of evil in *The Lord of the Rings*, Sauron is an exaggeration of the Nazgûl character traits. Whereas the Nazgûl are simply unknowable characters, Sauron is almost entirely absent for the entire narrative: the few times he is a direct narrative presence, he is disembodied, an Eye or a shadowed hand. In Galadriel’s mirror, Frodo sees Sauron as a “hole in the world of sight” and a “window into nothing” (*Lord* 364): not darkness, but an absence of that which would make him visible, an utter negation of the illuminating effects of the Light. As with the Nazgûl, there are hints of Sauron’s history and his fall into corruption: “For nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so” (*Lord* 267). Indeed, both Sauron and Galadriel’s characters are greatly expanded upon in the *Legendarium*, which tells of Sauron’s fall, and Galadriel’s near fall and eventual redemption. But in *The Lord of the Rings* both remain mysterious figures, and along with the other Elves and the Nazgûl, serve their primary narrative purposes as archetypes of good and evil.

#### 4.2.3. ESCAPE FROM DEATH

While the ‘ennoblement of the humble’ may have been, as discussed above (113-114), intended as the primary thematic structure of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien has said a number of times that in execution another theme inadvertently became

prominent: “only in reading the work myself . . . that I became aware of the dominance of the theme of Death” (*Letters* 267; see also 246, 262, 284). This is unsurprising: as noted above (53), one of the great values of Fantasy, for Tolkien, was its ability to express the “oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death” (“Fairy” 74). Thus, death became a “persistent motif” of not only *The Lord of the Rings*, but the entire mythos of Middle-earth:

Through his immortal Elves and mortal Men, Tolkien explores the positive and negative sides of death as well as its opposite, unending life, and its corollary, life eternal. He makes a clear distinction between unending life, which he sees as bondage to the world without hope of renewal, and eternal life, which transcends life and leads to God. (Flieger *Splintered* 28).

For Tolkien, the fantastic mode afforded the opportunity to explore matters close to his heart: the fear of death and the promise of eternal life, of “Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (“Fairy” 75).

Thus, in *The Lord of the Rings* we see a multitude of beings who are immortal or extremely long-lived, but for whom their deathlessness ultimately brings little joy. Two such beings, the Elves and the Ents, have strong connections with the natural world, with trees and with forests. They are manifestations of the natural, sacred world; but as this world begins to give way to the world of Men, the world of civilisation and modernity, the vitality of the Elves and the Ents begins to fade.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the deathlessness of both Elves and Ents is characterised by a sense of

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<sup>19</sup> A number of critics have identified this aspect of Tolkien’s work as resonating with the concerns of environmentalism, for example Dickerson’s *Ents, Elves, and Eriador*. In this context, the Ents’ destruction of Isengard can be seen as a fantastic instance of nature retaliating against the rampant encroachment of technology and civilisation. Later chapters will discuss how this the theme of ‘nature’ versus ‘civilisation’ has manifested in epic fantasy.

melancholy and loss. The Elves can live forever, but the world that they love cannot. For a time, the power of the Three Elven Rings grants them the power to stop time and to halt change, to preserve the beauty of the world in havens such as Lothlórien and Rivendell. But this inability to accept change is the Elves' greatest weakness, leading them to become, as Tolkien characterised them, 'embalmers', "overburdened with sadness and nostalgic regret" (*Letters* 197). Thus, when the power of the Three Rings is lessened with the destruction of the One Ring, there is little left for the Elves in Middle-earth, and most depart for Valinor. Similar to the Elves, the Ents are facing their own "long sorrow" (*Lord* 499): the loss of the Ent-wives and the spread of civilisation means that both they and their forests are fading. Olsen argues that the tale of the Ents "offers some of Tolkien's most compelling insights on the complexities and conflicts of life in a fallen world [and] the dangers of inherent of loving anything in this world, even nature itself, too much and too blindly" (41). Like the Elves, the Ents remember the "broad days" of Middle-earth (*Lord* 469), and this remembrance leaves them in a permanent state of mourning for what has passed, although they are still able to be roused to energy and life on occasion. But Treebeard, who is "sad but not unhappy" (*Lord* 486), seems to accept that the fading of the Ents is inevitable: "For the world is changing: I feel it in the water, I feel it in the earth, and I smell it in the air" (*Lord* 981). Unlike the Elves, who are able to leave the changing world, the fate of the Ents seems to be to become "tree-ish" (*Lord* 475), dwindling away from a world that no longer fits them. As Flieger argues, the Elves and Ents both represent Tolkien's conflicting views that change is both regrettable and required: "While Tolkien's psychological and emotional yearning was nostalgia for aspects of his world that had vanished or were vanishing in his lifetime, still, his philosophical and religious position was that change is necessary"

(*Splintered* 170). Thus, in the Elves and Ents we see a particularly melancholy kind of immortality, which brings only a longing for the past, an overwhelming regret for the lost beauty of a world that no longer exists.

In contrast, other immortal beings in Middle-earth have gained their immortality through unnatural means, becoming a corrupted mockery of life. The Nazgûl were once mortal men, now bound to existence by the Rings of Power they possess. We saw above that the Nazgûl have particularly corrupted relationship with light (118-119): they continue to be in the world, but they are not of the world, existing only as a lack. For, as Gandalf explains to Frodo, a mortal “who keeps one of the Great Rings, does not die, but he does not grow or obtain more life, he merely continues, until at last every minute is a weariness” (*Lord* 47). Thus, Bilbo, Gollum and Frodo are all damaged by their possession of the One Ring: Bilbo tells Gandalf that his longevity seems unnatural, leaving him “all thin, sort of *stretched*” (*Lord* 32). Of all three bearers, Gollum’s fate is perhaps the most tragic: able to think only of his desire to repossess the Ring that has bound him forever to this world, he ends “an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time” (*Lord* 714). While the Rings of Power do grant immortality to their mortal bearers, this brings them no joy: death becomes a release from bondage. Another form of deathlessness is seen in the Shadow Host: cursed into this state by their broken oath to Isildur, they come to Aragorn’s call in order to “fulfil [their] oath and have peace” (*Lord* 789). For the Shadow Host, death, true death, is ‘peace’. The fantastic mode may allow a fulfilment of humankind’s “oldest and deepest desire”, the desire to ‘escape’ from death (Tolkien “Fairy” 74); but in *The Lord of the Rings* the mortals who gain the ability to escape from death ultimately desire instead to escape from life everlasting. In the mythology of Middle-earth “the Doom (or the Gift) of Men is

mortality, freedom from the circles of the world” (Tolkien *Letters* 147). The acceptance of the ‘gift’ of death is the greatest challenge for the mortals of Middle-earth, for there “is in his story no assurance of any future beyond death. The unknown must be accepted in faith. This is exactly the point” (Flieger *Splintered* 144). For while death is fearful, the greater tragedy is not to move beyond, to find true immortality in death. Thus, in the melancholy immortality of the Elves and Ents, and the corrupted mockery of life in the Nazgûl, ghosts and Ringbearers, there lays a cautious message of hope for humankind: that death may be the greatest gift of all.

#### 4.2.4. ASCENSION AND DECLINE

So far we have discussed two types of characterisation, dominated either by the mimetic mode or the fantastic mode. But many of the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* do not sit comfortably at the extreme ends of the scale, but rather occupy the middle, employing both narrative modes. For example, both Gandalf and Aragorn begin relatively mimetic but become increasingly fantastic as the narrative progresses; however, unlike Frodo, their elevation is not a transformation, but rather a revealing of the truth that has always lain beneath the surface. For both Gandalf and Aragorn, their mimetic character traits are arguably a result of their similar narrative origins, in that both began as characters associated with hobbits. Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* is revealed as a higher being, one of the *Istari* who “came out of the Far West and were messengers sent to contest the power of Sauron” (*Lord* 1084). Possessed of a mortal body, Gandalf nonetheless passes through death to return to Middle-earth “for a brief time, until [his] task is done” (*Lord* 502). But despite Gandalf’s elevated nature, his personality still retains elements of Gandalf as he appears in *The Hobbit*: an irascible old wizard and guide, whom Bilbo feels quite

comfortable in calling “an interfering old busybody” (*Lord* 32). Indeed, it is through interaction with the hobbits that Gandalf expresses his more ‘human’ and relatable nature: for example, the high formal style Gandalf uses in his conversation with Denethor changes dramatically to a much more informal style in his conversation with Pippin immediately outside the chamber (*Lord* 758-59). For many characters, as for the reader, the hobbits act as a touchstone for mimetic behaviour. And, like a number of other characters, Gandalf’s true nature is indicated by his relationship with light. He begins the narrative as Gandalf the Grey: his robes, like his hobbit-like relatability, conceal the truth of his angelic nature. When he returns from death as Gandalf the White, his true nature is now closer to the surface, allowing for fleeting glimpses to be had: “a gleam, too brief for certainty, a quick glint of white, as if some garment shrouded by the grey rags had been for an instant revealed” (*Lord* 493). But during moments of great triumph and power, Gandalf’s true self becomes visible: he appears at Helm’s deep “clad in white, shining in the rising sun” (*Lord* 541), and rides out to rescue Faramir “shining, unveiled once more, a light starting from his upraised hand” (*Lord* 820). And after the victory of the West, Gandalf appears “robed in white, his beard now gleaming like pure snow in the twinkling of the leafy sunlight” (*Lord* 951), his true nature at last fully revealed. Unable to return now to Gandalf the Grey, he must, like Frodo, leave Middle-earth, his functional role in the story complete. It is noticeable that Gandalf does not re-enter the Shire at the end of the narrative: as Gandalf the Grey, he was able to penetrate this mimetic realm; as Gandalf the White, he no longer belongs.

Like Gandalf, Aragorn straddles both narrative modes, a character who is both mimetic and fantastic. For Aragorn, heir of Númenor and King of Gondor, was, in the initial drafts of *The Lord of the Rings*, Trotter, a hobbit. And although “his stature

and his history were totally changed ... a great deal of the 'indivisible' Trotter remained in Aragorn and determined his nature" (C. Tolkien *Return* 431). Thus, no matter the heights that he rises to, part of Aragorn always retains his hobbit nature. The character who would become Aragorn first appeared in the drafts as a "queer looking" hobbit, "sitting in the shadows ... smoking a broken-stemmed pipe ... and had a hood on, in spite of the warmth" (*Return* 136). This same image is recalled, not only in Aragorn's introduction in the narrative in *The Prancing Pony*, but in a quiet moment of peace in the ruins of Isengard, when Aragorn wraps his cloak around him and smokes his pipe. And although Pippin declares this to mean that "Strider the Ranger has come back!", as Aragorn corrects Pippin: "He has never been away ... I am Strider and Dúnadan too, and I belong both to Gondor and the North" (*Lord* 563). As a herald of the coming domination of Men, as well as a last vestige of the glory of the Elder Days, Aragorn is of both the future and the past, both mimetic and fantastic. Like Gandalf, Aragorn's true nature is made more visible as the narrative progresses. When Aragorn claims his true names, "Elessar, the Elfstone, Dúnadan, the heir of Isildur Elendil's son of Gondor", Legolas and Gimili catch a brief glimpse of his true self revealed:

He seemed to have grown in stature ... and in his living face they caught a brief vision of the power and majesty of the kings of stone. For a moment it seemed to the eyes of Legolas that white flame flickered on the brows of Aragorn like a shining crown. (*Lord* 433-434)

And when Aragorn is finally crowned King Elessar it seems to all that he is "revealed to them now for the first time.... A light was about him" (*Lord* 968). Less tangible than Galadriel and Gandalf, who both seem to produce their own light, Aragorn's elevated nature at the end of the narrative is nonetheless indicated by

natural imagery of light, such as the final glimpse of Aragorn and his knights: “the falling Sun shone upon them and made all their harness to gleam like red gold, and the white mantle of Aragorn was turned to a flame” (*Lord* 982). Yet, even after his elevation, Aragorn declares that the name of his house shall be Strider – an acknowledgement that some part of him will always be Strider, a person who is able to talk comfortably and informally with hobbits (*Lord* 863). It is significant, however, that after his coronation Aragorn deliberately does not venture into the Shire: Strider he may still be, but he does not belong in this mimetic world. As discussed above, the hobbits are the most mimetic characters in *The Lord of the Rings*; thus, by retaining elements of ‘hobbitness’, Tolkien is able to preserve a sense of mimesis to Gandalf and Aragorn, even as they scale the heights of fantastic ascension.

The antithesis of Gandalf and Aragorn is Saruman. While Gandalf and Aragorn become increasingly elevated as the narrative progresses, transitioning from mimesis to fantasy, Saruman falls from great heights, not only from good into evil, but from fantastic grandeur into petty mimesis. Saruman is, like Gandalf, an *Istari*, and was once the head of this order of higher beings. But led astray by both pride and despair, Saruman becomes something much less: as Frodo says, he “was great once [but] he is fallen” (*Lord* 1019). As Gandalf and Aragorn’s ascension is indicated by their increasingly visible relationship to the light, Saruman’s fall is symbolised by his gradual separation from the Light. Originally Saruman the White, he wilfully breaks the purity of light this represents, declaring himself instead “Saruman of Many Colours” (*Lord* 259). Gandalf later strips Saruman of his presence, of any relationship to the light: “You have no colour now” (*Lord* 583). And finally, Saruman is killed, becoming a “grey mist”, “a pale shrouded figure” that is destroyed

by a “cold wind” from the West, at last “dissolved into nothing” (*Lord* 1020). Saruman’s decline is also symbolised by the loss of the power of his voice, which was once “low and melodious, its very sound an enchantment” (*Lord* 578), but becomes in the end “cracked and hideous” (*Lord* 983). The quality of his voice aside, Saruman’s speech is an early clue of his fallen status. Whereas Gandalf and Aragorn can switch effortlessly between a high formal style and a low informal style, Saruman talks, as Shippey notes, “exactly like too many politicians”: he is abstract, calculating and rhetorical, “the most contemporary figure in Middle-earth, both politically and linguistically” (*Author* 75-76). In contrast to fantastic evil of Sauron and the Nazgûl, Saruman represents a particularly mimetic kind of evil, a representation of the destructive effects of modern industrialisation and technology. Thus, unlike Gandalf and Aragorn, Saruman not only ventures into the mimetic world of the Shire at the end of the narrative, but wreaks destruction in it as ‘Sharkey’: the ultimate indication of the petty depths to which he now belongs.

#### 4.2.5. THE PROBLEM OF ORCS

Of all the characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, the Orcs are some of the most problematic. The primary function of the Orcs is to serve as cannon fodder, a “continual supply of enemies over whom one need feel no compunction” (*Shippey Road* 233). Therefore the Orcs are depicted as uniformly and eternally evil, so that habitually slaughtering them has no moral repercussions for the good characters. But Tolkien complicated matters by adding an element of mimesis and giving the Orcs a voice. They not only have a language of their own, which indicates a degree of higher-level thought processes, but they have conversations. These conversations, while mostly serving exposition purposes, allow the reader to see that Orcs have,

amongst other things, a limited sense of morality, camaraderie, and loyalty: they have “a clear idea of what is admirable and what is contemptible behaviour, which is exactly the same as ours” (Shippey *Author* 133). Because Orcs clearly have a degree of moral awareness, they should, in theory, be redeemable, especially when taking into consideration the widely-held Middle-earth belief that evil is only perverted good, and that “nothing is evil in the beginning” (*Lord* 267). But in terms of the narrative, the Orcs appear to be unredeemable. At the end of the war, while the human enemies, the Southrons and Easterlings, are allowed to see the error of their ways and be forgiven, the Orcs, along with the other “creatures of Sauron”, simply go mad and die (*Lord* 949). That this is one of Tolkien’s less successful attempts at mixing modes is evidenced by his later attempts to explain and justify Orcs. In a letter to W.H. Auden he considered whether his notion of an entire race that was irredeemably evil was “heretical or not”, but did not come to a definitive conclusion (*Letters* 355). In later writings, Tolkien further considered the nature and origin of Orcs, writing that they “require more thought.... They are not easy to work into the theory and system” (*Morgoth* 402). But despite these efforts, Tolkien “struggled to perfect a retrospective solution” to the problem of Orcs (Rosebury 109), and they remained characters uncomfortably positioned between fantasy and mimesis.

## 4.3. STRUCTURE

### 4.3.1. INTERLACEMENT

*The Lord of the Rings* does not have a simple linear narrative structure. Although it began this way, as a straightforward adventure story similar to *The Hobbit*, the “tale grew in the telling” (*Lord* xxii), evolving into a long, complex and multi-layered narrative. Broadly speaking, the two main narrative threads are the quest to destroy

the Ring, and the war against Sauron. The quest plot thread is relatively straightforward, recalling the hero's journey of Campbell's monomyth, except that this is a quest to destroy, not to find. The other plot thread, which is further split into a number of sub-threads, concerns the unification of the people of the West into battles against both Saruman and Sauron, culminating in the assault on Mordor. The quest plot guides the structure of the first two Books, as well as Book IV and Book VI; the war plot guides the structure of Books III and V.<sup>20</sup> In Brooke-Rose's discussion of *The Lord of the Rings*, she questions the necessity of the war plot thread, arguing that because "only Frodo as Ring-Bearer is on the quest", all the other narrative threads are pointless duplication, which "seriously weakens the structure" because they serve no functional purpose (237). However, Brooke-Rose is analysing *The Lord of the Rings* based on the assumption that its "basic structure" is that of a fairy tale, as analysed by Propp and Greimas, which are typically in the form of a Quest (234-35). In contrast, West argues that *The Lord of the Rings* can best be understood in the context of the medieval narrative device of interlacement: "Interlace ... seeks to mirror the perception of the flux of events in the world around us, where everything is happening at once. Its narrative line is digressive and cluttered, dividing our attention among an indefinite number of events, characters, and themes, any one of which may dominate at any given time" (78-79). While an interlace narrative may have the appearance of randomness, "it actually has a very subtle kind of cohesion" (West 79). Although interlacement certainly provides a better basis for analysis than the fairy tale, *The Lord of the Rings* is, as Shippey notes, much more tightly unified than its medieval antecedents, with the various plot

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<sup>20</sup> See Shippey (*Author* 104) for a graphical representation of the narrative structure of *The Lord of the Rings*, from Book III to Book VI.

threads bound together by the precise map and an “extremely tight chronology of days and dates” (*Road* 161). Furthermore, by abandoning the perception that Frodo is the ‘hero’ of *The Lord of the Rings*, that his quest is the ‘main’ plot and all others are adjunct, we can then see that there is in fact a strong central plot which ties together the various narrative threads: the battle to save Middle-earth.

For, as Rosebury argues, in many ways Middle-earth is the real “hero” of *The Lord of the Rings* (34). Many critics have noted that Middle-earth itself becomes a character in *The Lord of the Rings*: places in Middle-earth “are never mere settings for the human drama; rather they participate in and help determine the narrative”, and are frequently portrayed as having a subtle sense of agency (Curry 453-54). As discussed in the first section of this chapter, the reality of this fantastic world is firmly established by Tolkien’s depth of sub-creation, which means that the threat of its destruction is just as real. Furthermore, Tolkien heightens the sense of peril with the imagery used in the descriptions of already corrupted parts of Middle-earth, such as the wastelands before Mordor: “Here nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that fed on rotteness. The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about” (*Lord* 631). The use of words more commonly associated with illness in humans or animals—‘leprous’, ‘gasping’, ‘choked’, ‘sickly’ and ‘vomited’—reinforces the sense that Middle-earth itself is a character in desperate need of rescue. Thus, rather than a simple quest, *The Lord of the Rings* details a complex sequence of events, all of which are dependent on one another for success. The completion of the Ring-bearer’s quest is what ultimately leads to the safety of Middle-earth, but Frodo could not have reached this goal had not the rest of the Fellowship, and indeed all of the people of the West, acted to distract Sauron from

the real “peril that crept, small but indomitable, into the very heart of his guarded realm” (*Lord* 938). Conversely, had not the people of the West fought to the last to defend their realms from Sauron, the destruction of the Ring may have come too late to make any difference in the outcome of the war. In this way, Frodo’s quest is but one of the many interlaced plot threads of *The Lord of the Rings*, which are all tightly bound together by the overarching quest to save Middle-earth from destruction.

As well as having a common goal, the plot threads are linked in other ways throughout the narrative. On occasion, the narrator establishes where certain characters are at a given time. For instance, during the ride to Minas Tirith, Pippin wonders where Frodo is, which prompts the narrator to inform the reader that at this moment “Frodo from far away looked on the same moon as it set beyond Gondor” (*Lord* 748), referencing Frodo in Henneth Annûn watching the full moon set “far off in the West” (*Lord* 683). Additionally, some characters and objects cross over plot threads: Pippin casts aside his elven brooch in the grasslands of Rohan, “a token” for Aragorn to find (*Lord* 424); Faramir arrives in Minas Tirith ready to tell tale of his meeting with Frodo and Sam (*Lord* 811); Frodo’s mithril vest is displayed to the army of the West as they gather in front of the Gate of Mordor (*Lord* 889). There are also many more subtle examples of cross-connection, such as Frodo hearing Gandalf’s voice on Amon Hen, the consequences of Pippin and Aragorn’s encounters with the Palantír, and the flight paths of the Nazgûl (*Shippey Road* 162-66): these connections are very understated, and as such require the reader to piece them together by careful reading of the text and reference to the chronology. But, as Shippey, argues these “references and allusions tie the story together ... they prove the author has the story under control” (*Road* 163), while at the same time working to enhance the sense of cohesion and meaning in the interlaced narrative.

Furthermore, additional connections between plot threads are created through a strong thematic unity. We have seen throughout this chapter some of the more prominent themes of *The Lord of the Rings*: hope and despair, life and death, ennoblement and the fall, light and dark, renewal and corruption. Each of these thematic concerns is explored in all of the plot threads, working to reflect and enhance one another, adding yet another layer of connected meaning to the interlaced narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*.

#### 4.3.2. A MELANCHOLY VICTORY

One criticism often directed towards *The Lord of the Rings* in its early reviews was the seemingly “contrived” nature of the “entirely successful happy ending” (Roberts 455). John declared himself unsatisfied by the “inevitable, and of course indispensable, happy ending” (976), while another reviewer preferred the war plot thread, for “the trouble about the adventures of Frodo, moving and terrible as they are, is that we know he must win in the end” (“Saga” 704). It is clear, however, that much of this criticism is based on the assumption that *The Lord of the Rings* has a traditional fairy tale structure, in which everyone ‘lives happily ever after’. A more careful, or more objective, reading of *The Lord of the Rings* demonstrates that while the story ends successfully, it does not end happily. For, in the end, Frodo chooses not to destroy the Ring, but rather claims it for his own. This was the ending for Frodo that Tolkien imagined from the earliest stages of drafting: an outline dating from 1939 describes Bingo (later renamed Frodo) reaching the Fiery Mountain, at which point “*he cannot make himself throw the Ring away*” (End 3). Fortunately, Frodo’s inability to destroy the Ring does not doom the Quest to failure, for Frodo’s ability to show mercy towards Gollum, to continue to hope for the possibility of

Gollum's redemption, meant that Gollum was still alive to wrest the Ring from Frodo. However, Frodo is unable to recover from his ordeal, broken down by his injuries, guilt, and lingering desire for the Ring: "It is gone for ever ... and now all is dark and empty" (*Lord* 1024). Like Aragorn, Frodo evokes the Fisher King figure of Arthurian legend. But, as Flieger argues, while Aragorn's is the role of the Healing King, the "more positive role of healer and renewer, whose presence works to restore the land" (134), Frodo takes on the role of the Maimed King, whose sacrifice is required to restore to the land:

He now evokes the Maimed King of the Grail legend.... Frodo is maimed, his loss of the Ring makes possible the renewal of the land, and, as in many versions of the Grail story, he is associated with and finally committed to water. ("Concepts" 144)

The association between Aragorn and Frodo's mirrored roles of Healer and Sacrifice are another point of connection between plot threads; whereas Aragorn's role ends with renewal of hope and fertility, Frodo's ends on a more tragic note. For Tolkien was keen to clarify that Frodo did not pass over the Sea to an immortal life, but to be healed "if that could be done, *before he died*" (*Letters* 328). As Flieger argues, Tolkien "goes to some lengths to show Frodo fallen, but barely adumbrates his redemption and re-making" (*Splintered* 156). Frodo's story in *The Lord of the Rings* does not end happily, with Frodo's recovery and redemption; instead, despite Frodo's sacrifices, his story ends with the certainty of his fall.

Frodo's fall resonates with the overall fall of Middle-earth. At the end of the narrative, the threat of imminent destruction has been thwarted, and realms such as Gondor and the Shire are, as discussed above (110-112), entering a period of

renewal. However, regardless of the triumph of good in this instance, Middle-earth is still facing, as Galadriel calls it, “the long defeat” (*Lord* 357). The eschatology of Middle-earth is a reflection of Tolkien’s belief that the Primary World has undergone a gradual descent from the paradisiacal golden age of Eden to the increasingly corrupt world of today: “The world has been ‘going to the bad’ all down the ages” (*Letters* 48). So too in Middle-earth, where humanity faces an ever-growing exile from paradise and the divine: *The Lord of the Rings* tells part of the story of an ongoing fall. Throughout the narrative, there is a recognition that victory in this battle will only slow the Fall, not reverse it: “The evil of Sauron cannot be wholly cured, nor made as if it had not been” (*Lord* 550). The world will still be a fallen place, for evil, once present, cannot be erased: indeed, Shippey argues that the “whole history of Middle-earth seems to show that good is attained only at vast expense while evil recuperates almost at will” (*Author* 148). Just as Frodo’s sacrifices do not guarantee his redemption, the sacrifices of the peoples of Middle-earth do not guarantee its recovery. The victory of the good in *The Lord of the Rings* is thus a melancholy one, for the end of the War of the Ring also signals the End of an Age, and a subsequent diminishing of magic, beauty, and wonder in Middle-earth: “For though much has been saved, much must now pass away; and the power of the Three Rings also is ended.... For the time comes of the Dominion of Men, and the Elder Kindred shall fade or depart” (*Lord* 971). As discussed throughout this chapter, Middle-earth is facing a growing separation from the light of the divine: while there are places in which the window to the divine is still yet clear, and beings of such purity that the light of their goodness is still yet visible, they are growing few. And the departure of Galadriel and Elrond from Middle-earth, along with their Rings of Power, implies that the last of the Edenic havens, Lothlórien and Rivendell, will soon

fade away. Because the mythology of Middle-earth is based in Christian theology, there is an implicit suggestion that redemption—a return to paradise and the reunification with the divine—is part of its future. But as discussed above (92), Tolkien’s view of Christianity often tended towards the pessimistic. So in *The Lord of the Rings* the sense of loss dominates; here there are no guarantees for a better future, only hope.

### 4.3.3. HOPE

So if the Fall is inevitable, where and how is hope to be found? Perhaps through the subtle evidence of the presence of higher powers, whose guidance and assistance gives occasion for hope. There is in *The Lord of the Rings* no formal religion, no churches and very few rituals. The Men of Gondor face West before eating, “towards Númenor that was, and beyond to Elvenhome that is, and to that which is beyond Elvenhome and will ever be” (*Lord* 676), and utter invocations on occasion: “May the Valar turn him aside!” (*Lord* 661). But beyond that, there is very little to suggest religious sensibility in the peoples of Middle-earth. Naturally, this seems rather at odds with Tolkien’s declaration that *The Lord of the Rings* is “fundamentally a religious and Catholic work” (*Letters* 172). However, as this chapter has demonstrated, a Catholic sensibility manifests in a number of other ways, in the representation of magic, in the sacramental air of the world, and in the thematic focus on hope, the fall, redemption and death. Furthermore, formal religion would not be appropriate in Middle-earth in the Third Age, for this “was not a Christian world” but rather “a monotheistic world of ‘natural theology’” (*Letters* 220). It is spiritual, rather than religious. God (Eru) is present, but He is not yet widely known. Other higher powers, however, are known: the Ainur, or “angelic powers” (*Letters* 146),

highest of which are the Valar, who alone are able to approach God. But while the *Legendarium* tells of the Valar in some detail, their presence within *The Lord of the Rings* is extremely understated, and difficult to perceive without further knowledge of the mythology. As Tolkien explains: “I have purposely kept all allusion to the highest matters down to mere hints, perceptible only by the most attentive, or kept them under unexplained symbolic forms” (*Letters* 201). Tolkien is referring specifically here to the return of Gandalf, which is the clearest moment of divine intervention in the entire narrative; but, even though Gandalf says that he “was sent back” (*Lord* 502), he does not say from where or by whom, a deliberate authorial obfuscation. Other possible incidents of divine intervention are even more subtle. For instance, Sam’s heartfelt plea for “light and water: just clean water and plain daylight” is fulfilled, an astonishing feat in the darkened wastelands of Mordor (*Lord* 918-920). The same wind that brings daylight to Mordor also drives back the despairing Black Wind that has overshadowed Gondor, in “a battle far above in the high spaces of the air” (*Lord* 919). Hammond and Scull state that some readers have “speculated that [the breaking of the darkness] is due to the unseen intervention of Manwë, chief of the Valar, whose province is the winds and breezes and regions of the air” (561). Similarly, compare the final moments of Sauron: “there rose a huge shape of shadow ... even as it leaned over them, a great wind took it, and it was all blown away, and passed” (*Lord* 949), and Saruman: “a grey mist gathered ... a pale shrouded figure it loomed over the Hill ... but out of the West came a cold wind, and it bent away, and with a sigh dissolved into nothing” (*Lord* 1020). Both end as insubstantial forms, blown away finally by the wind, another possible intervention by Manwë. However, just as many seemingly magical moments in *The Lord of the Rings* have equally plausible mimetic explanations (see above, 101) these instances

of seeming divine intervention could just as easily be natural occurrences. It is left to the characters, and the readers, to interpret these events as they wish.

There are also a number of prophecies and foretellings scattered throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, which are in themselves indicative of the guiding vision of a higher power. For example, Boromir travels to Rivendell because he dreamt of a voice, “remote but clear”, coming from a pale light in the West telling him: “*Seek for the Sword that was broken: In Imladris it dwells*” (*Lord* 246). Galadriel’s mirror shows visions of “things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be” (*Lord* 362), and she later advises Aragorn on his future paths and warns Legolas to “*Beware of the Sea*” (*Lord* 503). It is significant, however, that Galadriel’s mirror only shows visions of things that ‘may be’: prophecy in *The Lord of the Rings* is particularly tenuous, generally suggesting only possible outcomes, not certain futures. The effect on the narrative is therefore subtle: rather than explicitly foreshadowing specific narrative events, it instead works to enhance the sense of purpose and pattern within Middle-earth itself, creating an impression that there are some sort of higher powers at work in this world. One exception is the prophecy concerning the Lord of the Nazgûl, that “not by the hand of man shall he fall” (*Lord* 819). As Hammond and Scull note, Tolkien went through a number of draft versions of this particular prophecy (562), before settling on this version, which is deliberately deceptive in order to neatly sets up the narrative twist when Dernhelm is revealed as Éowyn: “But no living man am I!” (*Lord* 841). But such moments of authorial manipulation in regards to prophecy are rare in *The Lord of the Rings*; instead, prescience most often manifests as intuition, in a heart-felt feeling or foreboding, such as Gandalf’s sense that continued mercy towards Gollum is not only just, but crucial: “he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some

part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end” (*Lord* 59). This form of prophecy requires the characters not to decipher a dream or vision, but rather to trust that the voice that whispers in their heart is leading them in the right direction.

For even though the visions and prophecies indicate that there is a way that things should go, the characters are ultimately left to choose their own fate. In Middle-earth, Tolkien creates a world in which free will and destiny can, and do, coexist: “Tolkien allows for both freedom and fate, and in such a way that each seems to depend upon the other” (Dubs 38). For instance, while a vision told Boromir to go to Rivendell, this vision came first and most frequently to Faramir, perhaps indicating that the younger brother should have been the one to go. But Boromir choose to take the journey upon himself, and it is possible that this may have been the decision that led to his death. Similarly, it is made clear that while Frodo seems meant to bear the Ring, that “this task is appointed” for him, it is also made clear that it is choice whether to take it: “if you take it freely, I will say that your choice is right” (*Lord* 270). Likewise, it is Frodo’s choice to not destroy the Ring: “I do not choose now to do what I came to do” (*Lord* 945). As Shippey argues, if there is an “external power” at work in *The Lord of the Rings*, “it has to work through human or earthly agents, and if those agents give up, then the purpose of the external power will be thwarted” (*Author* 146). But whether they choose to follow the guidance or not, there is an overall sense that the thought of a guiding higher power is a comforting one, as Gandalf suggests to Frodo: “Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought” (*Lord* 56). For while there is much tragedy and hardship in the fate of many of the characters of *The Lord of the Rings*, they can find reassurance in the knowledge that there are signs, if they choose to see them, that some things are

meant to be, and that there is a higher purpose to all of these events: in this they can find both meaning and succour, and a reason to keep choosing hope.

#### 4.3.4. STORY-TELLING

The act of story-telling frames *The Lord of the Rings*: as discussed above (94), the literary device of the ‘found manuscript’, the ‘Red Book of Westmarch’, is the premise for the telling of this story. Additionally, there are a great number of stories within the story of *The Lord of the Rings*. Exposition, especially that which establishes the history of Middle-earth, typically takes the form of a story, poem or song, such as Aragorn’s tale of Beren and Lúthien (*Lord* 191-94), or Bilbo’s song of Eärendil (*Lord* 233-36). Many of these tales Tolkien would tell fully in other forms in the *Legendarium*, but their presence in *The Lord of the Rings*, even in fragmented form, adds another layer of depth to the world, a sense that there is a long history to Middle-earth, of which this particular story is only a small part. The act of story-telling can also serve other narrative functions. For instance, Aragorn’s telling of the tale elevates his status as a character, revealing him as a lore master, a person of significant knowledge. Furthermore, it is also a very subtle foreshadowing of his relationship with Arwen, another tale of love between a mortal Man and an immortal Elf, which is a “central element in [Tolkien’s] mythology” (Hammond and Scull 172). Bilbo’s song, on the other hand, works to reveal the importance of story-telling in Elvish society. Bilbo sings his song amidst a ceremonial gathering of song of music, to the appreciation of a “circle of listeners”, later telling Frodo that he did not think hobbits could “ever acquire the Elvish appetite for music and poetry and tales. They seem to like them as much as food, or more” (*Lord* 236-37). Within Elvish society, story-telling is not merely a form of entertainment, but a deeply significant

art form, almost a form of sustenance. But wherever they are told, stories are always significant in *The Lord of the Rings*: not only do tales of ancient history add depth to the world, but they also add depth to character, both individuals and societies as a whole.

Other stories told in *The Lord of the Rings* are events that occur within the timeline of the central narrative, but are recounted after the fact. The Council of Elrond is the most complex example of this: as Shippey notes, in this lengthy chapter “nothing happens: it consists entirely of people talking” (*Author* 68). But as Shippey’s detailed analysis demonstrates, this chapter is in actuality a complex layering of story-telling, as each speaker contributes their piece of the “Tale of the Ring . . . from the beginning even to this present” (*Lord* 242). Here, story-telling acts as an assemblage of knowledge, from which facts can be derived and decisions can be made, namely that this Ring is the One Ring, and that it must be destroyed. For the reader, this chapter is a full revelation of what has been up until this point mere hints and fragments, and the careful and logical decision-making process provides an intellectual understanding of the necessity of the Fellowship’s quest. While not as complex as the Council of Elrond, there are many other occasions in *The Lord of the Rings* in which the reader does not witness an event directly, but rather witnesses a character telling the tale of the event. The most common narrative effect is to increase suspense and surprise, because key events are revealed only after their climax has occurred in the narrative. For instance, the tale of Gandalf’s battle with the Balrog, and subsequent death and resurrection, is only told *after* Gandalf has revealed himself to Aragorn, Legolas and Gimili. This delayed telling works to increase both suspense, as the “old man” is assumed to be Saruman, and surprise, when Gandalf the White is at last unveiled (*Lord* 494). Likewise, the final stage of

the journey of the Grey Company is only told *after* the black fleet has arrived at the Battle of Pelennor Fields, thus increasing the surprise when the Corsairs of Umbar are revealed to contain Aragorn and other Gondorian allies. Tolkien admitted that Legolas and Gimili's recounting of this journey to Merry and Pippin was perhaps an imperfect solution, but maintained that "told in full in its proper place ... it would have destroyed Chapter 6" (*Letters* 258). As Bowman notes, "the effect of surprising the reader along with the armies during the battle was clearly intentional" (283). Tolkien was plainly cognisant of the ways in which the careful management of the withholding and revealing of certain parts of stories even *within* the central narrative could be used to manipulate reader response, and thus to increase intellectual and emotional engagement with the story as a whole.

There is also throughout *The Lord of the Rings* an intermittent metafictional sensibility, an awareness of its own status as a story:

*The Lord of the Rings* repeatedly reminds readers of its status as artifact.

[But] Tolkien never violates verisimilitude.... His characters would never be shown reading a chapter of *The Lord of the Rings* during the chapter itself.

But they are frequently shown writing it. He manages to operate at a meta-fictional level while preserving the illusion of historicity and the integrity of a very traditional kind of narrative. (Bowman 286)

The metafictional quality of *The Lord of the Rings* is at a much deeper level than in postmodern texts: it is not an overt, playful violation of narrative structure, a calling attention to the artificiality of narrative, but rather an awareness of the nature of story and the role it plays in human experience. In the most well-known example, Frodo and Sam discuss the nature of stories on the stairs of Cirith Ungol, as Sam wonders

what kind of story they are in, and whether their story will ever be “put into words, you know, told by the fireside , or read out of great book with red and black letters” (*Lord* 712). Sam’s speculation proves accurate in more ways than one: first the minstrel of Gondor sings the tale of Frodo of the Nine Fingers and the Ring of Doom, to Sam’s “final and complete satisfaction and pure joy” (*Lord* 954); then both Frodo and Sam put their tale ‘into words’ as co-authors of the Red Book of Westmarch; and finally, of course, *The Lord of the Rings* itself. As Flieger notes, in this passage Tolkien has created the most self-referential and post-modern moment in the entire book, for it is not just the story talking about itself and about the nature of story; it is also the book looking backward at its own genesis and forward at its future (and present) physical existence as the actual volume in the reader’s hand. (*Interrupted* 72)

In this same passage, Sam realises that the light held in the Phial of Galadriel signifies a connection with the story of Beren and the Silmaril: “we’re in the same tale still! It’s going on. Don’t the great tales never end?” (*Lord* 712). And, like the Phial itself, Sam’s metafictional recognition brings joy to Frodo: “he laughed, a long clear laugh from his heart. Such a sound had not been heard in those places since Sauron came to Middle-earth” (*Lord* 712). In this moment, light, hope and story come together in a moment of pure happiness. Thus within the world of the story of *The Lord of the Rings* we can see the consolation of story, the highest function of the fairy tale:

It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible its adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the ‘turn’ comes, a catch of the

breath, a beat and lifting of the heart. . . . In such stories when the sudden ‘turn’ comes we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart’s desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through. (Tolkien “Fairy” 75-76)

For Tolkien, the greatest fairy-story was the Christian story, for “this story has entered History” (“Fairy” 78). This was the act of Creation to which all acts of sub-creation merely aspire to, a refraction of the divine. In this way, story-telling becomes something much more than mere entertainment; in its highest form, story-telling is a form of sacrament, a way to glimpse the underlying truth, of the “Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (“Fairy” 75).

#### 4.4. CONCLUSION

*The Lord of the Rings* has been profoundly influential in the development of modern fantasy. The narrative innovations Tolkien pioneered have become generic features of epic fantasy, which is arguably still the most popular and recognisable subgenre of the fantasy genre. The most obvious influence of Tolkien’s work is his use of the mimetic mode in the creation of the setting, the characters, and the structure.

Tolkien’s Middle-earth set a new standard for fantasy worlds, distinguishing itself from predecessors by its sheer scope and scale, and by the certainty and devotion of its creator. As discussed above (21), in “On Fairy-stories”, Tolkien theorised about the possibilities of sub-creation to engender Secondary Belief, that is, true belief in the reality of a fantastic world: Middle-earth is the creative execution of this theory. Through the widespread use of mimetic narrative techniques, such as concrete descriptions, the use of names and maps to establish geographical reality, linguistic complexity, historical detail, and scholarly appendices, Tolkien was able to establish

a firm sense of reality for both the mimetic and fantastic landscapes of Middle-earth. But, crucially, Tolkien created much of this world and its history long before he began writing *The Lord of the Rings*; thus, he was able to provide authentically casual references to Middle-earth's past, because much of it already existed independently to the current story. The narrative techniques that Tolkien pioneered in establishing the reality of the fantasy setting have become standard in epic fantasy: we will see in later chapters that each of the authors discussed in this thesis use identical techniques. However, the *success* of the fantasy world often depends on the depth of sub-creation, on whether the world merely exists as a backdrop to the story, or whether, like Tolkien, the author has taken the time to create the fantastic world as an entity in its own right, with a historical and geographical scope that exists beyond the current story, a true Secondary World.

Another significant influential feature of *The Lord of the Rings* was Tolkien's introduction of mimetic characters into a fantastic world and story. The ordinary and relatable nature of the hobbits has proven to be key point of narrative pleasure for readers, as well as providing a point of connection between the Primary and Secondary Worlds. And, with the hobbits, Tolkien explored the consequences that might arise when a mimetic character is thrust into a fantastic world of story and myth: from the simple coming of age character development of Sam, an ordinary and humble character who nonetheless rises to great acts of heroism, to the tragic transformation of Frodo from actor to actant, becoming himself a sacrificial figure of story and myth. We will see in later chapters that each of the epic fantasies discussed feature similar protagonists, characters who begin as actors, but take on actantial roles, and the struggle between actor and actant is at the heart of each protagonist's character development, as they attempt to, like Sam, retain a sense of self in the

midst of heroism, and avoid Frodo's fate of becoming irrevocably altered by their role in the story. In this way, epic fantasy protagonists have grown more similar to characters such as Gandalf, Aragorn and Saruman, characters who shift between actor and actant, a blending of both mimetic and fantastic modes within one character. Indeed, this mixed characterisation is arguably the dominant mode of epic fantasy, and, like Tolkien's blended characters, the movement between the two identities of actor and actant is central to the development of many epic fantasy characters.

And finally, the interlace narrative structure of *The Lord of the Rings* has been particularly influential in epic fantasy. With this structure, Tolkien created something far more complex than the simple 'heroic quest' narrative typical of previous fantasy. By placing the Secondary World, rather than a single protagonist, at the centre of the narrative, and weaving a complex layering of plot threads all centred on saving this World from destruction, Tolkien created a sophisticated narrative, with deep thematic connections. And this complex narrative structure demands a mimetic approach to the construction and telling of the story, a careful cross-referencing of timelines, geographical detail, and issues of cause and effect, so as to ensure that there is no disruption to Secondary Belief bought about by inconsistencies between plot threads. The interlace structure of *The Lord of the Rings* has arguably become one of the most powerful influences on epic fantasy: it is a generic feature of the subgenre to have multiple plot threads and multiple protagonists. But, as we will see in later chapters, this generic feature of epic fantasy is also one that is most difficult to control, for interlace is a forceful narrative structure, one which is capable of taking over and shaping the narrative. Thus, the narrative structure of epic fantasy

demands a level of creative certainty and skill from the author, in order to prevent the weave of the story from unravelling.

Tolkien's narrative innovations in the mimetic mode reflect the scholarly side of his personality, his profound depth of knowledge of linguistics, literature, history, and myth. But the other side of Tolkien's personality, his deeply-felt Catholicism, is manifested most clearly in the fantastic mode. We have seen throughout this chapter a pervasive sacramental sensibility at work in *The Lord of the Rings*, a sense that both landscapes and characters can act as windows to the Light and carriers of the divine presence. This is a mutually causal relationship: uncorrupted places and beings, such as Lothlórien and the Elves, not only demonstrate their goodness through a visible purity of light, but also have the power to awaken and refresh waning spirit and hope in others. In contrast, corrupted places and beings, such as Mordor and the Nazgûl, not only lack light and presence, but inspire only a sense of fear and despair. This relationship between light and hope, darkness and despair, influences much of the imagery and meaning of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is perhaps most apparent in the contrast between two of the most symbolic objects in the story, the Phial and the Ring. The Phial is a symbol of Light and hope, and has the power to drive away darkness and despair, whereas the Ring's primary power is to make the wearer invisible, to diminish their relationship with the light, and therefore can only bring destruction and despair.

Thus, two of the most 'magical' objects in *The Lord of the Rings* are closely related to Christian meaning: indeed, magic remains throughout the story primarily symbolic. Similarly, the fantastic device of prophecy is used very subtly, to reflect on the nature of belief, hope and free will, rather than to manipulate the narrative or reader response. It is significant that magic and prophecy, two of the most fantastic

elements of any fantasy text, are in *The Lord of the Rings* used elusively, reflecting more on the nature and experience of the characters, rather than on the acts of magic and prophecy themselves. The further *The Lord of the Rings* moves away from Primary World reality, the closer it comes to the underlying reality Tolkien perceived through his Catholic beliefs. Accordingly, the conclusion of both Frodo's story and the story of Middle-earth are also reflections of Tolkien's perception of Catholic meaning, which often tended towards the negative and the inevitability of the Fall: "there cannot be any 'story' without a fall" (Tolkien *Letters* 147). Thus, while there are suggestions of hope of redemption for both Frodo and Middle-earth, *The Lord of the Rings* ends on the tragic melancholy of their fall. But perhaps the greatest hope for redemption comes through Story itself. The act of sub-creation was in many ways a religious act for Tolkien, a refraction of the act of divine Creation; likewise, the act of story-telling, of creating a story that both moves and transforms, was for Tolkien a diminished reflection of the historical manifestation of the Christian Story. And it is this aspect of *The Lord of the Rings*, the deep connection between the fantastic mode and Christian meaning, which has perhaps had the deepest influence in epic fantasy. While the superficial narrative elements, the mimetic techniques and characters, the interlace narrative structure, are the most easily apparent, there is, running beneath the surface, an awareness in the subgenre of epic fantasy of the potential of its stories to address some of the deepest concerns of human existence.

## 5. BEGINNING EPIC FANTASY:

### Terry Brooks' *The Sword of Shannara* and Stephen Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever*

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With the publication of Terry Brooks' *The Sword of Shannara* and Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever* in 1977, epic fantasy was firmly established as a commercially viable subgenre. Thus, it is unsurprising that in discussions of the history of fantasy, and especially of the legacy of *The Lord of the Rings*, the two novels are often compared. Inevitably, *The Sword of Shannara* comes off worse from this comparison:

What *The Sword of Shannara* seems to show is that many readers had developed the taste (the addiction) for heroic fantasy so strongly that if they could not get the real thing they would take any substitute, no matter how diluted.... This is not the case with Stephen Donaldson's 'Thomas Covenant' series, a work generally agreed to be much more original, and to have become in the end something like a critique and even an attempted rebuttal of Tolkien. (Shippey *Author* 320-21)

Like Shippey, critics generally agree that Donaldson's work is better executed and more original. While this chapter does not contest this perception, concurring with the consensus view that while *The Sword of Shannara* was the more commercially successful of the two works, *The Chronicles* was the work that demonstrated the potential for true literary sophistication in this new subgenre. However, this chapter

does offer a more comprehensive comparison of the two works, and attempt to offer an explanation for Donaldson's greater creative success. Furthermore, this comparison will explore not only the differences between Brooks' and Donaldson's responses to *The Lord of the Rings*, but also their similarities, something which has often been overlooked by critics keen to establish Brooks' as the inferior of the two works.

In his autobiography, Brooks recalls that reading *The Lord of the Rings* in 1965 helped resolve his struggle to find an appropriate "format" for his adventure story: "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" (*Sometimes* 188). But, acknowledging that he did not have Tolkien's "background in academia or his interest in cultural study", Brooks decided he would eliminate the scholarly and cultural "digressions" characteristic of *The Lord of the Rings*, and instead write a "straightforward adventure story that barrelled ahead, picking up speed as it went, compelling a turning of pages until there were no more pages to be turned" (*Sometimes* 188). Indeed, with *The Sword of Shannara* Brooks largely succeeds in creating a more accessible version of *The Lord of the Rings*. By condensing and simplifying both plot and theme, Brooks creates a fast-paced narrative that moves easily one from one adventure to another. Thus, *The Sword of Shannara* demonstrates how a story as complex as *The Lord of the Rings* can be transformed into something far more approachable, by simply pulling out the essential elements of the story and telling them with a "happy clarity" (Clute and Holmberg 142). Requiring little effort from the reader, the primary purpose of this story is to entertain.

Similarly to Brooks, Donaldson reveals in an interview that when he started generating ideas for *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, Tolkien “was extremely present” and “exciting” to him, and as he began looking for sources of inspiration he “went straight to the master” (Senior *Variations* 226). But Donaldson was also concerned to find a unique voice with which to tell his fantasy, telling himself: “I cannot write Tolkien, and if I try, this is going to fail. Whatever it is I do has got to become mine ... it has to be Donaldson. Or else there is no point in doing this at all” (Senior *Variations* 226). Donaldson decided that one thing he would do differently was “not pull away from the intense stuff like Tolkien does” (Senior *Variations* 227). In this, Donaldson was perhaps partly motivated by the stigmas associated with fantasy, and particularly the perception that fantasy was not ‘serious’ fiction:

the people who surrounded me all sneered at fantasy, and ultimately they would say that this wasn’t serious enough. So one reason *Covenant* is the way he is is that I don’t want anybody to be able to come back and say that I looked away from the crucial questions when it mattered.... Because of that, it’s a serious story. It doesn’t fit the parameters people use when they dismiss fantasy. (Senior *Variations* 223)

So whereas Brooks’ intention was to simplify and flatten, to create something intentionally escapist, Donaldson’s aim was to intensify and complicate, to create something that was more difficult than *The Lord of the Rings*, and in doing so preemptively defend his work against the assumption that fantasy was ‘merely’ escapist. Despite their differing creative motivations, Brooks and Donaldson’s works share a common element: a distinct influence of modern American sensibilities. As a literary genre, American fantasy struggled to establish itself, because fantasy conflicted with

many of the ideals of the emerging American character. Attebery argues that America began as a nation “hostile to fantasy”, because it was founded on ideals fundamentally opposed to the idea of fantasy, namely Puritanism, the Enlightenment, and materialism (*Tradition* 185-86). Similarly, American fantasist Ursula Le Guin argues that the American distrust, or even fear, of fantasy is “something that goes very deep in the American character”:

In wondering why Americans are afraid of dragons, I began to realize that a great many Americans are not only antifantasy, but altogether antifiction. We tend, as a people, to look upon all works of the imagination either as suspect or as contemptible.... Such a rejection of the entire art of fiction is related to several American characteristics: our Puritanism, our work ethic, our profit-mindedness, and even our sexual mores. (*Language* 32)

Thus there is a peculiar sense of ‘unbelief’ that characterises much early American fantasy, and can still be seen at work in both Brooks’ and Donaldson’s creative responses to *The Lord of the Rings*. In *The Sword of Shannara*, unbelief manifests explicitly as a suspicion of magic and belief within the fantasy world, but also implicitly as an authorial reluctance to fully explore the narrative potential of fantasy. Unbelief is even more explicitly influential in *The Chronicles*: the title character names himself ‘the Unbeliever’, and the issue of Covenant’s belief in the Secondary World frames and directs the entire narrative. As well as American unbelief, this chapter will also discuss the ways in which American ideals of equality and democracy manifest in both works. Very strongly influenced by *The Lord of the Rings*, yet also deeply rooted in American ideals and beliefs, we can see in both *The Sword of Shannara* and *The Chronicles* an uneasy merging of Tolkien’s conservative

and mythic sensibilities with the modern values of the fledgling American fantastic tradition.

## 5.1. SETTING

### 5.1.1. UNBELIEVING THE SECONDARY WORLD

In both Brooks' 'Four Lands', and Donaldson's 'Land', we can immediately see the influence of Tolkien's Middle-earth. Both of these fantastic worlds are presented in a relentlessly mimetic fashion, with concrete, matter-of-fact and detailed descriptions of their geography, history and cultures. Admittedly, neither Brooks nor Donaldson support their imaginary worlds to the same degree as Tolkien, particularly in terms of the paratextual material; both do have accompanying maps, and Donaldson also includes a glossary, but neither have the scholarly prologue, appendices, annalistic and linguistic material seen in *The Lord of the Rings*. However, what Brooks and Donaldson both adopt from Tolkien are the discursive techniques used to present the world in the narrative proper and, most importantly, the underlying assumption that the fantasy world should be just as realistic, rule-bound and concrete as the Primary World. As Brooks' and Donaldson's works both went on to form the foundation of a new subgenre, their mutual use of Tolkien's narrative techniques ensured that Tolkien's creative innovations would quickly become generic features of epic fantasy. But both authors have different levels of realism in their created worlds. Brooks realises his Four Lands to a degree, but either due to unwillingness or inability, stops short of creating a fully-fledged Secondary World in his own vision. In contrast, Donaldson exaggerates many of the elements that made Middle-earth so vivid, while at the same time undermining this heightened realism via his

protagonist's constant questioning of the reality of the Secondary World in which he finds himself.

*The Sword of Shannara* begins in Shady Vale which, like the Shire, is rural, isolated and idyllic. However, Brooks spends relatively little time establishing his protagonists' homeland, and the reader is given little sense of Shady Vale beyond a brief physical description of the village and its generic 'Valemen' inhabitants. In *The Lord of the Rings*, as discussed in the previous chapter (94-96), Tolkien uses the Shire as a transitional location between the Primary World and the Secondary World: thus, the narrative stays focused on this familiar location for the entirety of the scholarly prologue, as well as the first ten chapters. In contrast, Shea and Flick leave Shady Vale after three short chapters, much of which have been taken up with a lengthy exposition concerning the history of the world at large, and in particular the "history of the Northland and the legend of the Skull Kingdom" (*Sword* 24). As Shady Vale is located in the Southland, the reader is thus immediately dislocated from the starting location, in order to learn hundreds of years of history from another part of the world. So while Shady Vale is superficially similar to the Shire, it does not serve the same narrative function, as a portal setting through which the reality of the fantasy world can be gradually established; instead, Shady Vale is simply the place in the fantasy world that the story begins. And because *The Sword of Shannara* does not spend time establishing a familiar and mimetic starting location, the impact of transitioning to a strange outside world is lost. In fact, the narrative begins introducing fantastic elements *before* a sense of normalcy has been established: Flick notices an "unusual stillness" in the valley (*Sword* 2), and is frightened by the strange and otherworldly appearances of Allanon and the Skull Bearer in the first few pages, before he has even reached Shady Vale. Even though we are told these events are out

of the ordinary in this part of the Four Lands, we are not given a basis for comparison. While the immediate fantastic intrusions do work to thrust the reader straight into the action, this fast pace is soon undermined by the twenty-page exposition which takes up most of the second chapter (discussed further below, 193). And because the reader is taken so quickly out of Shady Vale, the sense of fear and wonder as the narrative moves to more fantastic realms is significantly diluted.

The undeniable derivative elements of *The Sword of Shannara* are one of its biggest flaws, and the unfortunate lack of originality is particularly apparent in the setting. As Shippey notes, while the ongoing success of the Shannara series “indicates that Brooks has succeeded at some level in creating his own ‘secondary universe’”, in this first instance, the Four Lands is so derivative from Middle-earth “as perhaps to deserve the term ‘tertiary universe’” (“Literature” 380). Indeed, the most intriguing aspects of the Four Lands as it appears in *The Sword of Shannara* are where Brooks is able to make significant departures from Tolkien. Most noticeable are the hints that the Four Lands is a post-apocalyptic Earth, such as the brief scene where Flick and Shea encounter a mysterious figure with what seems to be a battery-powered torch, which he describes as a “toy of people long since dead and gone” (*Sword* 117). And one of the most evocative settings is what appears to be the ruins of a large modern-day city, now just a “series of giant girders, covered with rust and framing square portions of the open sky” (*Sword* 195). Living in these ruins is a grotesque cyborg, a “nightmare mutation of living flesh and machine, its crooked legs balanced a body formed half of metal plating, half of coarse-haired flesh” (*Sword* 197). These dark, post-apocalyptic touches hint at the potential of the Four Lands to develop into a complex and original Secondary World, a potential that Brooks would explore more fully in subsequent novels in the *Shannara* series. But in *The Sword of*

*Shannara*, Brooks' originality is for the most part overshadowed by his imitation of Tolkien. It is likely that Brooks' lack of originality is largely a result of his novice writing skills; but perhaps this derivativeness is also the result of American unbelief, a doubting of the value or necessity of fully immersing oneself in a fantasy world. Whatever the reason, it seems that Brooks is not yet invested enough in his fantasy world to be able to fully separate it from Tolkien's Middle-earth, and thereby invest the Four Lands with a character and reality of its own.

In contrast, Donaldson largely succeeds in creating a fully-fledged Secondary World in *The Chronicles*. Although the Land strongly resembles Middle-earth in a number of ways, Donaldson, unlike Brooks, invests enough effort in the development of his fantasy world so that the derivative elements are ultimately outweighed by his original creative vision (Senior *Variations* 90-96; Shippey "Literature" 380). In his presentation of the Land, Donaldson paradoxically both exaggerates *and* undermines many of the narrative techniques that made Middle-earth so realistic. Because *The Chronicles* begin in the America of the Primary World, Donaldson's transitional location is even more mimetic than Tolkien's Shire. The America of *The Chronicles* is specifically presented to exaggerate the differences between the Primary and Secondary Worlds, emphasising the ugliness and hypocrisy of modern America to contrast it with the Land, which is in many ways an idealised version of America. In his small-town American home, Thomas Covenant is the victim of the worst of American society's intolerances. His leprous condition consigns him to the position of a feared outsider, as a truck driver explains to Covenant: "You know what a leper is? ... My old lady reads about this stuff all the time in the Bible. Dirty beggars. Unclean. I didn't know there was creeps like that in America. But that's what we're coming to" (*Chronicles* 391). Covenant's time in America frames each book in the

trilogy, and each time the picture of America becomes worse, culminating in the final book with Covenant's experience at a Christian tent revival. This encounter exposes the hypocrisy, greediness and closed-mindedness infecting those who should adhere to the highest ideals of acceptance and generosity, as, instead of compassion and succour, Covenant is threatened with violence if he disrupts the service: "We haven't taken the offering yet. If you do anything else to interrupt, I'll break both your arms" (*Chronicles* 801). So while the America of *The Chronicles* is more familiar than the Shire in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is a different kind of familiarity: unsettling and confronting, as opposed to comforting and amusing. And when the beauty and magic of the Land is contrasted with Covenant's America, the Land is made even more wondrous and beautiful by comparison.

But the most important consequence of framing *The Chronicles* with Covenant's experiences in the Primary World is that it raises the possibility that the Secondary World is only a dream or delusion. For Tolkien, this potential doubt was fatal to fantasy, for the "moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from the outside" (Tolkien "Fairy" 52). Indeed, the Shire, despite its mimetic and familiar qualities, is still undoubtedly part of Middle-earth: the world outside the Shire is strange and wonderful, but the hobbits never have cause to doubt its reality, and this same certainty carries over to the reader. Covenant, on the other hand constantly questions the reality of the Land, giving himself the epithet 'the Unbeliever'. As Attebery argues, Donaldson "has attempted to dramatize the very unbelief that mars so much American fantasy and to incorporate it into the world he is making" (*Tradition* 159). While Tolkien built his world and story on the creative principle of Secondary Belief, Donaldson bases his story on the idea of unbelief: so,

instead of Tolkien's constant reassurances of the reality of Middle-earth, we have Covenant's constant questioning of the reality of the Land. Importantly, however, it is *Covenant's* belief in the Land which is at issue; the reader is offered plenty of reassurances of the Land's reality. Despite Covenant's unbelief, the Land itself is described in mimetic detail, using the same narrative techniques that Tolkien refined in *The Lord of the Rings*. Even Covenant is comforted to find that the Land is consistent and rule-bound:

Covenant became slowly more conscious of the reassuring solidity of the Land. It was not an intangible dreamscape; it was concrete, susceptible to ascertainment. This was an illusion, of course – a trick of his racked and smitten mind. But it was curiously comforting. It seemed to promise that he was not walking into horror, chaos – that this Land was coherent, manageable, that when he had mastered its laws, its peculiar facts, he would be able to travel unscathed the path of his dream, retain his grip on his sanity.  
(*Chronicles* 60)

Covenant's reaction echoes the reaction a reader might have upon entering a state of Secondary Belief: even if this fantasy world is only beneficial for its escapist qualities, it is reassuringly 'coherent' and 'manageable', and "you therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside" (Tolkien "Fairy" 52). However, the reader of *The Chronicles* does need to work harder to attain Secondary Belief, as they are required to discount the protagonist's interpretation of events. Secondary Belief does become easier as the narrative progresses, for, as is argued below (186-87), the premise of unbelief is in many ways at odds with the narrative structure derived from *The Lord of the Rings*, and as *The Chronicles'* narrative scope widens, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain Covenant's unbelief as valid. Furthermore, the thematic focus on

the idea of unbelief is continually undermined by the Land's vividness and depth, as though the act of sub-creation has somehow subverted Donaldson's original creative vision.

### 5.1.2. THE LIFE OF THE LAND

We saw in the previous chapter how Tolkien developed meaningful connections between the land and the characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. In *The Sword of Shannara* and *The Chronicles*, we can see two different responses to this element of Tolkien's story: Brooks does not take it on at all, while Donaldson takes it even further. As discussed above, the Four Lands in *The Sword of Shannara* is not yet a fully developed Secondary world, which perhaps contributes to the protagonists' relatively superficial relationship with the landscape. While Flick and Shea encounter strange and wondrous realms in their journeys, they are not affected by them in any deep or lasting ways. For example, the Blue Pond in Storlock has "special healing elements", and the Stors use its water for medicinal purposes. But this water has no apparent magical properties, appearing to be the same as any healing mineral water in Primary World. Consequently, it is unsurprising that it does not cause any spiritual or emotional responses in the characters: when Shea tastes it, he finds it "different" and "not at all displeasing to drink" (*Sword* 231), but his experience does not have the sacramental undertone of Merry and Pippin's drinking of the Entwash in *The Lord of the Rings*. Similarly, compare Frodo's experience in Lothlórien (100, 105) to Flick's experience in Culhaven: "The creation of the gardens on this once barren hillside was a truly marvelous accomplishment.... The color was indescribable.... Flick attempted briefly to count the various shades, a task he soon found to be impossible" (*Sword* 129). Like Lothlórien, Culhaven is a 'marvelous' place, with

‘indescribable’ colours. But unlike Frodo, Flick remains an impressed but largely impassive observer of this beautiful landscape: he attempts to categorise the wonder that he sees, but does not undergo any sensory and spiritual awakening as a result of his experience. Similarly, in the Northland, Shea, Panamon and Kelset pass through a mist wall that brings them to the edge of death, lulling them into a dreamlike and timeless state, an “indulgence of the subconscious” where the “unreal became almost acceptable” (*Sword* 517). (In many ways, this dangerous mist wall is the closest the text comes to depicting a Faërie-realm, a landscape associated with dreaming and disassociation from reality.) However, after passing through the wall safely, Shea, Panamon and Kelset all recover quickly: “the three companions were suddenly the same as before. ... the memories were gone” (*Sword* 519). Passing through a dream-world has no lasting effect. Throughout *The Sword of Shannara*, the characters’ responses to the world are short-lived: they experience wonder and fear, but they are not transformed by this experience. Furthermore, unlike *The Lord of the Rings*, the characters’ emotional or spiritual state of mind has no effect on the land: the causal relationship between land and character is not only brief, it is one-sided. Shea, Panamon and Kelset are not saved from the mist-wall through strength of character or mind; rather, it is “only the power of the stones [that] saved them” (*Sword* 518). While the overarching plot of *The Sword of Shannara* is concerned with saving the Four Lands from darkness and domination, the characters do not have the intimate connection with the land itself that worked to enhance the urgency of the mission in *The Lord of the Rings*.

In contrast, Donaldson significantly exaggerates this element of *The Lord of the Rings* in *The Chronicles*, creating intimate physical and spiritual connections between the land and its inhabitants, and, in particular, with the

protagonist. Like Middle-earth, the Land has magical healing properties, able to rejuvenate both body and soul through sensory stimulation. But unlike Middle-earth, the Land's healing powers are conspicuous and readily available: for example, while *athelas* is rare in Middle-earth and requires a true King to call forth its healing properties, *aliantha* is abundant in the Land, and everyone knows that simply eating it will bring strength and health. As Senior notes, the Land itself is "health vivified" (*Variations* 91): it is not only the epitome of an unspoiled, unpolluted world in itself, but it is able to provide strength and restoration to its inhabitants in a myriad of ways. Of course, Covenant's reaction to the Land is heightened because he begins from a state of extreme sensory deprivation caused by his leprosy. In the Land, Covenant experiences a literal physical sensory awakening as the hurtloam and *aliantha* "reawaken" his dead nerves (*Chronicles* 55). But unlike Frodo, whose sensory awakening in Lórien brings him joy and spiritual rejuvenation, Covenant resists his sensory awakening as something that is unnatural and dangerous, believing that his dream is seducing him into forgetting the reality of his disease: "the immediacy of these inexplicable sensations began to infuriate him. They were evidence of health, vitality – a wholeness he had spent long, miserable months of his life learning to live without" (*Chronicles* 104). For Covenant, physical awakening is not quickly followed by spiritual rejuvenation; it takes a long time to heal his wounded soul. And there is a symbiotic relationship between Covenant and the Land, reminiscent of Aragorn and Frodo's relationship with Middle-earth (110, 134). Consequently, the Land itself begins to decline from its initial state of health, becoming a literal manifestation of the symptoms of Covenant's physical and mental illnesses. Thus, in contrast to the fire and heat of Mount Doom in Middle-earth, the heart of the corruption in the Land is a place of "livid cold" and "absolute chill" (*Chronicles*

1123), reflecting both the numbness of leprosy and Covenant's spiritual deadening. Covenant's mutually causal relationship with the Land adds depth to the plot, as Covenant's personal quest for healing becomes inextricably linked with the quest to save the Land from complete destruction.

Adding further depth is the pervasive sacramental air to the relationship between the Land and its people, similar to that between Middle-earth and its inhabitants.

However, Donaldson takes the idea of sacramentality further than Tolkien, for whom it remained, as argued above (104-107), a subtle element. While the Land, like Middle-earth, has no formal religious institution dedicated toward a higher power, the people of the Land exhibit a reverence for the Land and its Earthpower that verges on worship. All of the Land's customs and rituals centre around caring for the life of the land: thus, while the Men of Gondor face West before eating in acknowledgement of Númenor, Elvenhome, and beyond, the people of the Land "stand before eating, as a sign of respect for the Earth, from which life and food and power come" (*Chronicles* 70). The Stonedown marriage ceremony requires two people to vow not only their dedication towards each other, but to the "service of the Earth" (*Chronicles* 81), and the Vespers of Revelstone are a "time consecrate to the services of the Earth" (*Chronicles* 191). When Covenant explores Earthroot, the source of Earthpower, the imagery takes on explicit religious overtones: "Their rocklight, and the vibrant stillness of the lake, gave the whole place a cloistral air, despite its size. Earthroot was a place to make mere mortals humble and devout. It made Covenant feel like a sacrilege in the sanctified and august temple of the mountains" (*Chronicles* 748). In this way, Donaldson exaggerates the sacramental sensibility of *The Lord of the Rings*, to create a world with an amorphous but ubiquitous natural religion, which is starkly opposed to the structured and

hypocritical religion of Covenant's America. Donaldson has spoken of his reluctance to explicitly fictionalise his deep-seated but conflicted religious beliefs, because it always "turns back into fundamentalist Christianity, and then it falls dead on the page" ("Interview"); however, like Tolkien, those beliefs instead manifested in a sacramental understanding of the transformative potential of the land itself. This in turn creates a deep physical and spiritual relationship between the land and its characters in both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles*, which is absent in *Sword of Shannara*. Brooks and Donaldson's differing responses to this element of *The Lord of the Rings* in many ways reflect their overall approaches towards their re-visioning of Tolkien's work: while Brooks tends to simplify or eliminate many of the more fantastic or mythical elements of the story, Donaldson attempts to complicate or exaggerate these elements.

### 5.1.3. DEMOCRACY

Despite marked differences in some areas, Brooks and Donaldson's epic fantasies share a number of similarities in other areas. In particular, we can see in both the influence of American sensibilities, and especially the principles of democracy and equality. A passionate belief in the value of a democratic system of government is one of the founding traits of the American character; accordingly, it is also one of the distinguishing characteristics of American fantasy. Thus, in Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the Yankee can offer the people of mythical Britain "initiative, courage and democratic principles" as particularly American characteristics (Attebery *Tradition* 81). In many ways, as Smith argues, Twain's work "could be taken as the expression of an international crusade for democracy" which has characterised America's international relations (76). Another approach

characteristic of early American fantasy is to present the Otherworld as a utopia of democracy and equality: America as it should be. The most well-known example of this approach is Baum's Oz, which as Attebery argues, is presented as an ideal of American egalitarianism:

Oz ... is the agrarian promised land. It is essentially rural and democratic.... Its many farmers and woodsmen act and speak with the assurance of yeomen, rather than with the cautious humility of peasants; servants are few and independent.... Oz is America made more fertile, more equitable, more companionable, and, because it is magic, more wonderful. (*Tradition* 86-87)

Crucially, while Oz does have monarchical systems, this is balanced by a "deliberate democratization of kingship", wherein rulers are elected based on their "common sense and kindness rather than on birthright or divine right" (Zanger 98). This democratic sensibility exists in stark contrast to those of the strictly hierarchical societies of Tolkien's Middle-earth which, as discussed above (108-110), are built upon a sacred tradition of hereditary rule. Therefore, in constructing their Secondary Worlds, Brooks and Donaldson both face the challenge of reconciling the conservative beliefs of their literary inspiration with the modern sensibilities of the fledging American fantastic tradition.

The world of *The Sword of Shannara* is politically inconsistent, which is likely a result of Brooks' desire to introduce modern American sensibilities into his epic fantasy, combined with his inability to fully separate his creation from his model. For instance, Brooks initially gives Shea a heightened level of political awareness, which is somewhat incongruous with his ostensibly rural and isolated upbringing. Early on, we are told that Shea is "an outspoken advocate of decentralized government, an

opponent of absolute power”, and that his strong friendship with Menion Leah, “the heir to a monarch’s throne” is thus noted as being strangely out of character (*Sword* 71). However, even though Shea’s political views are mentioned quite frequently in the early part of the novel, this theme remains undeveloped: Shea neither reaffirms nor changes his beliefs that “central governments have always been the greatest danger to mankind” (*Sword* 29), nor do his strong beliefs result in any later conflict; instead, Shea’s beliefs are simply not mentioned again. Seemingly, Brooks planned to examine the role of centralised governments in some way through the character of Shea and his journeys into the wider world; however, this potential source of conflict ultimately remains unresolved. In a similar fashion, when the city of Callahorn is first described, it is characterised, like Oz, as an idealised America, a democratic utopia:

Callahorn was one of the few remaining enlightened monarchies in the world. While it was technically a monarchy ruled by a King, the government also consisted of a parliamentary body composed of representatives chosen by the people of Callahorn, who helped the ruler hammer out the laws that governed the land.... Callahorn was a land that reflected both the past and the future. (*Sword* 419-20)

However, despite this fulsome praise, we see little of the ‘enlightened monarchy’ of Callahorn in action, and little that demonstrates that it is substantially different from any other settlement in the Four Lands. In fact, the plot thread of Balinor’s reclamation of the throne of Callahorn from his mad usurper brother seems to contradict the image of a land which is only ‘technically’ a monarchy. Balinor, who is the “logical heir to the throne” (*Sword* 413), is portrayed throughout as the key to Callahorn’s victory, the possessor of special abilities which make him uniquely

suited to rule: “only the missing Balinor possessed the battle knowledge and skill necessary to lead them. The Prince must be found quickly and placed in command” (*Sword* 558). So, despite the description of Callahorn’s government, there is little in the text that supports the claim that Balinor is only a figurehead ruler of a democratic parliament. Like so much of Brooks’ more original contributions to his fantasy world, the political ideals are sporadically addressed, under-developed, and inconsistent with the plot elements derived from *The Lord of the Rings*. While Brooks makes gestures in the direction of modern, American ideals, he does not make the radical changes in either the world or the plot that are required to support them.

In contrast, Donaldson is able to incorporate these same democratic ideals into his re-visioning of Middle-earth in an internally consistent manner. Donaldson’s solution is both more drastic and more subtle than Brooks’: rather than attempting to adapt Middle-earth’s hierarchal social structures to suit his modern American ideals, he simply creates a Secondary World in which class systems do not exist, a world which is characterised by feeling of “American informality and sense of equality” (*Senior Variations* 73). But, unlike Brooks, Donaldson ‘shows’ rather than ‘tells’ these ideals at work in the Land. The social structures of the Land are equal and democratic, “a melting pot of people from different races and backgrounds working together, moving about, and associating freely” (*Senior Variations* 68), and people can choose their occupation without limitations of race, class or gender. At the heart of the Land, Revelwood is a city that exemplifies the ideals of equality and democracy; but rather than an ‘enlightened monarchy’, Revelwood is instead the seat of learning and study in the Land, and this is what gives it its unique character. There are no servants or lower classes, for the Lorewardens and apprentices do “all the work of the city – all

the cooking, farming, herding, cleaning” (*Chronicles* 564), and the city itself is open to visitors from all over the land who are seeking knowledge. The Land is governed by the Lords (a somewhat misleading title), who earn their positions of authority first through dedicated study, and then via peer-election: they “are named Lords, and they join the Council which guides the healing and protection of the Land. From their number, they choose the High Lord, to act for all as the Lore requires” (*Chronicles* 95). A number of scenes depicting the Lords’ council demonstrate that they consistently “operate as a democratic body and make joint decisions based on debate and argument” (*Senior Variations* 69-70). There is one small incongruity in the Land’s system of democratic election when Covenant is named ur-Lord simply because prophetic signs have indicated his importance: Prothall even offers Covenant the High Lordship, a position that Prothall himself has earned only through years of study and dedication. Covenant, however, does not claim the authority that is offered to him; indeed, the unwarranted deference only works to increase Covenant’s crippling sense of unworthiness. In the end, Mhoram is in the position of ultimate authority during the decisive battle for the Land’s safety, and, despite his own doubts about his abilities, he proves instrumental to victory, thus demonstrating the validity of system which elects its leaders based on consistent demonstration of worth. As discussed above (156-56), the America of the Primary World as it is depicted in *The Chronicles* is one that does not live up to its ideals of democracy, equality and tolerance; thus, the Land, as a world in these ideals work in the best possible fashion, is made even more wondrous by contrast.

#### 5.1.4. MAGIC AND BELIEF

In the world of *The Sword of Shannara*, magic is viewed with uncertainty and distrust. In the past, the abuse of scientific knowledge led to the destruction of civilisation (*Sword* 155-56), which has naturally led to a suspicion of science in the present. However, in trying to recover the lost sciences, the Druid Council inadvertently stumbled upon magic, which proved to be even more perilous than science: “the enchantment of sorcery has replaced [the old sciences]—a more powerful, more dangerous threat to human life than any before” (*Sword* 161). Consequently, magic remains largely unknown and unused in the Four Lands. Only two Druids still live: Brona, who has been corrupted by his use of magic (discussed further below, 180-79), and Allanon, who only studies the “black arts” (*Sword* 254) out of need to protect the Four Lands from Brona. There is no countering ‘white’ or natural magic in this world; magic is simply a dangerous power. In this regard, *The Sword of Shannara* has more in common with pre-Tolkien British fantasy, in which magic is an “intrinsically immoral, threatening force” (Zanger and Wolf 31), than it does with *The Lord of the Rings*, in which, as discussed (101-101), ‘evil’ magic is balanced by a ‘good’ magic that is associated with hope and sacramental belief. However, the influence of the American fantastic tradition can be seen in the *reason* that magic is more dangerous than science, which is that magic requires belief to make it work:

While the sciences of old operated on practical theories built around things that could be seen and touched and felt, the sorcery of our own time operates on an entirely different principle. Its power is potent only when it is believed.... If the mind does not truly find some basis for belief in its existence, then it can have no real effect. (*Sword* 164-65).

Because magic is less empirical and knowable than science, it is therefore more dangerous. The magic of a Secondary World can be seen as the height of the fantastic mode, representing as it does a pure willingness to believe in the impossible: so perhaps the fear of magic in the Four Lands is another manifestation of American unbelief, a transformation of magic from an act of faith into an act of dangerous irrationality. Moreover, magic is used remarkably few times within the narrative. In addition to Brona and Allanson's sporadic magic use, the only other significant instances of magic are the infrequent uses of the Elfstones, which simply act as convenient plot-device to get the characters out of trouble, and of course the eponymous Sword, which, as is discussed below (180-79), represents the dangers inherent in believing in the impossible. Brooks, like his characters, seems somehow wary of magic and thus reluctant to truly explore the full narrative potential of the impossibilities of the fantastic mode.

In contrast, magic is a pervasive element in *The Chronicles*, and one in which we can see a complex merging of Tolkienian and American fantasy. Zanger and Wolf argue that one of the features of American fantasy is that in it "magic has become a counterpart of science, having a law-like structure, achieving verifiable results, and open to all who learn its ways" (35). This is a significant difference from magic as it is depicted in *The Lord of the Rings*, where magic remains mysterious, deeply symbolic and deliberately unknowable. In the Land the source of all magic is Earthpower, which, as discussed above, represents a particularly sacramental understanding of the world; however, the people of the Land have precise methods of harnessing Earthpower, and have developed a system of knowledge—rituals, lore and Laws—which are able to be taught to new practitioners. Magic in the Land is thus both sacramental and scientific. Additionally, magic, as in *The Lord of the*

*Rings*, is strongly associated with the theme of hope; however, instead of acting as a means through which hope can be revealed or enhanced, magic in *The Chronicles* has differing results depending on the practitioner's motivations, one of the most important of which is hope. Magic in *The Chronicles* is thus a reflection of the "emerging American outlook", in which "magic is an amoral, neutral force" able to be used for good or for ill (Senior *Variations* 86). The Lords' use of Earthpower is governed by the Oath of Peace, which was created after Kevin's devastating use of the Ritual of Desecration. But, as Mhoram learns, in taking the Oath, in "forswearing all violent, destructive passions", the Lords have also "unwittingly numbed themselves to the basic vitality of the Old Lord's power" (*Chronicles* 807). Initially dismayed by this knowledge, Mhoram has a significant moment of revelation when he understands that "despair was not the only unlocking emotion" to the Ritual of Desecration (*Chronicles* 986), and that passion for protection, for preservation, for love of the Land, also grants access to this power. In short, it was not the power itself that caused the Desecration, but Kevin's despair; thus, if that power is accessed from a place of hope rather than despair, the results will be different.

However, despite his realisation, Mhoram ultimately believes that it is better not to access Earthpower in this fashion: "we will gain lore of our own ... a lore in which the Oath of Peace and the preservation of the Land live together" (*Chronicles* 1149). In this decision, we can see a subtle manifestation of American unbelief, and its distrust of uninhibited fantasy: Mhoram is wary of using magic when it is accessed via passionate emotion rather than rational thought, choosing "the restraint implied in the Oath of Peace over superior power" (Barkley 167). But, on the other hand, Covenant learns that in order to harness the wild magic of his ring, he must give in to pure instinct: "he found his error. He had tried to use the wild magic like a tool or

weapon, something which could be wielded. It was not a thing to be commanded ... Now that it was awake, it was a part of him, an expression of himself" (*Chronicles* 1137). To use his ring, Covenant cannot try to control it, but must instead give himself over to the wild magic. Furthermore, in order to use magic, Covenant must first believe in it, for, as with any Secondary World, magic is the central impossibility of the Land: "This wild magic is not a part of your world. It violates your Unbelief. How can you use this power in which you do not believe?" (*Chronicles* 1132). Thus, to harness the wild magic, Covenant must not only let go of his self-restraint, he must give into belief. But there is also a paradox in this because, as discussed further below (187-87), Covenant's unbelief is also the key to his victory: not believing *and* believing are required to defeat Lord Foul. Like so much of *The Chronicles*, the representation of magic demonstrates how Donaldson's work sits in the gap between the old and the new, between the ideals of Tolkien and the ideals of modern American, embodying both but advocating neither. But while Donaldson's fantasy clearly values magic more than Brooks', there is still an element of fear about where unbridled belief may take us, a sense that magic, and by extension fantasy itself, is desirable, but should perhaps be controlled by reason and restraint, or balanced by a measure of unbelief.

## 5.2. CHARACTER

### 5.2.1. THE HUMAN HERO

In the characterisation of the protagonists, we can again see Brooks' and Donaldson's differing responses to Tolkien's work, in that Brooks tends to simplify, while Donaldson exaggerates. In *The Sword of Shannara*, Flick and Shea are pared-down versions of the hobbits. They are ordinary, recognisable, uncomplicated and,

importantly, begin in a secure state of identity and remain that way for the entire story. Shea, for example, is half-Elven, but while we are told that sometimes “being a half-blood bothered him” (*Sword* 21), he does not go through any identity crises as a result of his mixed heritage, even when he encounters Elves for the first time. Indeed, as is discussed further below (184-84), Shea undergoes very little character development throughout the story. In many ways, Flick and Shea represent a return to fairy tale heroes, a stripping away of the individuality and moral complexity that added depth to the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*, and instead providing a blank slate on to which the reader can project their identity. While this effect is somewhat undermined by the frequently shifting focalisation, which often changes from person to person between one paragraph and the next, Shea and Flick do act as points of connection for the reader, and easily relatable guides to the Four Lands. In contrast, Covenant is difficult to relate to, and acts as an uneasy guide to the Land. An often highly unlikeable character, Covenant, rather than providing a bridge to the fantasy world, actively disrupts the process of Secondary Belief. Like Twain’s Yankee, Covenant is an American intruder in a fantastic world, a jarring and confronting stranger: “Like the dreaded ugly American abroad, he is rude, arrogant, defiant, demanding, thankless, and xenophobic at times” (*Senior Variations* 30). Indeed, one of the first things Covenant does in the Land is to rape an innocent girl, which, as Senior notes, is “a violent revision of the conventional start of fantasy” (*Variations* 21). Unlike the hobbits in Middle-earth, or Flick and Shea in the Four Lands, Covenant is not a part of the Secondary World: further, he constantly questions the very existence of the Land itself, acting as a discordant element in the process of Secondary Belief. However, while Covenant is not necessarily relatable, he is

certainly recognisable in his flawed and complex humanity, and thus still acts as a mimetic, albeit uncomfortable, point of connection for the reader.

The same contrast in Brooks and Donaldson's approaches can be seen in the way that the protagonists assume their heroic roles, and the changes that are wrought by their heroic journeys. In *The Sword of Shannara*, Shea accepts being forced into the functional role of hero with relative equanimity; however, he is acutely aware that he is only in this position because he was "born in the wrong family" (*Sword* 146), and thus doubts his suitability for the role: "from the beginning he had been completely inadequate to the task. He had been unable to do anything for himself, depending on the strength of other men to get him this far" (*Sword* 508). So, whereas Frodo's transformation takes him out of the sphere of relatability, Shea's growth is, ostensibly, much more akin to Sam's: a simple growth in confidence and self-worth. However, a major flaw in Brooks' writing is his tendency to 'tell' rather than 'show' character development, wherein the characters constantly inform the reader about emotional and psychological states, rather than demonstrating these states through action and dialogue, a technique that would have been far better suited to the intended fast narrative pace. As Mendlesohn notes, the effect of these 'internal reveries' is "peculiar": while it is "intended to draw us into the mind of the character" it instead has a distancing effect, breaking the immersive rhythm of the story while the characters pause, "explaining to us [their] concerns" (39-40). And, as discussed further below (184-84), the lack of detail and complexity in regards to Shea's character development also creates some significant problems during the narrative climax. Whereas Brooks simplifies this aspect of *The Lord of the Rings*, Donaldson once again exaggerates. Thus, unlike both Shea and Frodo, Covenant resents and resists the role of the hero and saviour, and actively works against

fulfilling his functional role in the story. As Senior notes, in a world filled with relatively 'ordinary' people, "the only person capable of being the superhero ... is Covenant, who is paradoxically the least interested in becoming a saviour" (*Variations* 45). Covenant is unable to accept his heroic role because he is frightened of the power inherent in this role, a power that conflicts with his identity as an impotent leper: to accept the role of heroic saviour would mean denying the reality of his leprosy, something that Covenant is unable to do: "If you think I'm some kind of personified redemption – it's a lie. I'm a leper" (*Chronicles* 213). Further, Covenant's sense of powerlessness only worsens as his refusal to accept his functional role causes death and destruction, sending him into a spiral of guilt and inadequacy. Thus, Covenant's journey sees him learning to accept his heroic responsibility, which first and foremost requires him to both confront and forgive his leprosy.

Covenant's psychological journey is the primary narrative thread of *The Chronicles*, and this intense focus on one individual's character development is probably one of the most dramatic changes Donaldson makes from *The Lord of the Rings*. As Covenant journeys towards heroism, the reader is given detailed access to his constant self-examination and the painful process of his psychological and emotional healing: as Mendlesohn notes, the "overall effect ... is to render the reader as therapist, required to accept this continuing internal analysis" (43). This narrative technique is better suited to *The Chronicles* than the internal reveries are to *The Sword of Shannara*: not only is Donaldson's work much slower paced, but there is throughout an explicit thematic focus on psychological concerns. The main hurdle that Covenant has to overcome is the feeling of despair caused by his leprosy. The title of the second chapter—"You cannot hope"—is a telling one: in this chapter,

Covenant is informed that the only way to survive leprosy is to accept the reality that there is no hope of a cure. He *cannot* hope, because “above all else a leper must not forget the lethal reality of facts” (*Chronicles* 21). And it is Covenant’s hard-learned reliance on the ‘reality of facts’ that is challenged by the Land, because the vitality of the Land cures his leprosy, something he knows to be impossible: hence Covenant’s desperate need to cling to his unbelief, for unbelief is “his only defence against the Land, his only way to control the intensity, the potential suicide, of his response to the Land” (*Chronicles* 691). Thus, when Covenant begins to let go of his unbelief in the Land, he is implicitly letting go of his despair about his leprosy and opening himself to the possibility of hope. However, as discussed further below (187-87), Covenant does not give in completely to belief and hope: the key to his survival is finding a balance between hope and despair, belief and unbelief, fantasy and reality. Thus, when Covenant wakes in the hospital, he still identifies himself as a “sick man, a victim of Hansen’s disease”, for this reality has not altered; however, he now accepts that this reality does not need to define him, that he is “not just a leper” (*Chronicles* 1152). Dramatically changed from the resentful and despairing man who first entered the Land, Covenant is now a person who now believes he will be able to find hope in the reality of his life.

### 5.2.2. COMMON HUMANITY

A noticeable difference between *The Sword of Shannara* and *The Lord of the Rings* is that the majority of the fantastic creatures in *The Sword of Shannara* do not seem to be very different from the humans. Like Tolkien, Brooks has populated his fantastic world with a variety of non-human species, including Elves, Dwarves, Trolls and Gnomes. Although very similar, respectively, to the Elves, Dwarves,

Trolls/Ents and Orcs of Middle-earth, Brooks does add some original elements to his fantastic species. For example, the Trolls have an interesting system of law and honour, briefly glimpsed during Kelset's trial (*Sword* 626-31), and the Dwarves are claustrophobic, a hereditary trait prompted by "untold years" of forced underground living (*Sword* 503). Unfortunately, like the post-apocalyptic touches to the world (discussed above, 155), these moments of originality are teasingly few. While Brooks does demonstrate the potential to develop unique fantastic races, the characterisation is, overall, awkward and lacking in subtlety, which means that this potential remains undeveloped, and that the distinguishing character trait of the dwarf is that he is 'taciturn'. However, the general lack of any significant differentiation between the fantastic species does appear to be intentional, a way to support the text's thematic focus on the importance of equality, the need to "understand that the differences in face and body that distinguished the races outwardly were negligible" (*Sword* 420). Thus, Shea is reprimanded for forming a "hasty opinion without foundation" about Kelset, and thinking of him as an 'animal' because he "doesn't look civilized and doesn't appear an intelligent creature on the face of things" (*Sword* 332). This is a significant departure from *The Lord of the Rings*, wherein differences in external appearances were indicative of fundamental internal differences. Unlike Tolkien's Elves, Brooks' Elves are not immortal embodiments of light and purity; rather, aside from their "sharply raised eyebrows" and "strange pointed ears" (*Sword* 141), they seem to be the same as any other mortal species in the Four Lands. And the ability to recognise the common humanity that exists beneath external differences is, in the Four Lands, a defining feature of any 'modern' or progressive person or nation: hence Balinor's pride that the people of Tyrsis "were among the first to turn from the old prejudices to look for common

grounds of understanding and friendship” (*Sword* 421). While somewhat didactic, Brooks’ efforts to introduce a modern sense of egalitarianism and acceptance to his Secondary World are more successful than the sporadic attempts to introduce political awareness and democracy, not only because they are more consistent, but also because they are more integrated into the social reality of the Four Lands.

As already noted (166-66), a similar sense of equality exists in the Land. Unlike both Brooks and Tolkien, Donaldson has neither Elves nor Dwarves in his Secondary World: while the Woodhelven and Gravilingas certainly recall the Elves and Dwarves of Middle-earth, they are not different species, but rather different tribes. The differing appearance and social character of these two tribes is due to where they live and what this indicates about their particular relationship with the Land, whether they are affiliated with the trees or the rocks. Importantly, members of both tribes have the option to leave their homeland and pursue another calling, such as studying at Revelwood and becoming Lords. The Lords of the Land have some similarities to the Wizards of Middle-earth, in that they have fantastic magical powers and longevity (but not immortality); however, being a Lord is a vocation, not unique to any particular race or species, and thus the Lords all share a common humanity. And it is this human side of the Lords that is highlighted in the narrative, through de-emphasising their fantastic powers and characteristics, and instead focusing on their human fears and fallibilities. In particular, Mhoram’s humanity is exposed to the reader through extensive narrative focalisation, which gives insight into the Lord’s fears and doubts about his ability to lead, his growth to knowledge and acceptance of power, and his struggle to maintain hope in the face of devastating knowledge of power. As Senior notes, “Tolkien rarely reveals such an intimate side to his wizards” (*Variations* 70). And, as noted above (170), Mhoram triumphs over his human

fallibilities when he understands that despair is not the only way to access the power of the Ritual of Desecration.

In contrast to Mhoram is Elena, who exemplifies what could have happened to Mhoram had he let his fear overwhelm him and lead him to dangerous acts of desperation. Elena's combined despair and pride causes her to make reckless decisions, to use power that she does not fully understand and cannot control, which, as Senior notes, is one of the biggest impulses the people of the Land must overcome: "the epidemic in the Land is ... a wrongheaded willingness to do anything, offer any sacrifice, a form of hubris, perhaps, through which the individual accepts action or direction without fully considering his own potential and the possible dangers or risks involved" (*Variations* 152). In Elena's demise and return, we can see a recollection and an inversion of Gandalf's demise and return in *The Lord of the Rings*: both fall into a chasm while battling evil, and both are returned to the world in some capacity. But whereas Gandalf returns elevated as Gandalf the White, Elena's return is perverse and destructive: "Like a reborn phoenix, she flourished in green loveliness ... she radiated triumph and decay. But her eyes were completely lightless, dark.... She had become a servant of the Despiser" (*Chronicles* 1064). In Mhoram and Elena we can see the two poles of human strength and weakness, and the same potential for both triumph and failure that exists in all the Lords. When Covenant first meets the Lords, he is shocked by their obvious humanity: "Within him, his conception of the Lords whirled, altered. They were not superior beings, fate-shapers; they were mortals like himself, familiar with impotence" (*Chronicles* 193). Similarly, the reader of *The Chronicles* quickly learns that the Lords, despite their fantastic abilities, are still fundamentally human.

### 5.2.3. THE CONSEQUENCES OF IMMORTALITY

Two of the most fantastic characters in *The Sword of Shannara* are the Druids Allanon and Brona, who both began human but achieved unnatural longevity of life through magic. With Allanon, we have a good example of the difficulties inherent in trying to maintain the fantastic unknowability of a character while also revealing their human side. Allanon is introduced as a mysterious and slightly menacing character, “all blackness and size” (*Sword* 6), who has unknown motivations, and is perceived for most of the narrative by many of the characters as a “giant shadowy figure, as mysterious and deadly as the Skull Bearers that pursued them so relentlessly” (*Sword* 394). However, Brooks also frequently focalises through Allanon, which instantly works to undermine his mystery because it reveals to the reader his clearly noble intentions, rendering the uncertainty of the other characters groundless. In a more skilled writer, this contrast between perception and reality could have been used to great ironic or humorous effect, but, as MacRae observes, “Brooks walks a narrative tightrope with Allanon, and his novice skills in this first novel do not always allow him to hold the rope taut” (73). In particular, Brooks still tries to maintain a level of uncertainty about Allanon even while he is acting as focaliser, which results in absurd moments in which Allanon anguishes over whether or not to tell a ‘secret’, while he scrupulously avoids revealing what the secret is to the reader: “Once more he reflected on the journey they were making to Paranor, pondering what he knew that none other could know.... The others only suspected his own role in all that had happened, in all that yet lay ahead, but he alone was forced to live with the truth behind his own destiny and theirs” (*Sword* 189). Of

course, in the end Allanon realises that he should not have held onto his ‘secret’ for so long, but instead should have trusted that Shea could have handled the truth about the Sword. But as Allanon tells Shea, “a Druid is still a human being” (*Sword* 718): while Allanon does hold the secret to longevity, he is still just as capable of making mistakes as any other human. And the same is true of the other Druid, Brona. It is interesting that the ‘Dark Lord’ figure of *The Sword of Shannara* was originally human: unlike Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*, Brona is not a fallen higher power, but rather a human who has become god-like through his desire for immortality. When the Druids first discovered the secret to longevity, they also discovered there was “a price ... demands and disciplines ... many steps to true longevity, and some are not—pleasant” (*Sword* 719). Brona tried to circumvent the price and achieve immortality through other means, which is what led to his corruption. He achieved immortality through sheer will-power, an “obsessive conviction that he could not perish” (*Sword* 701): thus, the Sword’s power to ‘reveal truth’ is the key to defeating Brona, because it is able to show him the impossibility of his own existence. Brona is perhaps the ultimate extension of the air of unbelief that permeates *The Sword of Shannara*, an object lesson on the dangers of excessive willingness to believe in the impossible, because for Brona, this results in the loss of his humanity. Thus, the only way to defeat this evil is to bring Brona out of the fantasy and back to reality.

In *The Chronicles*, Donaldson also explores the risks of achieving impossible long-life through the Bloodguard. Like Brona, the Bloodguard were once mortal beings who made themselves immortal, in this case through the power of their Vow to serve the Lords and Revelstone. As a consequence of their “pledged loyalty” the Bloodguard, once a “hot-blooded ... and prolific” people, have become “ascetic, womanless and old” (*Chronicles* 186). No longer requiring sleep or food, the

Bloodguard have become less vital, less human as a result of their unnatural immortality. In this, the Bloodguard become yet another cipher for Covenant's psychology. The Bloodguard live a life of absolutes—"life or death – the Vow or Corruption" (*Chronicles* 208)—and there is no middle ground, which is why Bannor succumbs to complete despair when he breaks his Vow. Thus, the Bloodguard act as a warning to Covenant, a fantastic embodiment of the risks of dedicating oneself to one single unforgiving purpose. As Senior notes, the Bloodguard "are lepers of another type ... they too have become automatons marching to the demands of their Vow without alternative or inspiration and have thus cut themselves off from the simple joys and feelings inherent in daily life" (*Variations* 180-81). The Bloodguard are contrasted to the Giants, who like the Ents of Middle-earth, enjoy a natural longevity, and also know how to appreciate simple joy and laughter. The lesson that Covenant must learn from the Bloodguard is that to live life of absolutes is to cut oneself off from the simple joys and pleasures that makes us human. Just as the Bloodguard have dedicated themselves utterly to their Vow, Covenant has dedicated himself utterly to conquering his leprosy. But Covenant is only surviving; he is not living. In order to truly conquer his leprosy, Covenant therefore needs accept that the single reality of his inevitable death does not need to be the only thing which defines how he lives his life.

Offering an alternative perspective on the dangers of unnatural life is the figure of Lord Foul, who fulfils the 'Dark Lord' role in *The Chronicles*. A primal force, the equal and opposite of the Creator, an immortal being who "surpasses flesh" (*Chronicles* 220), Foul is not corrupted good; he is simply Corruption. Neither human nor god, Foul is instead a personification of Covenant's leprosy and despair: "Foul is the reality of leprosy, imposed on the Land to do to it what leprosy does to

[Covenant] so that the projection of his illness, its effects and properties, constitutes Foul's powers and shapes his identity" (Senior *Variations* 80). Thus, Foul destroys through slow poison, manipulating the people of the Land to succumb to their fear and despair, and thereby bring about their own destruction. His primary servants, the Ravens, are the ultimate embodiments of corrupted life: "They have no bodies of their own, and their spirits wander until they find living beings which they can master. Thus they appear as animals or humans, as chance allows, corrupting the life of the Land" (*Chronicles* 90). The Ravens are formless, like the Nazgûl of Middle-earth, but instead of wearing clothing to give shape to their nothingness, they 'wear' living creatures. The particular horror is that the possessed being can then be forced to turn against their loved ones, becoming a malevolent influence within their own community. But perhaps Foul's greatest triumph comes as a result of Elena's failure, when she succumbs to her human weaknesses and breaks the Law of Death. As a result, Foul's servant is able to raise the dead during the battle of Revelstone, sending "blunt, misshapen, insensate ... ancient fossilized remains of buried bodies" to fight against the people of the Land (*Chronicles* 973). Thus Foul, through his insidious corruption, is able to inflict this grotesque extension of life upon the Land, a particularly horrific form of immortality.

## 5.3. STRUCTURE

### 5.3.1. EPIC STRUCTURE

The narrative structures of both *The Sword of Shannara* and *The Chronicles* are closely modelled *The Lord of the Rings*. Both begin with small group of characters travelling together with a singular purpose of defeating an ultimate threat to the Secondary World. At one point in the journey, the narrative splits into different parts:

one is a small, intimate quest into the heart of the Dark Lord's realm, while the others concern the 'good' people of the world going to war against the Dark Lord's forces. This splitting of the narrative, which transforms a straightforward linear plot into a multilayered, interlaced narrative, is one of the most significant influences of *The Lord of the Rings* on both *The Sword of Shannara* and *The Chronicles*. However, both Brooks and Donaldson struggle, in different ways, to reconcile this epic structure with their desired creative intentions.

As discussed above (149), Brooks claims that in writing *The Sword of Shannara*, he wanted to create a "straightforward adventure story" (*Sometimes* 188). In this, he largely succeeds. *The Sword of Shannara* is fast-paced, moving quickly from adventure to adventure, and overlaid with an air of urgency as the characters are forced to constantly keep moving. The only exceptions to the fast pace are the characters' 'internal reveries' (discussed above, 173) and the lengthy exposition dumps (discussed below, 193), both of which act to interrupt the narrative momentum. There is of course a very noticeable, almost point for point, replication of plot points from *The Lord of the Rings*, but these have been highly condensed. For example, Allanon's disappearance in Paranor clearly recalls Gandalf's disappearance in Moria. However, whereas Gandalf is absent for a lengthy period, Allanon is missing for approximately twenty pages; and whereas Gandalf's absence and return is fraught with significance, having a profound impact on both the characters and the narrative, the primary effect of Allanon's disappearance is to add momentary suspense to the sequence, before the characters' belief that Allanon has died is revealed as a simple misunderstanding (*Sword* 321). Lack of originality aside, this compressed and action orientated structure is suited towards the 'straightforward adventure story' for which Brooks claims he was aiming, resulting in an exciting and

easy to read story. However, *The Sword of Shannara* is transformed from a simple adventure story into an epic narrative when the interlace structure of *The Lord of the Rings* is introduced, which immediately adds a level of complexity to the plot that is neither required nor well-supported. The first narrative split occurs at around the half-way point of the story, when Shea is separated from the main party and begins his quest North, leaving the rest of the characters to take part in the 'war' plot thread. This thread undergoes further splitting, at one stage into as many as four parts, as Allanon and Flick, Menion Leah, Balinor and the Elves, and Hendel each take part in various missions: this means that, including Shea's quest, there are five unique plot threads occurring in the last half of a 700 page book. There are two consequences to this level of narrative complexity. Firstly, it diffuses the action, slowing down the momentum as Brooks shifts between the various plot threads. While he does switch between the threads frequently, and tends to leave each one on a cliff-hanger, which helps to compel fast reading, the pace is inevitably slower than it would have been with one, or even two, plot threads. Secondly, the shorter narrative means that none of the various plot threads can be explored with any significant amount of depth, which, when combined with the frequently shifting focalisation, results in a narrative that lacks focus and meaning. Of course, the plot threads are connected narratively via the overall goal to defeat Brona and save the Four Lands, and Brooks does, as discussed above (177), develop a level of thematic connection through the ideas of equality and acceptance, the need to look beyond surface appearances; however, Brooks often struggles to connect plot and theme in meaningful ways.

This struggle can be seen most clearly in the climax. The climax of *The Lord of the Rings* is not a physical battle between hero and antagonist, but rather a psychological battle within the hero himself. Brooks models his climax on Tolkien's, but creates a

different locus for the psychological struggle when Shea finally discovers the ‘secret’ of the Sword of Shannara, which is that it is able “to force the man who held it to recognize the truth about himself” (*Sword* 692). Thus, Shea is confronted with his own hypocrisy, prejudices, pettiness and cowardice. But, after a brief resistance, Shea is able to draw “from some inner well of strength and understanding” and to “admit the reality of what he had been shown” (*Sword* 692), meaning he is then able to turn the Sword on Brona, on whom it has, as discussed above (180), more significant effects. However, this climax is not strongly supported by rest of the text, for Shea has not been shown to be struggling with or denying these truths about himself. In contrast, as discussed above (171-71), Shea’s primary problem is that he lacks confidence and self-worth: he is more likely to be overly focused on his flaws, rather than denying them. In order for this climax to have true depth of meaning, it would have been more appropriate for Shea’s character development to take him from delusional self-confidence to a place of humility and acceptance. It is unsurprising then to learn that Brooks had worked on *The Sword of Shannara* for seven years without having a clear idea of what the ‘secret’ of the Sword actually was: “Lester [his editor] thought up the ending. I think I was doing something with opening a dimensional door or some such” (Speakman). Similarly, the ending of *The Sword of Shannara* seems strangely indecisive. In contrast to Tolkien’s extended dénouement, Brooks concludes his story in five short pages, signalled by the unambiguous, “so it ended” (*Sword* 722). All of the characters return home, while Shea and Flick, after settling back into their old life, are pleasantly surprised when Panamon appears at their door, thus ending *The Sword of Shannara* on an oddly unfinished note. With both the climax and the ending we get the sense that Brooks struggled to find a clear narrative and thematic conclusion, a natural way to bring the

story to an end. The adoption of the interlace structure of *The Lord of the Rings* thus transforms *The Sword of Shannara* from a simple linear story, a straightforward quest, into something far more complex, a story which demands a level of certainty and depth which Brooks is not quite able to provide.

In contrast to *The Sword of Shannara*, *The Chronicles* has a far slower pace; however, like Brooks, Donaldson has difficulties reconciling his creative intentions with the epic structure. The primary and driving thematic focus of *The Chronicles* is Covenant's unbelief, which, if it is to remain valid, requires the story to be focalised exclusively through Covenant, as focalisation from any other character will work to confirm the Land's reality. However, the epic structure necessitates multiple focalisations, in order to convey the full scope of the narrative.<sup>21</sup> Thus, when examining the narrative structure of *The Chronicles*, it is easy to identify the point when the epic structure begins to conflict with the thematic focus on unbelief. The first book is simply structured, comprising of two quests, Covenant's journey to Revelstone and the Quest for the Staff of Law, which are both exclusively focalised through Covenant. Thus, the first book validates the possibility that the Land is an illusion. However, the second book splits the narrative when Covenant leaves with Elena on the quest for the Seventh Ward, which leaves Hile Troy to take over as focaliser of the 'war' plot thread. And, as Senior notes, this introduction of a second focaliser has significant consequences to the narrative because it means that, for the first time, "our external perceptions about the Land diverge from Covenant" (*Variations* 142). The third book has the most complex structure, as the narrative shifts between three plot threads and three focalisers: Mhoram and the war at

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<sup>21</sup> Robin Hobb is one author who has successfully written an epic fantasy from the perspective of a single character: see Chapter Eight for further discussion.

Revelstone, Triock and his journey to the Unfettered One, and Covenant and his journey to Foul's Creche. Thus, Covenant's position of unbelief gradually becomes less and less tenable as the interlace structure of *The Lord of the Rings* begins to truly impose itself on the narrative, for the "evolving alteration of perspective within the text confirms, from our exterior understanding, the reality of the Land and concomitantly denies Covenant's beginning premise of dream" (Senior *Variations* 140). Consequently, the reader is distanced from Covenant's struggle; rather than joining with him in his doubt as to whether the Land is real, the reader observes from a distance Covenant's stubborn refusal to accept a reality they know to be true.

Donaldson has admitted that this conflict caused him creative difficulties:

Of course, in practice issues that have to do with this whole Unbelief structure of Covenant's are—well, the credibility of them is delicate at best because the narrative works hard to present the character in as vivid a way as possible, and for him to then stand in relation to the material the reader is getting and then say 'I don't believe this is real' is a hard thing to sustain. (qtd in Senior *Variations* 221)

Thus, just like the act of sub-creation, the interlace structure also works to subvert the thematic focus on unbelief, as Donaldson struggles to reconcile Tolkien's creative vision with his own.

Like *The Sword of Shannara*, the climax of *The Chronicles* is psychological rather than physical. However, unlike Brooks, Donaldson clearly establishes Covenant's psychological struggle as a dominant theme in the book, which supports the overtly psychological climax. As we have seen throughout this chapter, Covenant's journey towards healing requires him to overcome the despair and resentment caused by his

leprosy; thus, the climax of *The Chronicles* sees Covenant defeating Lord Foul through the power of laughter, representative of hope and joy. But the most crucial factor in deciding Covenant's victory is his ability to find balance, balance between belief and unbelief, between acceptance and defiance, between hope and despair. To defeat Foul, Covenant needs to reject Foul's assertion that he must choose between the "Land and Unbelief" because he "cannot have both" (*Chronicles* 1131), and instead realise that seeming opposites can coexist. Covenant's experiences in the Land have taught him that the "demand for absolute answers is dangerous" (*Chronicles* 811), because this is what led to the tragedies of Kevin's desecration, Elena's failure, and the Bloodguard's inhumanity. Having defined himself 'the Unbeliever', Covenant needs to learn that despite his fears, he can in fact believe *and* unbelieve in the Land, that only by "accepting both poles of the contradiction, keeping the both whole, balanced ... could he preserve them both, preserve both the Land and himself, find the place where the parallel lines of his impossible dilemma met. The eye of the paradox" (*Chronicles* 1131-32). So, in the end, the narrative advocates Covenant's unbelief, because full belief still needs to be balanced by continuing recognition of unbelief. In the same way, Covenant learns that he can dream of a better future, while still accepting the reality of his leprosy: a measure of hope, balanced by a measure of despair. Thus, Covenant's true victory occurs in the Primary World when Covenant wakes up in the hospital, and is finally able to find joy in his continuing existence: "He smiled because he was alive" (*Chronicles* 1152). In many ways, Covenant's psychological journey mirrors Donaldson's creative journey, who struggled to find a way to balance the two opposing creative urges of American unbelief and Tolkienesque Secondary Belief: like Covenant, Donaldson is often overwhelmed by the forces of Secondary Belief, but in the end he does

manage to find a middle-ground between belief and unbelief, the ‘eye of the paradox’.

### 5.3.2. BELIEF AND KNOWLEDGE

In *The Sword of Shannara*, Shea is forced to assume the functional roles of hero and saviour, not through divine providence, but through a combination of sheer bad luck and a widespread willingness to believe in the impossible. Originally, the Sword of Shannara could be wielded by anyone, but because so many people *believed* that only those descended from Jerle Shannara could use the sword, legend became reality, and now “only the blood and belief of a descendent of Shannara can invoke the latent power of the great Sword” (*Sword* 165). And Shea, the only remaining decedent of the Shannara line in the Four Lands, is therefore the only person who is able to wield the Sword, and if the Four Lands it to be saved from Brona, Shea must “accept what chance had decreed for him” (*Sword* 149). Although Shea accepts his fate with relative equanimity, this does first require him to take a leap of faith, and trust that the “half dreams and legends” the journey is premised on will prove to be a more effective weapon than “common sense” (*Sword* 280). Shea, along with Flick and Menion, frequently comments on the illogical and impractical nature of the quest, and is, right until the end, plagued by doubt that the Sword will actually have the power to defeat Brona, that the “Sword’s legendary power [is] a lie” (*Sword* 693). This scepticism stands in stark contrast to the hobbits’ unquestioning belief in the power of the One Ring in *The Lord of the Rings*. Yet, in spite of their doubts about the Sword, the characters accept the one prophecy that appears in *The Sword of Shannara* without question. This is perhaps because Brooks recognised the potential for prophecy to be used as a narrative device, and thus chose to minimise the level of

scepticism at this point. The prophecy that the shade of Bremen delivers is much more direct than the vague foreshadowing of *The Lord of the Rings*, but is nonetheless still open to misinterpretation: “He promised that within two dawns we would behold the Sword of Shannara. But he also foresaw that one member of our company would not reach the far side of the Dragon’s Teeth. Yet he will be the first to lay hands upon the sacred blade. . . . One of you will not reach Paranor!” (*Sword* 247). The characters believe that this means one of them is going to die: “the implication was unmistakable” (*Sword* 252). Instead, the prophecy is fulfilled when Shea is swept away from the company, and thereby placed in the position to find the Sword. But until this happens, the characters, like the reader, are put into a state of anticipation, while they wait to see whether someone will die. While it is a little awkwardly executed, and somewhat thematically inconsistent, this scene nevertheless demonstrates prophecy’s potential as a fantastic narrative device, an effective way to manipulate reader response.

Prophecy is far more prevalent in *The Chronicles* than in *The Sword of Shannara*, but rather than being used to foreshadow specific narrative events, it is used to enhance the portentous atmosphere of the narrative. The prophecies in *The Chronicles* are typically fraught with doom, or tragically misleading. For example, Damelon Giantfriend foretold that the Giants’ “exile would end when our seed regained its potency” (*Chronicles* 199), and thus the Giants celebrate when three sons are born to Wavenhair, convinced that this unprecedented fertility indicates their imminent return Home. However, joy soon turns to despair when the Giants learn that the Ravens are possessing Wavenhair’s three sons, which in turn leads to the near-genocide of the Giant race, bringing the omen that the Giants will find “an end, a resolution” to their homelessness (*Chronicles* 198) to tragic fulfilment. Whereas *The*

*Lord of the Rings* examine the ways that a sense of destiny can provide hope, in *The Chronicles*, believing that you know what the future is going to bring is dangerous, and opens the way to despair. For, ultimately, prophecy is a form of knowledge, and as Senior argues, the power and danger of knowledge is one of the primary themes of *The Chronicles*: “the *Chronicles* pounds away at the problems caused by knowledge. What can one do without it? What can one do with it? Does possession of knowledge justify its use? Is knowledge itself ever sufficient? How may one predict the effects of knowledge? Is ignorance at times preferable to knowledge?” (*Variations* 160). In this context, prophecy thus becomes a particularly uncertain form of knowledge and having too much confidence in your understanding of prophecy, as the Giants did, may have tragic consequences. Of course, prophecies such as these only have such a powerful effect because the people of the Land accept the realities of concepts of destiny and foreknowledge, so it is not a question of whether they believe it to be true, but rather of how they interpret it, and how much faith and hope they place on this interpretation.

In contrast, Covenant has little faith in the prophecies concerning the white gold, even though his possession of a white gold ring is enough to convince others about Covenant’s importance. But, for Covenant, the fact that one small object is enough to dictate his fate is abhorrent: “the idea that his wedding band was some kind of talisman nauseated him” (*Chronicles* 67). Covenant persistently refuses to accept his prophesised role as saviour. In a world where so many people are desperate for any knowledge that will help to save them, Covenant refuses to seek the knowledge of how to use white gold, even though the prophecies dictate that his use of it is inevitable. While he does come to accept, to a degree, the reality of the prophecies, he refuses to let them act as a guide to his actions. And, this middle-ground between

acceptance and resistance is, in many ways, the best way Covenant could react. For the prophecy is concerned with the idea of paradox, of the coexistence of seeming oppositions, which, as we have seen throughout this chapter, is also at the heart of Covenant's journey:

he who wields the white wild magic gold  
is a paradox –  
for he is everything and nothing,  
hero and fool,  
potent, helpless –  
and with the one word of truth or treachery  
he will save or damn the Earth  
because he is mad and sane,  
cold and passionate,  
lost and found. (*Chronicles* 212)

Thus, in contrast to the prophecy in *The Sword of Shannara*, which foretold specific narrative events, this prophecy is thematic in nature, foreshadowing the central focus of Covenant's psychological struggle, as well as indicating the solution he will eventually find. And, just as Covenant must find a balance between belief and unbelief, hope and despair, his role in the prophecy is also a paradox, allowing him both free will and fate. For, as the Creator tells him, Covenant is fated to have a choice:

You did not choose this task. You did not undertake it of your own free will. It was thrust upon you.... Choiceless, you were given the power of choice. I elected you for the Land but did not compel you to serve my purpose in the

Land. You were free to damn Land and Earth and Time and all, if you chose.

(*Chronicles* 1144-45)

As Senior argues, “in both the Land and in his world, Covenant retains absolute autonomy of choice and behavior” (*Variations* 28). Covenant’s acceptance of his destined role as saviour acts as a metaphor for his acceptance of his leprosy:

Covenant did not choose to be either a hero or a leper, but this does not mean he has not freedom of choice left. Thus, the lesson that Covenant learns, the key to his victory, is that while he cannot choose his fate, he can choose how to react to it: it is only through accepting the immutable realities of his life that Covenant earns the power of choice.

### 5.3.3. THE VALUE OF STORY

Perhaps the best indication of Brooks and Donaldson’s differing approaches in their re-visioning of *The Lord of the Rings* can be seen in the differing value that is placed on stories and storytelling within the narrative and the Secondary World. In the previous chapter, we saw how an appreciation of Story manifested in *The Lord of the Rings* through the use of stories, songs and poetry as exposition, and through subtle meta-fiction (140-41). However, in *The Sword of Shannara*, there is little evidence of this kind of appreciation of Story. For example, the history of the Four Lands is delivered in a series of lengthy ‘exposition dumps’, such as the scene in the second chapter in which Allanon, in what MacRae accurately describes as a “long history lesson” (73), lectures Shea and Flick on the “history of the Northland and the legend of the Skull Kingdom” (*Sword* 24). Predictably, the narrative pace grinds to a halt while Allanon deliver his twenty pages of exposition. This sets the pattern for the rest of the narrative: whenever historical information is required, the action pauses for a

number of pages while a character, typically Allanon, lectures the other characters on the history of the Four Lands. On one level, this intrusive expositional method can be seen as a consequence of Brooks' novice writing skills, for it is exceptionally difficult to integrate the entire history of Secondary World into an epic fantasy in a way that is both graceful and comprehensible. But, on a more fundamental level, it can also be viewed as an indication of a deeper lack of appreciation and joy in storytelling. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the history of Middle-earth is often introduced via story and song, serving the dual purposes of information *and* entertainment. In *The Sword of Shannara*, history is recounted in a very straightforward and mundane manner; it is not transformed into a story, because stories are not valued in this post-apocalyptic world, where literature is viewed as a "luxury" (*Sword* 499). Indeed, there is a demonstrable contempt for stories throughout *The Sword of Shannara*, a perception that stories are childish, because they are "only fiction, not fact" (*Sword* 36). Thus, Shea is forced to suffer through the many stories of Panamon Creel, one of the only characters who seems to find joy in Story: "Panamon seemed to enjoy telling these stories far more than anyone could possibly enjoy listening, as if each were the very first and not the five hundredth. Shea endured the tale in stoic silence" (*Sword* 350). It is somewhat ironic that Brooks claims he wanted to tell a simple and entertaining adventure story with *The Sword of Shannara*, but that the world he creates does not seem to place any value on simple and entertaining stories.

In contrast, stories are immensely valued in the Land, appreciated for their ability to entertain, to educate and, most importantly, to heal. One of Covenant's first experiences in the Land is to witness Atiaran's song in Mithil Stonedown. On the one hand, this song serves simple exposition purposes, telling the story of Berek Halfhand to both Covenant and the reader. But on the other, it is demonstration of the

power of story, for it is shown to draw together the entire community in joy and celebration, and the “oneness of their communal response” (*Chronicles* 77). After journeying north with Atiaran, Covenant finds himself in the company of another storyteller, Saltheart Foamfollower. Foamfollower is above all a joyful character, quick to laughter, and having a deep cultural and personal appreciation for the strength that can be found in stories. Thus the tragedy when the Land’s unnatural winter affects Foamfollower’s story-telling ability: “I find I cannot remember certain precious Giantish tales. My friends, Giants do not forget stories” (*Chronicles* 915). But, even in death, he is able to find hope and reconciliation in the power of story: “I am at Peace. I have beheld a marvellous story” (*Chronicles* 1142). Long-lived and deeply connected to the Land, the Giants as a race share in Foamfollower’s joy and ability in story; in contrast, the Bloodguard, while also long-lived, lack the “Giants’ gift for storytelling” (*Chronicles* 549). Their unnatural and single-minded existence allows no room for either joy or story. There is throughout the Land a deeply felt belief in the power of stories. Thus, in response to Covenant’s obvious suffering during the Quest for the Staff of Law, Mhoram suggests that Foamfollower should tell him a story, for “such healing there is in stories” (*Chronicles* 237).

And of course Covenant has a particularly close relationship with stories. He is an author, but loses both his ability and desire to write when he learns of his leprosy: “his books had seemed to him so blind and complacent, so destructive of himself, that he had burned them and given up writing” (*Chronicles* 384). Covenant’s lack of creative impulse is linked with the lack of hope and joy in his life, a link that Foamfollower finds both obvious and tragic: “‘Are you a storyteller, Thomas Covenant?’ ... ‘I was, once.’ ... ‘And you gave it up? Ah, that is as sad a tale in three words as any you might have told me. But a life without a tale is like a sea without

salt. How do you live?’” (*Chronicles* 153). Belief, hope, fantasy, story: these are all things lost to Covenant when he becomes a leper and dedicates himself utterly to the overwhelming reality of his illness. As discussed in Chapter Three, story is often assumed to be an escape from reality; likewise, Covenant assumes that belief in the Land is an escape from the reality of his leprosy: “This – Land – is suicide to me. It’s an escape, and I can’t afford even thinking about escapes, much less actually falling into one” (*Chronicles* 479). Thus Covenant is both attracted to and frightened by the intensity of the communal reaction to Atiaran’s story in *Mithil Stonedown*: he desires to hear the story, but believes he can “not afford to lose himself in it” (*Chronicles* 75). So when Covenant is at last able to accept his belief in the Land, and to regain a sense of hope and joy in his life, he is also able to conceive of again creating a story: when the Creator asks him if he will “ever write a story for which no character will have cause to reproach [him]”, Covenant responds, “I’ll try” (*Chronicles* 1147). Thus, Covenant’s journey takes a metafictionally circular route, from a loss of story, *through* a story, and back again to recovery of story.

## 5.4. CONCLUSION

Both inspired by *The Lord of the Rings* but responding in vastly different ways, Brooks and Donaldson both struggled to reconcile their creative vision with Tolkien’s. Desiring to tell a ‘simple adventure story’, Brooks flattens and condenses, avoiding as far as possible the depth and complexity of *The Lord of the Rings*. The Four Lands and its inhabitants are predominately derivative of Middle-earth and its inhabitants, with any touches of originality remaining underdeveloped. Unlike Middle-earth, the Four Lands does not emerge fully as an entity in its own right, and is instead largely a backdrop to the action, with no significant connection between

the land and the characters. Brooks' sporadic attempts to introduce a modern sense of democracy and equality are not fully integrated with either the setting or the plot; likewise, the imaginative potential exhibited in the presentation of both individuals and races in the Four Lands is neither consistently nor strongly developed. Brooks does, however, largely succeed in creating a fast-paced and entertaining story, which has demonstrated its ability to appeal to a wide audience over three decades of consistent popularity. The straightforward nature of the narrative is, nonetheless, made unnecessarily complicated by Brooks' adoption of *The Lord of the Rings'* interlace narrative structure, which demands a level of complexity and creative certainty that *The Sword of Shannara* is unable to deliver. This leads, in turn, to thematic inconsistencies in the climax, and an abortive and indecisive ending to the story.

In contrast to Brooks, Donaldson's response to *The Lord of the Rings* was to complicate, expand and deepen. The Land is in many ways an exaggerated version of Middle-earth, a land of pure and palpable vitality that is under threat from an embodiment of diseased corruption. The sacramental undertone of *The Lord of the Rings* is made explicit in *The Chronicles* through the pervasive religious relationship between the Land and its inhabitants, as well as the unambiguous link between the physical and spiritual health of the protagonist and the Secondary World. While the Land is in many ways reminiscent of Middle-earth, it is nonetheless a fully developed Secondary World of Donaldson's creation, meaning that, for example, the addition of modern ideals of democracy and equality are well integrated in the cultural reality of the Land. Donaldson deepens the mimetic potential of the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*, creating with Covenant a protagonist who is extremely recognisable in his humanity, forcing the reader into a relationship of uncomfortable

recognition as they accompany Covenant on his lengthy journey from despair and denial into hope and acceptance. While Donaldson's use of the interlace structure is not necessarily more complex than *The Lord of the Rings*, it does have far more complex effects, creating as it does a fundamental narrative conflict with the underlying thematic focus on Covenant's unbelief, a conflict that is never fully resolved.

Indeed, the pervasive influence of the concept of unbelief is one thing that *The Chronicles* and *The Sword of Shannara* have in common. In *The Sword of Shannara*, unbelief manifests as a suspicion of fantasy and magic, from both the characters and the author himself. The characters distrust magic because it is less knowable than science, and unbridled belief in the impossible leads to dangerous things such as the evil of Brona's immortality. And Brooks' own sense of unbelief seems to manifest as an unwillingness to fully develop and explore his fantasy world, and in particular its magic: a distrust or distancing from the full creative potential of the fantastic mode. Perhaps connected to unbelief is the lack of recognition of the power of story in *The Sword of Shannara*; instead, respect for and joy in story-telling is noticeably absent in the world of the Four Lands. Unbelief also plays an important role in *The Chronicles*, motivating and shaping the entire narrative. The story chronicles the journey of 'The Unbeliever', from unbelief to belief, from despair to hope, and from creative impotence to the recovery of story. But while his journey celebrates the power of belief and the value of story, it does not advocate abandonment of unbelief and recognition of harsh reality; rather, Covenant must attempt to find a balance, a way to have both belief and unbelief, to sit in the eye of the paradox. In this way, Covenant's journey reflects Donaldson's, as *The Chronicles* exemplifies the struggle

to find a balance between the old and the new, between the ideals of Tolkien's fantasy and those of modern American fantasy.

Both *The Sword of Shannara* and *The Chronicles* had a dramatic effect on popular fantasy. The success of both books, and their mutual dependence on *The Lord of the Rings*, ensured that Tolkien's work would be firmly established as the generic model for the new subgenre of epic fantasy. Furthermore, the publication of both books not only marked the separation of the fantasy genre into separate subgenres, but introduced a subgenre that would quickly come to dominate the entire market:

Up to the 1970s, while there are many different types of fantasy, there is no real sense of separate fantasy sub-genres.... The 1970s, however, sees what we can think of as speciation, in which certain aspects of the field become recognizable marketing categories in their own right. By the end of the 1970s at least one of these marketing categories (the quest fantasy, 'in the tradition of J.R.R. Tolkien') was threatening to become so powerful as to overwhelm the presence of other forms. (Mendlesohn and James 112)

So we can see that the success of *The Lord of the Rings* and the consequent desire of publishers to capitalise on this success had a profound effect on the development of modern commercial fantasy: as Attebery argues, "*The Lord of the Rings* fell like a great meteorite into the stream of American fantasy and almost blocked it off altogether" (*Tradition* 154). We have seen throughout this chapter the difficulties both Brooks and Donaldson had in separating themselves from Tolkien: this same difficulty has characterised the entire subgenre of epic fantasy, as it has struggled to creatively, commercially and critically separate itself from *The Lord of the Rings*. We saw in this chapter two of the directions an epic fantasist might take when faced

with this challenge. *The Sword of Shannara* exemplifies a failure to disconnect from a creative model, to fully realise a unique creative vision; in contrast, *The Chronicles*, while still hampered in many ways by its closeness to *The Lord of the Rings*, ultimately succeeds where *The Sword of Shannara* fails. We will see in the following chapters three more successful approaches from authors who have been able to work within the tight generic model of epic fantasy and yet still realise a unique creative vision.

## 6. LOOKING BACK AT THE READER:

### David Eddings' *The Belgariad*

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David Eddings' *The Belgariad* distinguishes itself from most epic fantasies through its use of humour, a humour that relies heavily on the generic nature of the story. A humorous tone is rare in epic fantasy, which tends to take itself rather seriously. Indeed, the texts discussed thus far in this thesis are almost entirely lacking in humour. As Senior notes, "comedy or humor" is simply "not a main staple of epic fantasy" (*Variations* 20). Perhaps epic fantasists avoid humour because it has a distancing effect, and thereby may seem to be declaration that the subject matter need not be taken seriously; and, as we have seen throughout this thesis, being taken seriously is something that fantasy has always struggled to achieve. In her discussion of American fantasists Leiber and Zelazny, Le Guin questions whether their use of humour is perhaps yet another manifestation of American unbelief, a way of preemptively defending themselves against the accusation that they are treating fantasy too seriously:

Sometimes I wonder if these two writers underestimate their own talents, if they lack confidence in themselves. Or it may be that, since fantasy is seldom taken seriously at this particular era in this country, they are afraid of their own creations, getting all worked up about imaginary things; and so their humor becomes self-mocking, self-destructive. Their gods and heroes keep turning aside to look out of the book at you and whisper, 'See, we're really just plain folks'. (*Language* 78)

In a similar fashion, Attebery argues that humour “acts to defuse the sense of wonder that marks fantasy. If there is to be humor in a work of fantasy, it must be kept separate from the component of the marvellous” (*Tradition* 20). Of course, there is an entire sub-genre of humorous, or comic fantasy, best exemplified by Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld* series, which parodies not only epic fantasy, but other fantasy subgenres. *The Belgariad*, however, while it makes use of humour to great effect, does not cross over into a full parody, because Eddings is able to find a balance between earnestness and humour, an intermittent sense of grandeur and significance amongst the light-hearted comedy.

*The Belgariad* was written in the early 1980s, at a time when many of the generic conventions of epic fantasy were already well established. Indeed, Eddings has acknowledged in an interview that when he began developing outlines for *The Belgariad*, his “original perception of how you did these things was based almost entirely on *The Lord of the Rings*” (S. Nicholls 27). However, rather than being creatively hindered by the generic model, Eddings takes advantage of the familiar nature of his story and uses it to humorous effect. Throughout *The Belgariad*, Eddings frequently ‘corrects’ the unrealistic and romantic expectations his young protagonists have about the world outside their narrow experiences. As these expectations are typically similar to those an average reader might have of epic fantasy itself, the corrections thus act as a subtle mockery of the subgenre, as well as of the reader themselves. However, the reader is also frequently placed in the position of knowing observer, wherein their knowledge of generic conventions grants them more information than the protagonists, which means that they are ‘in’ on the joke when the narrative makes fun of the protagonists’ ignorance. Because both types

of humour rely heavily on the readers' knowledge of generic conventions, Eddings is thus able to turn a potential weakness into a creative advantage.

But there is also a sense of comfort to be found in generic convention, which means that *The Belgariad* has an overall 'safe' tone, with few unexpected turns, and no real sense that the characters are in any danger of losing. Eddings acknowledges as much in his pithy summary of the plot structure in the preface to the two-volume edition of *The Belgariad*: "It wanders around for five books until it finally climaxes with the traditional duel between "Our Hero" and the "Bad Guy" (Would it spoil anything for you if I tell you that our side wins?)" (xi). This sense of safety and comfort is augmented by the overall 'domestic' tone to story. In many ways reminiscent of the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Belgariad* frequently concerns itself with celebrating the simple comforts of home, of food, of baths, of sleeping, and in particular of the security to be found in strong familial relationships. Although, as we will see in this chapter, Eddings does present a world and story that has a real sense of scope and scale, the focus of the narrative tends to be on the small details, on the minutiae of the world's societies, on the daily interactions between the characters, and on an individual's responses to the grand and epic events happening around them. And by diminishing the narrative significance of the more 'fantastic' aspects of epic fantasy, Eddings is able to prevent the persistent mockery of these aspects from taking over the narrative, allowing him to strike a delicate balance between humour and sincerity.

## 6.1. SETTING

### 6.1.1. GARION'S WORLD

According to Eddings, his first inspiration for the story of *The Belgariad* came from a boredom-induced “doodle”, which turned into a “map of a place that never was” (*Rivan* 10). When he decided to write a story that was set in this imaginary world, he concluded that his first step should be to build the world in more detail:

I realized that since I'd created this world, I was going to have to populate it, and that meant that I'd have to create the assorted ‘ologies’ as well before I could even begin to put together an outline.... I reasoned that each culture had to have a different class-structure, a different mythology, a different theology, different costumes, different forms of address, different national character, and even different coinage and slightly different weights and measures. I might never come right out and *use* them in the books, but they had to be there. (*Rivan* 11)

These ‘preliminary studies’ were published twenty years later in *The Rivan Codex* and, as Eddings suggests, they contain a lot of information about the world that does not appear in the narrative proper. Just as Middle-earth, its mythology and history, came first for Tolkien, the world of *The Belgariad* came first for Eddings. This means that although the history of Eddings’ world does not rival that of Middle-earth in either scope or complexity, there is an “intermittent sense of J.R.R. Tolkien-like depth of back-story” in *The Belgariad* (Clute “Eddings” 307), because so much of this world already existed before the story was written. The extent of Eddings’ sub-creation is evident in the paratextual material, which as discussed above (153), was minimal in both *The Sword of Shannara* and *The Chronicles*. In contrast *The*

*Belgariad* has, as well as a map, a short ‘historical document’ prefacing each of the five volumes. While these prologues are not as extensive or complex as the prologue and appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*, they do have a similar effect, in that they help create the sense that this world has a reality and a history that exists independently from the events of this particular story.

The central narrative of *The Belgariad* begins in Faldor’s farm, an isolated farmstead in the kingdom of Sendaria, which, like the Shire, is a recognisable parody of England. Faldor’s farm is absurdly idyllic, a harmonious and bountiful place, which is “known throughout the district as the finest place to live and work for twenty leagues in any direction” (*Pawn* 22). Like Tolkien, Eddings spends a considerable amount of narrative time firmly establishing the familiar and mimetic nature of this beginning locale. But Faldor’s farm is not just a portal location through which to introduce the fantasy world; it also functions as a way of clearly establishing the personality of the protagonist and primary narrative focaliser. We are introduced to the world of Faldor’s farm through the lens of Garion’s childhood experiences, and it is made clear that Garion’s sense of self is intimately linked with the place he grew up in: “No matter how high Garion rose in life, he never forgot that all his memories began in that kitchen” (*Pawn* 19). Throughout *The Belgariad*, Garion’s identity is both influenced and revealed via the locations he travels through, and thus the events of the first five chapters serve to establish the very ordinary nature of the protagonist: Garion does chores, plays with his friends, celebrates birthdays and gets into trouble for silly pranks. He also has very firm views on what is real and possible, which are challenged by the sporadic fantastic intrusions of Belgarath, who questions Garion’s ability to know what is impossible:

There's a world beyond what we can see and touch, and that world lives by its own laws. What may be impossible in this very ordinary world is very possible there, and sometimes the boundaries between the two worlds disappear, and then who can say what is possible and impossible? (*Pawn* 43)

Belgarath thus creates a contrast, as Garion recognises, between the “ordinary world” he grows up in, and the “complicated” world outside of Faldor’s farm (*Pawn* 43). So when Garion leaves the farm, it not only represents the crossing of the threshold from the familiar to the unfamiliar, but also indicates Garion’s growing willingness to change his ideas about what is ordinary and possible.

As Garion journeys the world outside Faldor’s farm, we can see that each of the locations he visits is well-suited towards exploring his various stages of emotional and intellectual development. For example, Garion has some ‘manly’ first experiences—rebellling against the authority of his Aunt, killing a boar, getting into a fight over a girl—in Cherek, whose population of rough, bearded warriors and sailors are the epitome of macho manliness. And Garion performs his first real acts of sorcery in Tolnedra, whose institutional scepticism of all things magical neatly complements Garion’s own denial of his increasingly obvious magical ability. Garion only begins to truly accept his ability and his destiny after he has spent time in the Vale of Aldur, which has been the site of magical study and intense self-reflection for thousands of years: “There was, it seemed, something rather special about the Vale. [There was a] warmth and peace and a kind of eternal and magical serenity” (*Magician’s* 125). And of course, a particularly significant moment for Garion is his brief return to Faldor’s farm. Even Garion realises that the real purpose of this otherwise unnecessary detour was so that he could accept that he has changed too much to ever return to his old life: “We made the trip all the way up there just so

I could find that out?” (*Castle* 126). Moreover, the same connection between identity and location is upheld when Ce’Nedra is introduced as the secondary narrative focaliser.<sup>22</sup> She is forced to learn patience and decorum in Ulgo, a land populated by deeply spiritual people who waited (patiently) for decades to find a God who would accept them. Whereas Tolkien and Donaldson created a physical and spiritual connection between the well-being of the Secondary World and the characters that live within it, Eddings links the different cultural identities of his world with the identities of the story’s protagonists. This is an effective way of delineating character development, as well as an alternative way of creating the constant metaphorical interplay between setting and character that is so typical of Secondary Worlds and epic fantasy.

#### 6.1.2. THE MUNDANE REALITY

Eddings has claimed in an interview that one of the ways he wanted to distinguish his epic fantasy from *The Lord of the Rings* was to deal more “realistically” with the grittier aspects of the Middle Ages: “I’m going to have to have pickpockets, I’m going to have to have thieves, and I’m going to have to have prostitutes” (S. Nicholls 28). Indeed, when *The Belgariad* was published, epic fantasy was still relatively conservative in this regard. Taking *The Sword of Shannara* and *The Chronicles* as examples, we can see that the petty immoralities of thievery, prostitution and debauchery are largely absent in both: with the exception of Panamon Creel in *The Sword of Shannara*, matters of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ were addressed on a much grander scale. However, in *The Belgariad*, prostitution, thievery, corruption, spying,

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<sup>22</sup> Ce’Nedra’s role as secondary protagonist, and female double of Garion, is discussed below (215-16).

drugs, drinking and casual violence are all part of the social background of this world. This is not a fantasy world in which the more unsavoury aspects of life are confined to specific areas of evil influence; instead, all points on the scale of morality are represented in most parts of the world. Therefore, the idyllic and peaceful world of Faldor's farm is in many ways an anomaly, a tiny pocket of respectability in a rather corrupt world. And Garion, raised on the traditional Sendarian virtues of "work, thrift, sobriety, good manners, and practicality" (*Pawn* 23), is frequently disappointed, especially in the early stages of his journey, that the world outside of Faldor's farm does not live up to his moral standards and grand expectations. His excitement at seeing his first big city is soon deflated when he reaches Darine, with its "littered and dirty" streets, full of the "smell of dead fish" and "grim and unfriendly" people (*Pawn* 106-107). He is forced to further reconsider his perception of the grandeur of a big city, which "from the hilltop ... had looked quite splendid" (*Pawn* 106), when he is exposed to the casual lying, manipulation, bribery and exploitation inherent in the commerce system (*Pawn* 112-20). In this way, Eddings undermines the sense of 'internal wonder' that we saw in the hobbits' experience of entering the more fantastic realms of Middle-earth; although Garion crosses the threshold from the familiar to the unfamiliar, he often finds that the world 'outside' is far more mundane and petty than he imagined it to be. And because Garion, like the hobbits, acts as our guide to the Secondary World, we can see in Eddings' correction of Garion's grand ideals an implicit correction for any reader who has a similar romanticised perception of the pseudo-Medieval settings common to epic fantasy. Garion's gradual disillusionment continues as he begins to meet the nobility. Each kingdom in the world of *The Belgariad* is strictly hierarchical. Unlike Brooks and Donaldson, Eddings does not try to incorporate democratic principles into the social

structures of his fantasy world; the only hint of a democracy is Sendaria, which is mocked for electing its first king, a rutabaga farmer (*Pawn* 178-82). However, we can see the influence of modern American ideals of democracy and equality in the persistent undermining of the types of hierarchal social systems that were taken so seriously in *The Lord of the Rings*. Instead of viewing the King as a sacred, semi-divine figure, *The Belgariad* instead delights in pointing out that the “stupidest man in the world can be a king if he has the right parents” (*Pawn* 178). This process of “stripping kingship of its mystery” is, Zanger argues, an approach typical of American fantasy (98). To emphasise the contrast between expectations and reality, the first official meeting with nobility in *The Belgariad* takes place after a long build up, in which Garion and his company are captured, taken to the castle, dressed in finery, and ceremoniously escorted to the throne room, only to find that the King of Sendaria is an unassuming, “dumpy-looking man” with a “rather ordinary-sounding voice”, who is easily intimidated by ‘Aunt Pol’ and ‘Mister Wolf’ (*Pawn* 188-89). Garion’s illusions are further shattered when he learns that almost all of his friends have some sort of title, and he soon realises that the members of the nobility are in fact little different from ‘ordinary’ people.<sup>23</sup> This is an important lesson for Garion to learn, as he will soon be revealed as the long-lost Rivan King. This moment is of course reminiscent of Aragorn’s reclaiming of the throne of Gondor in *The Lord of the Rings*: both the Rivan and Gondorian thrones have been held in guardianship for centuries as the kingdoms waited patiently for the true King to return, and both Aragorn and Garion are confirmed as the true King through magical signs and

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<sup>23</sup> This same shock and disillusionment occurs when Garion learns that his ‘Aunt Pol’ and old friend ‘Mister Wolf’ are the legendary sorcerers Polgara and Belgarath (see below for further discussion, 216-17).

joyously welcomed by their subjects. However, unlike Aragorn, Garion's return is not immediately followed by a time of peace and renewal. Instead, Garion's return is followed by five chapters detailing his new life of boring administrative duties, trivial political struggles, loneliness, and complete lack of freedom: "Garion was morbidly convinced that somewhere ... was the ultimate master list that laid out the schedule for the rest of his life—including his royal funeral" (*Castle* 208). By detailing the mundane reality of what looks rather splendid from the outside, Eddings again works to correct both Garion's and the reader's expectations. As well as learning that a life of privilege and power comes with strings attached, Garion must also deal with his feelings of uncertainty about his ability to rule. Fortunately, because Garion is so self-effacing and aware of his own ordinariness, this means that he will be perceived as a good king. In the world of *The Belgariad*, only 'bad' rulers believe that their position somehow makes them better than others. Take, for example, the King of the Murgos, who is so egotistical that he destroys any cup he has used so that no one else is able to drink from it (*Magician's* 237). Compare this to the Alorn Kings: even they "don't take kings very seriously" (*Castle* 187). So while Eddings does not eliminate or modify the system of hereditary rule in his Secondary World, he does consistently mock, or characterise as evil, those characters within this world who take the system too seriously, who elevate rulers to the level of the divine.

### 6.1.3. LEARNING MAGIC

Just as Eddings consistently undermines romanticised images of the nobility and the 'grand' life of the cities, he also undermines the wonder and mystery of magic. Most people in the world of *The Belgariad* view magic as something inexplicable and all-

powerful, if they believe that it exists at all. However, for those few who get an insider's perspective, magic is exposed as something that is ultimately rather ordinary. Once again, Garion serves as a touchstone for reader expectations, as he must radically alter his perception of magic when he learns that he has enormous magical ability. Garion's magical training becomes a major narrative thread in the story, which makes *The Belgariad* the first text discussed in this thesis to draw upon the motif of the 'sorcerer-apprentice'. Although, it is not the first in modern fantasy: Ged, from Le Guin's 1968 *The Wizard of Earthsea* is one of the earliest and most well-known 'sorcerer-apprentice' figures in modern fantasy. Indeed, Zanger and Wolf argue that one of the hallmarks of American fantasy is the magically skilled hero: "No longer is the good magician an ancillary to the non-magic hero; the hero himself is a practising magician" (34). One significant advantage of this motif is that it justifies frequent exposition as the magic system is explained to the novice user. But as Garion, and by extension the reader, gains more insight into how magic works, it soon begins to lose its mystery. In *The Belgariad*, as in much of American fantasy, we can see a progress of a "disenchantment" and "trivialization" of magic: "magic has become a science, and the work of the magician is applied science, a technology complementary to the technology of the real world" (Zanger and Wolf 35-36). And, as magic is transformed from a fantastic power into a practical tool, greater emphasis is placed on learning the specifics of its rules and limitations. Thus, Garion must learn that magic sometimes "has certain unexpected effects" (*Queen* 30), that it is physically exhausting, that it makes a 'noise' that can be detected by other magic users, and that it brings with it the potential risk of complete self-destruction if the magic user tries to make something disappear. As well as learning the risks, Garion must also understand that a fundamental law of physics—that every

action has an equal and opposite reaction—also applies to magic use, as he learns to his humiliation when he tries to move a large rock and ends up buried neck deep in the ground, needing to be rescued by Silk and Hettar, who mock him every step of the way (*Magician's* 130). By making Garion's efforts to learn magic a source of humour, Eddings further undermines the mystery of magic: not only is magic exposed as something that is practical and rule-bound, it is also something which does not necessarily need to be taken very seriously.

While the magic in *The Belgariad* is more systematic and scientific than that in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Sword of Shannara* and *The Chronicles*, it still retains a symbolic role. However, instead of an association with hope or belief, the learning of magic in *The Belgariad* is closely linked with Garion's coming of age narrative, which, as Langford notes, is a common tactic of sorcerer-apprentice stories: "For younger trainee wizards, the process [of learning wizardry] is partly a metaphor for accepting adult power and responsibility" ("Wizards" 1026). In the first instance, Garion's burgeoning magical ability is both practically and metaphorically linked with the onset of puberty. He is forced to confront his magical ability in Nyissa, where he also shaves for the first time, and encounters the overtly sexual Queen Salmissra, to whom Garion feels "at once afraid and yet strangely attracted" (*Queen* 289). Just as Garion cannot control the changes to his body, he cannot stop his magical ability from developing, and his greatest fear is that this ability will make him "a monster" (*Queen* 256). Just as Garion must accept the responsibilities of adulthood, he must come to terms with the added power his magical ability brings him. Indeed, Ce'Nedra points out the similarities between Garion's magical power and her political power: just as Garion is capable of killing people with his power, Ce'Nedra has the power to sentence people to execution: "Power is power, Garion.

The results are the same. You don't have to hurt people if you don't want to" (*Queen* 317). Similar thematic connections are made when Garion is forced to assume a leadership role when Belgarath and Polgara are both incapacitated. In this same chapter Garion also takes part in his first sword fight, where he feels a "wild, surging exultation" in his battle prowess (*Castle* 39), and also uses his magic to purposely defend his companions for the first time, thus drawing explicit connections between the different forms of power: political, physical and magical. And it is at this point that Garion finally begins to appreciate the extent of his own power: while it is still frightening, it also makes him feel "somewhat more secure" (*Castle* 42). So we can see that magic acts as a fantastic exaggeration of the mimetic growth to adulthood: it is both a metaphor for growing sexuality, as well as a metaphor for the assumption of adult roles and responsibilities. Thus, as Garion begins to accept and control his magical power, this in turn prepares him to assume the adult roles of husband and King.

## 6.2. CHARACTER

### 6.2.1. ORDINARY HEROES

Eddings makes a point of acknowledging that his characters are fulfilling functional roles. Indeed, the actantial identity and purpose of each of the primary and secondary characters is made explicit by the Mrin Prophecy: Mandorallan is "The Knight Protector", Silk is "The Guide", Barak is "The Dreadful Bear", Hettar is "The Horse Lord", Durnik is "The One with Two Lives", Ce'Nedra is "The Queen of the World", and Garion is "The Chosen One" (*Magician's* 136-37). However, although they are ostentatiously functional, Eddings also ensures that each character is given enough personality and background to round out their character and make them

something beyond their actantial role. The secondary characters are typically given relationship or domestic problems that are peripheral to Garion and his story, and thus help to create a sense that they have lives and concerns beyond this particular narrative, adding to the emotional scope of the narrative. For example, Silk's hopeless love for his uncle's wife, Barak's dysfunctional relationship with his wife, and Mandorallan's chaste romance with the Baron of Vo Ebor's wife, all act to add a level of actorial depth to complement their actantial sides. Garion, as the protagonist of the story, has a number of functional roles to fulfil. As discussed above (210-10), he is a sorcerer's apprentice. He soon learns he is also a hidden king, as well as the Chosen One, a central figure of an apocalyptic prophecy. *The Belgariad*, more so than any of the texts discussed thus far in this thesis, explicitly draws connections between the fulfilment of functional roles and the hero's coming of age, using the fantastic mode to complement Garion's mimetic character development. As discussed above (210-11), Garion's gradual acceptance of his role as 'sorcerer-apprentice' acts as a metaphor for his beginning acceptance of adult sexuality and power; accordingly, the assumption of his subsequent functional roles mark different stages of his development to adulthood, and his acceptance of adult roles and responsibilities. Appropriately, there is frequently a distinct whining tone to Garion's complaints about his actantial roles that reflects the complaints of an ordinary adolescent facing the obligations of adulthood: "It was the unfairness of it all that upset Garion the most. He had never asked for any of this. He did not *want* to be a sorcerer. He did not *want* to be the Rivan King" (*Enchanters*' 13). Each actantial role also comes with a new name—from Garion, to Belgarion, to King Belgarion: Overlord of the West, and finally the Child of Light—with each name taking him further away from his ordinary and humble beginnings as "only Garion" (*Castle*

209). However, Garion, unlike Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, is not dramatically changed by his assumption of actantial roles, and is able to find room in his identity for both the actor and the actant. For, rather than examine the potential tragedy involved in the transformation of actor to actant, Eddings instead focuses on the potential humour inherent in the situation.

One of the main points of humour is Garion's perpetual ignorance of his own functional roles, which is juxtaposed with the knowingness of some of the other characters, as well as that of the reader. There are a number of clues as to Garion's true identity scattered throughout the first three and half books, both in the narrative proper and the prologues: his birthmark, a "perfectly round, white patch on the palm of his right hand" (*Pawn* 63), which is identical to that which "marking of Riva's heir" (*Pawn* 15), is one of the most obvious early clues. An early comment from Belgarath even deliberately recalls the motif of the 'hidden king': "who knows these days where a king might be hiding?" (*Pawn* 42). Many characters, beside Belgarath and Polgara, also seem to know or suspect Garion's true identity: Silk in particular deliberately helps prepare him for his role (*Castle* 50). But even without the hints, those readers familiar with generic conventions will not be surprised when Garion is revealed as the Rivan King. The narrative pleasure derives from the fact that the reader is positioned as a knowing observer, which creates expectations and anticipation: so, rather than wondering *what* will happen when they reach Riva, the reader wonders *how* Garion will react when he realises he is the Rivan King. Adding to the humour is Garion's annoyance at his lack of knowledge: while he suspects there is more going on than he realises, no-one tells him anything, and he consequently responds to revelations about his identity by sulking: "You both knew all along, didn't you? ... Well, if you'd wanted me to behave like a king, you should

have told me about it” (*Castle* 203). Another source of humour lies in the fact that as Garion struggles to adapt to each new role, his efforts are undermined every step of the way by his friends and family. As noted above (210-11), they make fun of his mistakes when learning magic; the same holds true while Garion learns to rule, for instance when the other Alorn Kings gather to watch Garion and offer “commentary” on his efforts (*Castle* 179). Moreover, Garion’s moments of heroic self-realisation are also frequently undermined. As he struggles to adapt to his latest functional role as the Child of Light, Garion spends much of his journey east “sick with fear” (*Castle* 282). But he finally realises that Torak is just as frightened about the final confrontation as he is, and thus sends him a defiant mental challenge. In other stories this would be celebrated as a moment of profound self-development; in *The Belgariad* Garion is yelled at for revealing their position: ““Are you sure you don’t have a trumpet somewhere under your clothes?” [Belgarath] asked with heavy sarcasm. ‘Maybe you’d like to blow a few fanfares as we go along’” (*Enchanters*’ 298). While Eddings does treat Garion’s transformation from actor to actant with earnestness as well, exploring Garion’s fear, loneliness, and identity crises, he balances the seriousness with moments of humour, a consideration of the ways in which the situation might be funny.

Eddings also explores the coming of age narrative through replication, a doubling of the hero through a female counterpoint: Ce’Nedra. Like Garion, Ce’Nedra goes through a journey to maturity which coincides with her assumption and acceptance of her functional roles as the Rivan Queen and the Bride of Light. However, Ce’Nedra’s journey is in many ways an inversion of Garion’s: whereas Garion, coming from humble beginnings, learns to deal with the responsibility of power and command, Ce’Nedra must learn that being born to rank and privilege means more

than collecting titles and getting your own way. A defining moment in Ce’Nedra’s development is her decision to assume command of the armies of the West, which is not only one of her first truly selfless moments, but also marks her acceptance of one of her functional roles: “Let me prove that I’m fit to be Garion’s queen” (*Castle* 319). But the actant is still balanced by the actor: this moment is immediately followed by Ce’Nedra complaining about her small breast size, once again creating an association between sexual maturation and assumption of functional roles. This association also manifests in the fact that Garion and Ce’Nedra, as well as being the dual protagonists of the story, are also destined to marry. Once more, the reader is placed in the position of knowing observer: not only does Garion and Ce’Nedra’s relationship follow standard patterns of the romance narrative, but the text also explicitly tells the reader what is going to happen. The prologue of the second book, in which Ce’Nedra is first introduced, details the Accords of Vo Mimbire, one of which promises “a princess of Tolnedra to be wife unto the Rivan King” (*Queen* 5). While both Garion and Ce’Nedra take steps towards adulthood through successfully assuming their functional roles, the final step in this journey is their marriage, or, more specifically, their wedding night, which is obliquely referenced through Belgarath’s drunken conversation with the “furiously blushing Orb” (*Enchanters*’ 372). As Garion and Ce’Nedra’s sexual maturation has all along acted as a counterpoint to their heroic journeys, it is thus appropriate that the story concludes with their mutual loss of virginity.

### 6.2.2. BELGARATH THE SORCERER

Belgarath fulfils the functional roles of wizard/mentor/guide in *The Belgariad*, similar to Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, Allanon in *The Sword of Shannara*, and

Mhoram in *The Chronicles*; however, his relationship with these roles is a mixture of performance and reality, for Belgarath is acutely aware of his dual identities of actant and actor. Belgarath's actantial identity thus becomes his public persona, with few people privy to the reality of the actor that lies underneath. One of these privileged people is Garion, who often struggles to reconcile the man he knows—the storyteller, Mister Wolf, his Grandfather—with the figure of legend, Belgarath, who he was convinced was “a fairy-tale figure, a myth” (*Pawn* 199). As noted above (209), Garion is disillusioned when he learns that his old friend is the legendary sorcerer Belgarath; however, he becomes happier when he realises that this means that Belgarath is also his (many times removed) grandfather (*Pawn* 326). Thus, in addition to their sorcerer/apprentice relationship, Belgarath and Garion also have a familial connection, which adds an actorial quality to their functional relationship. Similarly, Belgarath, like Garion, has a female counterpart in Polgara; but just as Garion and Ce'Nedra are lovers as well as dual heroes, Belgarath and Polgara also share a father/daughter relationship in addition to their dual mentor/sorcerer roles. Even Belgarath's antagonist, Zedar, is his estranged Brother (as a former disciple of Aldur), which adds a level of emotional depth to their centuries-old dispute. In addition to the domestic nature of his functional relationships, Belgarath's actorial side is evidenced by his ordinary appearance and personality. Once again, Eddings undermines the “remarkable” expectations both the characters and the readers might have of the figure of the ‘mysterious sorcerer’, by highlighting the thoroughly ordinary nature of the sorcerers in this Secondary World: “I think you're in for a bit of a disappointment.... For the most part, sorcerers tend to be crotchety old men with a wide assortment of bad habits” (*Magician's* 135). Furthermore, Belgarath has very questionable standards of morality, which contradicts the notion that ‘good’ sorcerers

are all pure good. However, instead of hinting at evil motives, as Brooks did with Allanon, Eddings simply gives Belgarath the very human, and somewhat mundane, vices of thieving, drinking and wenching, making him “a thoroughly disreputable old man” (*Pawn* 36). Together, these elements of humanity work to balance the functional nature of Belgarath’s role in the story.

However, Belgarath is reluctant to reveal his human side to many, preferring to encourage the image of the mysterious sorcerer. Hence, his annoyance when Garion uses the word ‘push’ to move the rock in the Vale of Aldur: “we do have a certain dignity to maintain. ... If we go around saying ‘push’ or ‘flop’ or things like that, no one’s ever going to take us seriously” (*Magician’s* 134). Belgarath realises that his reputation of omnipotence and inhumanity is just as important as his actual magical power in maintaining his influence in the world. So, whereas Gandalf’s ‘human’ side acts as a shell for his true identity, Belgarath’s ‘sorcerer’ identity is a shell for his humanity. And while the sorcerer of reputation—“the Eternal Man, shimmering in the aura of his full power” (*Enchanters’* 316)—is certainly a part of Belgarath’s identity, the narrative is more concerned to emphasise Belgarath’s humanity *in spite* of his power and immortality. Accordingly, one striking difference between *The Belgariad* and the texts explored thus far in this thesis is a significant lessening of the consequences of immortality: whereas Tolkien, Brooks and Donaldson all explored the ways in which deathlessness could result in loss of humanity, Eddings instead explores the ways in which immortality could make one *more* human. And for Garion, who has recently discovered he too is an immortal sorcerer, this is a very important lesson to learn. To begin with, Garion adheres to the belief that immortality equates to inhumanity, accusing Polgara of manipulating them “like puppets” because she is so far removed from the capacity for ordinary human

relationships: “You left being human behind so long that you can’t even remember where you lost it” (*Queen* 275). However, Garion soon learns that immortality can actually intensify human emotions, which means that Belgarath “had probably in his seven thousand years developed a capacity for love beyond the ability of other men even remotely to guess at” (*Castle* 270). Furthermore, Belgarath’s immortality is frequently treated with irreverence by the other characters: Silk, in particular, often makes fun of Belgarath’s age: “I wish I were seven thousand years old so I could solve problems so easily” (*Pawn* 297). It is difficult to imagine, for example, Pippin making fun of Gandalf in this manner, or Flick of Allanon: in those stories, deathlessness was treated with seriousness and reverence. But in *The Belgariad*, one of the aspects of epic fantasy that is taken most seriously—the desire for immortality and its consequences—is used as a source of humour. Thus, through the character of Belgarath, Eddings continues to undermine the generic conventions of epic fantasy: the Immortal Sorcerer is exposed as a somewhat debauched, yet exceedingly compassionate, ordinary man, who is not above becoming the target of jokes, and who is also revealed to be actively encouraging his own unrealistic reputation within the Secondary World.

### 6.2.3. GODS AND MONSTERS

In a particularly noticeable difference from *The Lord of the Rings*, wherein the higher powers were purposefully kept off stage, the gods in *The Belgariad* are visible and knowable. Eddings’ gods are not enigmatic beings, beyond human comprehension; rather, they are exaggerated humans, each a distillation of the defining characteristics of the cultural group that worships them. The gods are also morally imperfect and, like Belgarath, their vices are very recognisable: Belar enjoys ‘carousing’, Nedra is

materialistic, and Issa wilfully disconnects himself from everyday reality. And even gods cannot escape the domestic flavour of Eddings' epic fantasy: the gods are brothers, their father is UL, and their 'mother' the universe. The 'human' nature of the gods lends an oddly secular flavour to a world in which everyone believes in higher powers; although there are various religious institutions dedicated to the gods, their relationships with their worshippers are rather informal and distinctly unceremonious. In fact, religious fanatics, such as the Bear-cultists and Relg, are typically viewed with disdain: while the gods are, by definition, more than human and should be respected, religious dedication should not be taken too far, and should certainly not be forced upon others. Thus, the Grolim religion of the Angaraks, which centres on human sacrifice to Torak, is the height of evil in this world. However, Torak is equally to blame for encouraging this practice amongst his worshippers, announcing that he is "well pleased" with burnt offerings and human sacrifices (*Enchanters*' 2). Torak, like the Murgo King, demands a reverence far beyond his due. Like the other gods, Torak is an exaggeration of human qualities, in this case pride and vanity, with Eddings clearly drawing on the Lucifer archetype, as Tolkien did before him. But Eddings' Lucifer-figure is also insane: "Torak's madness is the madness of a God—a being who can *make* his diseased imaginings come to pass" (*Enchanters*' 182). To some degree, Torak's insanity counteracts his evilness, and he is ultimately treated as a sympathetic figure: the other gods, his brothers, mourn his death, and UL's grief is that of a father for his wayward son: "I tried to turn thee from this path, my son" (*Enchanters*' 330). Thus, just as Eddings exposed the ordinariness of nobility and sorcerers, so too are the gods' human weaknesses revealed: they are more powerful than humans, certainly, but they are

not necessarily wiser or more virtuous, and they are just as susceptible to the disease of insanity as any human.

Similar to Torak, the various beings that typically inhabit the ‘evil’ end of the moral scale in epic fantasy are treated with a level of compassion in *The Belgariad*. The ‘monsters’ are creatures that were created by the gods, but rejected because they were “unseemly and strange” (*Magician’s* 1), making them outcasts, rather than fallen or corrupted good. And, like Torak, the monsters also have the excuse of insanity for their violent acts, as they were driven mad when Torak cracked the world. Some of the monsters are further made sympathetic due to their particular circumstances: Grul the Eldrak is ‘human’ enough for rudimentary speech and clothing, and Belgarath kills him reluctantly (*Magician’s* 183); and of the three dragon-like creations, the two males killed each other during the first mating season, leaving the only female “alone for as long as [Belgarath] can remember” (*Magician’s* 83). Thus, like Brooks and Donaldson, Eddings advocates empathy towards those who are different, of not judging based on appearance or reputation, because even monsters may have reasons for their actions. Likewise, animals who might in some circumstances be treated as ‘monstrous’ are treated with respect in *The Belgariad*, as we can see in the case of the wolves. Rather than savage animals, Eddings portrays wolves as courteous creatures, with a “rather concise and often quite beautiful language” (*Castle* 286).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Polgara’s mother was originally a wolf, which means that Garion has to overcome his ‘prejudices’ regarding animals, and accept

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<sup>24</sup> Eddings’ positive depiction of wolves is a departure from his predecessors, wherein wolves were commonly depicted as dangerous and evil (Langford “Wolf” 1027). However, a positive depiction of wolves is relatively common in epic fantasy: we will see in Chapters Seven and Eight that both Jordan and Hobb present their wolves in a similar fashion. This is perhaps a result of the influence of American Indian culture, which tends to have a much more positive perception of wolves than European culture.

that Poledra is the same 'person' regardless of the form she takes: "am I not who I am, whether as wolf or owl or woman?" (*Castle* 291). The lesson of tolerance is extended to humans also. For example, Beldin was driven from his village because he was "deformed and hideous" (*Magician's* 145); however, a vast intelligence and sensitivity lies beneath the surface, for those who are able to see past his malformed appearance. Even most of the Angaraks are ultimately treated sympathetically, as the protagonists learn more about the reasons for their enemies' actions. Garion and Ce'Nedra gradually realise that majority of Angaraks are bound to Torak through fear of his sacrificial, mind-reading priesthood and, as both characters move further into enemy territory, their compassion grows until they find "it impossible to hate them, even though they were technically the enemy" (*Enchanters'* 180).

However, this tolerance does not seem to extend to the human culture of the Murgos and the priesthood of the Grolims. Both of these groups are depicted as uniformly evil, "reviled by all the characters and routinely slaughtered whenever encountered" (*Spellar* 176). Technically the Murgos and Grolims are two tribes, but they are "more closely related to each other than they are to other Angaraks" (*Queen* 154), and thus almost impossible to tell apart. Both groups are typically described as 'cold' in demeanour, and 'alien' in appearance, with self-inflicted facial scars and "dead eyes" (*Magician's* 230). The Murgos are consistently depicted as arrogant, deliberately segregating themselves from other cultures, and only venturing out to act as spies. They are not given any redeeming humanising characteristics. In addition to the Murgo traits, Grolims also have magical ability and fanatical desire to sacrifice humans to Torak. Their typical attire of "black, hooded robes and polished steel masks" (*Magician's* 218) not only adds to their frightening and alien appearance, but also recalls the Nazgûl of *The Lord of the Rings*. The Murgos and Grolims are the

only anomalies in a text which goes out of its way to demonstrate that everything has a ‘human’ side. So perhaps they are a manifestation of the idea that true, unredeemable evil is something which is the exclusive domain of humans, which means that, in the end, we are the only true monsters.

## 6.3. STRUCTURE

### 6.3.1. A SIMPLE STRUCTURE

Like Brooks and Donaldson before him, Eddings adopts the interlaced structure of *The Lord of the Rings*; but Eddings simplifies this structure significantly, adapting it to fit the much smaller scale of his epic fantasy. *The Belgariad* comprises five short books, averaging 350 pages each, which are organised in a clear two-stage structure. The first stage is the quest to retrieve the Orb of Aldur. This stage is exclusively focalised through Garion for first two books; Ce’Nedra is introduced as the secondary focaliser in the third book, and they alternate as focalisers for the remainder of the quest, which concludes mid-way through the fourth book when the quest party successfully returns the Orb to Riva. This stage has very simple linear structure, with only the minor sub-plot of Ce’Nedra’s time in Ulgo. The interlace structure only emerges in the second stage of the narrative, when Garion departs on his quest to confront Torak, leaving Ce’Nedra to lead the armies of the west in a large-scale diversionary war. Eddings switches between the two plot threads only four times, which helps to maintain the simple narrative drive. However, while the primary focus is kept on Garion and Ce’Nedra’s stories, Eddings does add a level of complexity in the final book when he introduces a number of minor alternative focalisers who are used to portray the full-scale of the war. Two chapters, focalised through various Queens and wives, contain snapshots of events happening back in

the Western nations; and two other chapters, focalised through various leaders and soldiers, portray moments in and around the battlefield. By providing these brief and intermittent insights of the wider world, Eddings is able to increase the geographical scope of the story, similar to the way that the depth of sub-creation increases the historical scope, and the secondary characters' back-stories help to increase the emotional scope. Thus, Eddings is able to create a sense that there are countless other stories occurring just beyond the boundaries of this particular story, while still maintaining a strong and simple focus on the two protagonists' heroic journeys. For, as we have seen throughout this chapter, Garion and Ce'Nedra's mutual journey towards fulfilment of both their actantial roles in the story and their adult roles in the world is the primary thematic foundation of the story.

We have also seen that one of the objectives of *The Belgariad* is to challenge romantic illusions about the generic conventions of fantasy, such as nobility, magic, sorcerers, gods and monsters. The same is true for the two sides of the generic narrative structure of epic fantasy: the 'quest' and the 'war'. As discussed above (84), in Kaveney's consideration of the 'quest' plot thread in Eddings' work, she criticises its lack of moral depth. But as already suggested, when this plot element is examined in the context of Eddings' thematic concerns, it is clear that it serves entirely different functions. We have already seen that journeying through different cultures acts as both mirror and catalyst for Garion and Ce'Nedra's character development. Another purpose of the 'quest' plot thread is to shatter the protagonists' illusions about the romance of adventure. So, whereas Tolkien emphasised the moral significance of journeying, Eddings focuses on the boredom and discomfort. When Garion is first faced with the prospect of leaving Faldor's farm, he "almost choke[s] with excitement" (*Pawn* 79), and although he is

uncomfortable sleeping on the ground, “the exciting sense of being on some great adventure” helps him “to endure the discomfort”; however, when it begins to rain, Garion decides that the adventure is “growing much less exciting” (*Pawn* 103-4). Thus, Garion’s naïve excitement is rapidly overwhelmed by mundane reality. Similarly, Ce’Nedra’s journey, which begins for her as another attempt at minor rebellion, a fun adventure, quickly becomes “tedious” and “ghastly” (*Magician’s* 182). In his advice to aspiring fantasists, Eddings suggests they should “grind [their] reader’s face in grubby realism”, in order to counter any idealistic notions about the romance of the ‘quest’: “Go ride a horse for a day or two so you know what it feels like” (*Rivan* 392). Accordingly, Eddings’ dwells on the ‘grubby realism’ of questing in *The Belgariad*: it takes a long time to get places, both journeying and sleeping are uncomfortable, it rains frequently, food is monotonous, and there are infrequent opportunities for bathing, which leaves many of the characters a “bit strong from the downwind side” (*Queen* 40). However, there is a narrative advantage to dwelling on the boring aspects of journey, as this time can also be used to develop the relationships between the characters. The daily routine of travel, setting up camp, preparing food, and sleeping provides opportunity for conversation, banter, and swapping of stories. Garion and Ce’Nedra’s relationship, in particular, is strongly connected to their shared experiences on the quest: from everyday events, such as doing chores together, to significant turning points, such as bathing together in the Wood of the Dryads, or Ce’Nedra teaching Garion to read while on the ship to Nyissa, the quest provides the narrative space for the two protagonists to get to know each other. Thus, the first stage of the narrative acts to not only correct Garion and Ce’Nedra’s (and by extension the reader’s) idealistic notions about the adventure of journeying, but to prompt character and relationship development.

The commencement of the second stage of the narrative, the ‘war’ plot thread, brings greater disillusionment to both Garion and Ce’Nedra. Garion initially believes that the war against the Angaraks will be a short-lived affair; however, Belgarath quickly destroys this notion:

What did you expect, Garion? A short little ride in the sunshine, a nice easy fight, and then home before winter? I’m afraid it won’t be like that. You’d better get used to wearing armour and a sword because you’ll probably be dressed that way for most of the rest of your life. This is likely to be a very long war. (*Castle* 227)

Out of a desire to avoid this eventuality, Garion leaves on another ‘quest’ plot thread and the second stage of his hero’s journey, which, in turn, signals the introduction of the interlace structure, as Ce’Nedra is left behind to take over the focalisation of the ‘war’ plot thread. And, like Garion, Ce’Nedra is rapidly disillusioned about the romance of war, when she realises that leading an army entails a physically and emotionally exhausting schedule of speech-making and ruthless manipulation, as Polgara bluntly informs her: “Did you really think that all you were going to have to was put on your armour, jump into the saddle and shout ‘follow me’?” (*Castle* 337). Furthermore, having gathered her army, Ce’Nedra is then confronted with the practical and “tedious little details” involved with transporting and feeding this army, “most of which Ce’Nedra [finds] extremely distasteful” (*Enchanters*’ 126). And finally, Ce’Nedra is educated on the very real dangers of war, first when she almost gets Adara killed because of the “fascinating reason” that she was bored (*Enchanters*’ 197). And when the battle actually starts, Ce’Nedra has to confront the fact that many of the people she convinced to follow her are very likely going to die: “What had seemed so stirring, so glorious in her anticipation had turned out to be

something quite different in reality” (*Enchanters*’ 219). Moreover, all of this harsh reality is overlaid by the knowledge that she has “raised an army to lead into a hopeless war” (*Castle* 373), because the more important battle is going to be fought by Garion. Ce’Nedra’s gradual loss of wilful naiveté in regards to the mundane and brutal realities of war is the most significant catalyst in her journey to maturity, and her character growth forms the thematic foundation of the ‘war’ plot thread.

In another reflection of the simpler narrative structure of *The Belgariad*, the ‘war’ and the ‘quest’ plot threads are brought back together for the narrative climax. This climax occurs in three short stages: first Belgarath defeats Zedar, then Polgara rejects Torak, which then leads the way for Garion to confront Torak in a physical battle. But, as in both *The Sword of Shannara* and *The Chronicles*, the final confrontation between the hero and the villain becomes something more than physical. In *The Belgariad*, the key to Garion’s victory is his realisation that what Torak really wants from him is his love: by rejecting Torak and telling him that “in all the universe there is not one person—not one thing—that loves [him]” (*Enchanters*’ 326), Garion is able to gain the upper hand and win the physical battle. We have seen throughout this chapter the way that Eddings exposes the humanity of his fantastic characters; thus, there is a strong thematic continuity in the climax, as Garion needs to understand Torak’s simple human need to feel loved in order to defeat him. And, as discussed above (221), there is a slightly bittersweet note to Garion’s victory, as it is made clear that Torak’s family do still love him, and “mourn [his] passing” (*Enchanters*’ 330). However, the epilogue comprises an unambiguously happy ending, with what Silk describes as a “universal plunge toward matrimony” (*Enchanters*’ 353), a series of marriages similar to those which conclude *The Lord of the Rings*. However, rather than symbolising a renewal of life and fertility, the marriages which conclude *The*

*Belgariad* represent a sense of completion and fulfilment. For Garion and Ce’Nedra in particular, their marriage is the final step of their successful journey to adulthood, signifying the end of their adolescence and the beginning of the next stage of their lives. When Eddings was writing this conclusion, he was already in the early planning stages of *The Mallorean* (*Rivan* 17); thus there are hints in the final pages that the story will continue. And, appropriately, *The Mallorean* tells the story of the next stage of Garion and Ce’Nedra’s lives, dealing with their further growth into the roles of king and husband, queen and wife, and, in particular, their acceptance and fulfilment of their new adult roles of father and mother.

### 6.3.2. THE PROPHECY OF LIGHT

Of the texts discussed thus far in this thesis, *The Belgariad* employs the most comprehensive use of prophecy as a narrative device. The Mrin Codex and Darine Codex are ancient prophetic texts which Eddings uses to manipulate the characters and events, as he unashamedly notes when explaining why these documents do not appear in *The Rivan Codex*:

They don’t appear because they don’t exist. They’re a literary device and nothing more.... I used the ‘Mrin’ as a form of exposition. Those periodic breakthroughs when Belkira and Beltira – or whoever else is handy – finally crack the code are the things that set off a new course of action. (13)

Accordingly, the prophecies tend to be concerned with things such as people that must be found, or events that must occur, thus acting as a relatively straightforward instruction manual for what the characters need to do next. But, while the use of prophecy as a narrative device is very calculated, Eddings does add a level of subtle complexity when, in what is perhaps the ultimate extension of Eddings’ tendency to

humanise everything, the abstract concept of prophecy is given a voice. The Prophecy of Light is literally a voice in Garion's head who tells him what to do, at times even taking over his body, and who has, moreover, a very sardonic sense of humour. A further complicating element is introduced when it is revealed that the Prophecy of Light is matched by the equal and opposing Prophecy of Dark, which is attempting to direct events towards a different outcome. Thus, in the world of *The Belgariad*, destiny is not a comforting benign force that gently guides people in the 'right' direction; rather, it is a sarcastic chess player ruthlessly moving his pieces around the board to ensure his ultimate victory, as Garion quickly begins to realise:

He felt oddly powerless, as if his entire life were in the fingers of two faceless players manoeuvring pieces in the same patterns on some vast board in a game that, for all he knew, had lasted for eternity. There was no question about what had to be done. The players, however, seemed content to leave it up to him to come up with a way to do it. (*Queen* 121)

A chess game represents a vision of destiny which is rule-bound and concerned with one player outmanoeuvring the other; it is not about what is 'right', but about winning the game.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, in typical Eddings' fashion, matters of prophecy and destiny become sources of humour. The Prophecy of Light is frequently frustrated with the limitations of his human tools, complaining, for example, that the Mrin prophet "was insane ... and he was an imbecile besides, but he was all I had to work with" (*Castle* 231-32). But the Prophecy also takes a perverse pleasure in watching his tools struggle to decipher obscure prophetic statements and their

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<sup>25</sup> This chess imagery is of course also reflected in the titles of the books: *Pawn of Prophecy*, *Magician's Gambit*, *Enchanters' End Game* etc.

fruitless attempts to avert destiny. And, like the knowing reader, it also takes great pleasure in knowing more than the hero does, refusing to tell Garion what is going to happen next because, “[he] wouldn’t want to spoil anything for [him]” (*Castle* 132). In this way, the Prophecy of Light also acts as a humorously metafictional acknowledgement of authorial manipulation through prophetic narrative devices.

Beyond the purely practical purposes of narrative manipulation, *The Belgariad* also considers the effect that prophecy has on the two protagonists. Most of the prophecies are more concerned to heighten Garion and Ce’Nedra’s expectations and uncertainty, rather than the reader’s. For example, the prophecy that the Orb will “for some reason” restore Torak is deciphered at just the right time to bring Garion’s fear about the forthcoming confrontation to an apex: “Garion rode slumped in despair. They were going to lose, and Torak was going to kill him” (*Enchanters*’ 82-83). However, any reader familiar with the generic conventions of epic fantasy is unlikely to be concerned, as they are reasonably assured of a happy ending, especially given the overall light-hearted tone of the series. So, rather than manipulating the readers’ emotions, this prophecy, like many of the others, instead functions to increase the anxiety of the characters. A further effect of prophecy is to add another layer to Garion and Ce’Nedra’s journeys to adulthood, as the ability to accept the fact that certain aspects of their lives are pre-determined is a significant step towards accepting their functional roles within the story. Ultimately, the reasons for both protagonists accepting their destiny is based on simple human emotions, rather than a deep philosophical understanding of the immutability of destiny: although they both understand on some level the necessity of what they are doing, each needs to find reasons that are more immediate and personal. Thus, while Garion’s decision to journey east to confront Torak by himself is certainly prompted by the Prophecy of

Light, who explains that Garion is destined to confront Torak, Garion's primary motivation for leaving is his unwillingness to go to war and "get a lot of people killed", when it is all going to end the same anyway (*Castle* 233). As well as demonstrating Garion's growing sense of leadership and responsibility, his decision also gives him back some measure of control over his life: while he cannot change what is going to happen, he can choose *how* he gets there. Similarly, Ce'Nedra finds acceptance in her destined role as leader of a doomed army out of love for Garion: "Polgara and Belgarath ... could perhaps devote themselves to an idea, a concept; but Ce'Nedra was barely sixteen years old, and she needed something more human to arouse her devotion.... She swore to herself that she would never fail her Garion" (*Castle* 373). Ce'Nedra accepts to a degree that she is fulfilling her destined role, but she also realises that this knowledge alone is not enough to reconcile her to her fate. So while Garion and Ce'Nedra both come to an understanding of the influence that prophecy has in their lives, it is only through ordinary human emotions of duty and love that they are able to begin accepting their destiny.

### 6.3.3. ONLY A STORY

*The Belgariad* is highly cognizant of the important role of story-telling in predominately pre-literate societies, where story-tellers are sources of both entertainment and information. In the beginning of the story, Belgarath is known only as 'the storyteller', an itinerant character who is welcomed to Faldor's Farm because of his considerable story-telling skills: "His stories were not always new, but there was in his telling of them a special kind of magic" (*Pawn* 36). In this description of Belgarath, we can discern a self-reflexive comment on Eddings' own talent for story-telling. As Clute notes, Eddings' "considerable popularity ... does in

the end derive from his compulsive storytelling skills.... He is a telling example of the centrality of Story in the sustained fantasy epic” (“Eddings” 308). Just as Eddings is not only aware of, but actively takes advantage of, the familiar nature of the stories he tells, stories *within* the world of *The Belgariad* are told and re-told in different styles. One of the most prominent examples of these repeating stories is the history of the world itself. The prologue of the first book is an extract from *The Book of Alorn*, which dutifully recounts the creation of the world, the Breaking of the World, and the formation of the Alorn kingdoms, in a formal, mythic-historic style that verges on parody. This same story is retold in the second chapter by Belgarath, who claims that the subject of “beginnings and the Gods” is a “worthy” subject, but a “dry and dusty” one (*Pawn* 38). Instead of dwelling on the content of the story, this part of the narrative instead focuses on the skill of Belgarath’s recitation, and the responses of his audience, who listen “rapt with attention” (*Pawn* 39). While it is the same sequence of events, Belgarath’s version is a story, which is infinitely more entertaining than history. Belgarath later tells a more personal version of this story in the fourth book, when he discusses his relationships with Aldur and Poledra in the context of these events, thus adding a sense of immediacy and emotional intimacy to historical events (*Castle* 284-86). And, finally, the last book tells of the same sequence of events, but this time from Torak’s point of view, as they appear in *The Book of Torak*, in which Torak challenges the Western version of the story by casting himself as the aggrieved son and brother, and sole creator of the world, “forever King of Kings, Lord of Lords” (*Enchanters’* 7).<sup>26</sup> By re-telling the same story in different ways within the world, Eddings thus offers a meta-fictional defence of his

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<sup>26</sup> This same story is told twice more, in much greater detail, in Belgarath and Polgara’s respective auto-biographies, *Belgarath the Sorcerer* and *Polgara the Sorceress*.

position that all stories are in some sense derivative, and that the “literary value of any story is in its *presentation*” (Rivan 281).

*The Belgariad* also reflects on the relationships that individuals can have with the stories that surround them: this is most clearly seen in Garion’s changing understanding of the truth behind stories. At the beginning of the narrative, Garion is fascinated by stories. In one subtly parodic scene, Garion hears field-workers telling the story of the Battle of Vo Mimbire and, in a typical child-like fashion, decides to act out one of these stories with a friend, donning kettles and pots before “repair[ing] to a quiet place to do war upon each other” (*Pawn* 33). So we can see a diminution of events, as history becomes a story, which then becomes a game, something that Garion views as rather meaningless escapism: “It’s *only* a story” (*Pawn* 42).

However, as this chapter has demonstrated, one of Garion’s most important lessons on his journey to adulthood is realising the truth behind story. Not only does Garion learn that these events did actually take place, but he also learns that the world of story is much less splendid than he imagined, shattering his idealised images of castles, kings, wizards, quests and battles, and replacing them with much more mundane and frightening reality. Of course, Garion later learns that all of these events are in a sense part of a great cosmic game, but played out on a much more significant scale than he could have conceived when fighting Rundorig with a wooden stick in Faldor’s Farm. And before the end of *The Belgariad*, Garion himself has become a figure of story and legend in his own right: where once he had to confront the improbable reality of Belgarath the Sorcerer, King Belgarion of Riva is now received with awe and “profound respect” by sovereign kings (*Enchanters*’ 73). But while Garion, like Belgarath, builds a reputation based on his actantial identity, his true personality, his actorial identity, remains essentially the same. As we have

seen throughout this chapter, Garion loses his childish naiveté and becomes a mature young adult, but overall he is relatively unchanged by his transition into the world of story. One measure of the stability of Garion's identity is that even while he is in the midst of a story, on a journey to confront an insane god, and quite possibly to meet his death, Garion still wants to hear Belgarath tell stories: "Garion suddenly wanted the old man to talk – to tell stories as he had so long ago. Stories somehow always helped. He could lose himself in a story, and for a little while it might make things bearable" (*Castle* 283). For perhaps one of the most important lessons Garion learns is that while you can grow up and lose your illusions, there will always be a simple pleasure and comfort to be had from escaping into a story.

#### 6.4. CONCLUSION

We have seen in this chapter the way that an epic fantasy that sits unambiguously at the centre of the 'fuzzy set' definition of the subgenre is nonetheless able to establish a unique creative identity. As this chapter has argued, *The Belgariad* distinguishes itself by its sense of humour, which not only acknowledges the generic nature of the story, but relies upon it for creative effect. Eddings takes advantage of his readers' familiarity with the conventions of epic fantasy in order to gently mock many of the more fantastic elements of the subgenre, such as the grandeur of a fantasy world, the exceptionality of kings, wizards and gods, the romance of travel, and the glory of war. As Garion and Ce'Nedra journey further afield from their sheltered homes, their expectations about the world 'outside' are consistently undermined, and they are exposed to the often petty, sometimes disturbing, and overwhelmingly ordinary truth behind their naïve assumptions. Thus, the fantasy world is replete with casual decadence and petty immortalities; kings, wizards and gods are revealed to have just

the same human weaknesses and strengths as everyone else; travelling is tedious and uncomfortable; and war is dull, brutal and unforgiving. Within the world itself, the majority of characters do not take such things terribly seriously either, and those who do are typically depicted as either wilfully ignorant or dangerously delusional. The narrative primarily works to correct the protagonists' expectations, but in doing so it also works to correct any similar assumptions held by the reader and, at the same time, subtly parodies many of the common generic conventions of epic fantasy itself.

But *The Belgariad* also uses the generic conventions of epic fantasy in order to position the reader as the knowing observer. Thus, many of the narrative events will easily be anticipated by a reader familiar with the subgenre. Garion's magical abilities, his ascension to the Rivan throne, his triumph over Torak, his marriage to Ce'Nedra: few of these events will come as a surprise to the average fantasy reader. Indeed, many of the characters within *The Belgariad* are also aware of, or at least suspect, the direction the story will take. Whether they have prophetic knowledge, like that of Belgarath, Polgara, or the Prophecy of Light, or simply a good sense of intuition, like that of Silk or Durnik, they, like the reader, are infrequently surprised by the turn of events. Indeed, the only two characters who are consistently surprised are Garion and Ce'Nedra, which means that the reader, along with the other 'knowing' characters, is able to find humour in the protagonists' perpetual ignorance and frustration. Furthermore, the narrative clearly establishes that Garion and Ce'Nedra's fears about being changed by their functional roles are unfounded, that becoming a sorcerer, a ruler, or a hero does not fundamentally change a person. This reassurance means that the reader can find enjoyment in watching the protagonists struggle to adapt to each new role and turn of events, comfortable in their knowledge that things will most likely turn out happily in the end.

However, Eddings does balance the humour of *The Belgariad* with a sense of earnestness, an awareness of epic fantasy's ability to comment and reflect on serious matters. Thus, the narrative consistently advocates for the value of equality and acceptance, implicitly praising people and societies who are able to look beyond matters of appearance, station and reputation to the true nature of the person beneath. The simple worth of home and family is celebrated, and the anxieties and doubts shared by heroes and adolescents alike are explored with both wit and compassion. And, finally, the joy and value of Story is evident throughout the narrative. For, even as Eddings' pokes fun at the generic conventions of epic fantasy, he never makes fun of those who find pleasure and comfort in escaping into a story. A naïve acceptance on the part of the listeners/readers may be mocked, but never the act of story-telling itself. Instead, *The Belgariad* recognises that story-telling is an art, and especially praises the ability of those who are able to take an old and familiar story and make it seem new. Thus, while *The Belgariad* derives much of its humour from an awareness of its own generic conventions, it is also suitably self-aware of the creative triumph inherent in the fact that Eddings has successfully taken these same generic conventions and presented them in an original manner.

## 7. EXPANDING THE HORIZONS OF STORY:

### Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*

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When Robert Jordan died in September 2007, there was an outpouring of grief from his fans. The post on Jordan's blog announcing his death attracted over 2000 comments in two days, crashing the website. For the many people who had immersed themselves in the eleven books (at that time) of Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* series, there was a distinct sense that they had lost not only a friend, but an entire world. The world of *The Wheel of Time* is immense, hugely detailed and enormously complex. And Jordan, as Attrill notes, was the sole "ethnographer" of this world: "the joy and reporting over and above the details of the plot is a hallmark of his style.... [He produces] a world that is remarkably convincing, richly nuanced and with a depth of detail that readily evokes a state of mind that Tolkien described as 'Secondary Belief' (69). Indeed, *The Wheel of Time* is arguably one of the few epic fantasies to rival the sheer scope of Tolkien's sub-creation. And, like Tolkien, Jordan died before the complete story of his Secondary World had been told. But, after Jordan's death, his wife/editor enlisted the assistance of epic fantasist Brandon Sanderson to finish the story of *The Wheel of Time*. According to those closest to Jordan, his wish was that the series be finished, and tales abound of him dictating the ending to the story while literally on his deathbed. Sanderson was left with a huge range of material, completed and fragmentary scenes, notes, outlines, and dictations, from which to craft the remainder of the story (J. Jones). So far, Sanderson has helped to complete two further books in the series, with the final book planned for publication in 2012, a full 22 years after the first book in the series was published.

Besides the length of time between the beginning and end of the story, the enormous scale of *The Wheel of Time* has had other effects. The series is replete with multiplicities and replication, a complex patterning of thematic variation, as the generic conventions of epic fantasy are explored from a multitude of perspectives. Thus, the journeys undertaken by individuals are typically reflected on a larger scale, as entire cities, cultures and even the world at large, must face and resolve identical problems to the people within them. This chapter will focus in particular on one of the strongest themes of *The Wheel of Time*: that of the need for balance. Many of the problems inherent in the world and its characters have resulted from an imbalance, and finding resolution requires a re-establishment of balance, between male and female power, external and internal identity, order and chaos, nature and civilisation, creation and corruption. As well as creating connections between the multitude of plot threads, this sort of strong thematic unity also works to provide a structuring element for the sprawling narrative.

Of all the epic fantasies explored thus far in this thesis, *The Wheel of Time* is the by far the most metafictional. It is supremely conscious of the power of story-telling, and stories exert a strong influence on both the narrative and the characters within it, as Jordan explores the joy and escape that can be found in stories, the cyclical nature of stories, and the way that identities can be both formed and broken through the power of story. Jordan himself was also very self-aware of his role as a story-teller, clearly enjoying the relationship he had developed with his readers, and artfully manipulating reader response through the extensive use of prophecy and foreshadowing, dangling narrative resolutions like puzzles that could be solved through simple perseverance. And, of course, the largest of these narrative puzzles, the ending of the story, remains as yet unresolved. Jordan had always maintained that

he had known the ending since he began writing *The Wheel of Time*, and that this ending had remained unchanged: “I could have written the last scene of the last book 20 years ago – the wording would be different, but what happened would be the same” (“The Wheel Turns” 7). It is perhaps appropriate that this chapter was written when only the final book of the series is still yet to be published; like so many other reading experiences of *The Wheel of Time*, this analysis has been characterised by a need to find patterns and connections that suggest likely conclusions to the story, to speculate on the ending but to work always with a mingled sense of uncertainty and anticipation.

## 7.1. SETTING

### 7.1.1. A WORLD OF STORY

The world of *The Wheel of Time*<sup>27</sup> is one that is deeply influenced by stories: both from the Primary World, and from within the world itself. The first and most obvious external literary influence is that of *The Lord of the Rings*. Jordan has stated that he wanted to create a “little bit of a Tolkien-esque feel” in the beginning of his story: “Then, having said this is what you expect and this is the familiar ground, now, kiddies, we’re going someplace else” (“SFBC Interview”). Thus, *The Wheel of Time* begins in the Two Rivers, an isolated and idyllic community of farming villages, bordered by forests, rivers and the ‘Mountains of Mist’. As well as a general geographical resemblance between the Two Rivers and the Shire, there are a number of other similarities to *The Lord of the Rings* in the early stages of *The Wheel of*

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<sup>27</sup> Jordan does not name the world in which *The Wheel of Time* takes place; in lieu of an ‘official’ name, readers of the series have adopted the name ‘Randland’, after the story’s protagonist. For the sake of convenience, this thesis will do the same.

*Time*. For example, the reader is introduced to Emond's Field as it is preparing for Bel Tine, just as Hobbiton was introduced through the occasion of Bilbo's birthday party. And, like the hobbits, the Emond's Field villagers spend much of their time in the local tavern gossiping about the presence of 'outsiders' in their isolated community, and the possibility that a "grand display of fireworks" (*Eye* 11) is planned for the forthcoming celebration. Thus, while the Shire acted as a transitional location into the fantastic world of Middle-earth through its familiarity with England, the Two Rivers acts as a transitional location into Randland through its familiarity with the Shire: it deliberately recalls the Secondary World of the best known story of the genre in order to help the reader accept the reality of this Secondary World.

As the narrative moves outside of the Two Rivers, another Primary World influence becomes clear: the Arthurian legends. The Two Rivers belongs to the nation of Andor, which bears a strong resemblance to the Britain of the Primary World, both in geography and history. Its banner is a "white lion rampant on a field of red" (Jordan and Patterson 331), and the symbol of the ruling house is the Rose Crown: the lion, the colours white and red, and the rose are of course all strongly associated with Britain. Its capital city, Caemlyn, is reminiscent both in name and appearance to Camelot, and on its borders is the Aes Sedai city of Tar Valon, reminiscent of Avalon. The names of members of the royal house of Andor—Morgase, Elayne, Galad, Gawyn, Tigraine—are also evocative of the Arthurian legends, as are the names of Thom Merrilin and Moraine, which recall the magical figures of Merlin and Morgaine (Morgan le Fay). One of the most influential historical figures in Randland was "Artur Paendrag Tanreall, Artur Hawking, Artur the High King" (*Eye* 51) who, like the King Arthur of British legend, united the land for a brief but glorious reign, which lasted only until his death. Another character who evokes King

Arthur is of course Rand himself. Like Arthur, Rand proves his identity by removing a sword from a stone when he takes Callandor from the Stone of Tear. And prophecy suggests that Rand will end his life on a bier or a boat surrounded by three women (*Eye* 216, *Chaos* 447), an image that recalls King Arthur's dying journey on a barge, received by "three ladies with great mourning" (Malory 515). As the narrative moves into the other nations of Randland, many similar analogies can be made with the legends and myths of other Primary World cultures, in particular Norse, Greek, Roman, Japanese, Chinese, and Native American (Butler *et al*). But in the first stages of the narrative, Jordan primarily evokes the Secondary World of Tolkien's Middle-earth and the Britain of Arthurian legend, thus beginning in extremely familiar territory for the average Western fantasy reader.

As well as creating a sense of familiarity, the similarities between Randland and the stories and legends of the Primary World are also a manifestation of the world-view that underpins the entire series. *The Wheel of Time*, as the title suggests, is set in a world which believes that time is cyclic, an endlessly repeating wheel of events and characters: "It is a world where the previous Age fades into myth and legend as another comes about ... it is temporally representative of what was, what is, what may come. Janus-like it looks both back and forward" (Attrill 40). This world is neither a pre-historical nor post-apocalyptic version of the Primary World; rather, it is simply one Age in the turning of the wheel of time, "an Age yet to come, an Age long past" (*Eye* 1). Like Brooks' Four Lands, there are some physical remnants in this Secondary World which suggest a historical link to the Primary World: in a museum in Tanchico, Egwene sees the skeleton of an elephant and a giraffe, which seem to her "fantastic" impossibilities, as well as a metallic "three-pointed star inside a circle" that gives an aura of "pride and vanity", clearly suggestive of a Mercedes-

Benz hood ornament (*Shadow* 202-03). As common objects from the Primary World become wondrous museum pieces in Randland, so too may historical events and figures have been transformed into stories and legends. For example, Thom tells stories of Anla, the Wise Counselor, and Materes the Healer, Mother of the Wondrous Ind, suggestive of, respectively, Anne Landers and Mother Theresa (*Eye* 51). However, these moments of specific historical connection to the Primary World are rare in *The Wheel of Time*; for the most part, the connections are made through the repeating cycle of story and legend, wherein the relationship between fact and story is much less linear. Hence, the Arthurian legends of the Primary World may have influenced the naming practices of the royal house of Andor; however, the characters and events in the Age of Randland may have, in turn, influenced the development of those same legends in the Primary World: in the turnings of the Wheel, “there are neither beginnings nor endings” (*Eye* 1). Thus, Jordan not only draws upon the stories, legends of myths of the Primary World to help create the sense of familiarity characteristic of successful Secondary Worlds, he also creates a reason for this sense of familiarity to exist, which is deeply embedded within the reality of this Secondary World.

In a world that is so heavily influenced by stories, both in terms of its external sub-creation and its internal mythology, it is unsurprising that stories also play a significant role in shaping the characters’ own understanding of their world. This is manifested most clearly in Rand, the narrative focaliser for first 20 chapters of the narrative, and the primary focaliser of the first book (discussed further below, 254). From his isolated village home, Rand dreams of the world ‘outside’, a world that he knows only through stories and storytellers, and one he believes to be infinitely more exciting than his own:

They were places he knew only from peddlers' news, and tales told by merchants' guards. Aes Sedai and wars and false Dragons: those were the stuff of stories told late at night in front of the fireplace.... It must be different out there, beyond the Two Rivers, like living in the middle of a gleeman's tale. An adventure. One long adventure. A whole lifetime of it. (Eye 39)

But we are introduced to Rand just as the world of story begins to intrude the world of Emond's Field: a menacing black-cloaked figure in the woods, a mysterious noblewoman in the village who is like "a lady from a gleeman's tale" (Eye 26) but is actually a fearsome Aes Sedai, and finally a brutal Trolloc attack: "Not just a story, not after tonight" (Eye 71). Thus, the world of stories suddenly becomes "horribly real" to Rand (Eye 94). Fortunately, when Rand leaves the Two Rivers for the outside world, he finds that the wonder of stories is just as real as the horror. Rand's imaginative frame of reference for the wondrous world of story is similar to that of the reader's: "A thousand stories had painted cities in his mind, the great cities of kings and queens, of thrones and powers and legends" (Eye 528-29). It was discussed above how Andor recalls the Arthurian Britain of the Primary World: thus, for Rand, exploring Andor and Caemlyn is like experiencing a story coming to life, fitting into his "mind-deep pictures as water fits into a jug" (Eye 529), and looking ever "like something out of a gleeman's tale" (Eye 588). Whereas Eddings undermined expectations in *The Belgariad*, mocking Garion's, and by extension the reader's, romantic ideals about the world of stories, in Jordan the world outside does, on first impressions, live up to Rand's expectations. Caemlyn it is just as grand and noble as he imagined it to be, and unlike Garion, Rand is not disappointed by his first meeting with royalty: "She's beautiful. Like the queens in stories" (Eye 639). But Rand's

experience of the horrible reality of stories invading Emond's Field ensures that he is always aware that stories have a darker side, and if this city of stories is actually real, then it is also vulnerable:

Rand felt a sickness in his stomach at the thought of Trollocs in the streets of Caemlyn... He could see the towers burning, flames breaking through the domes, Trollocs pillaging through the curving streets and vistas of the Inner City. The Palace itself in flames. (*Eye* 632)

Indeed, twelve books later, this vision seems to be coming to pass—"The city is burning... Trollocs in Caemlyn!" (*Towers* 838)—heralding the ultimate destruction of Rand's story world. More explicitly than any other text explored thus far in this thesis, the crossing of the threshold between the ordinary world and the fantastic world is a transition into the world of story. And Rand finds that the world outside Emond's Field is not less than he expected, but more: it is more real, more complex, and far more dangerous than he had ever imagined. Furthermore, as the narrative progresses, all of the characters find that the worlds that they had known only through legend and story are, like the city of Caemlyn, all too real. The Blight, the Aiel waste, Shara, Seanchan, and even the worlds of games, alternate worlds, and the world of dreams: to both their delight and their horror, the characters of Randland learn that none of these worlds exist only in stories.

### 7.1.2. WASTELANDS AND DREAM-WORLDS

The world of *The Wheel of Time* is moving inexorably towards atrophy. In the first book, the corruption is localised in the wasteland area of the Blight, similar to Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings* and Lord Foul's Creche in *The Chronicles*; although, the Blight is not a barren or frozen world, but a diseased and grotesque

“parody of spring” (*Eye* 725), replete with bloated and sickly vegetation, and misshapen and deadly animals. This excessive version of the dying world motif is, however, seen only briefly during the climax of *The Eye of the World*; the rest of the world is suffering from a more subtle and protracted death. From the second book to the eighth book, Randland primarily suffers from an unending summer, as the Dark One strains to “fix the seasons in place” (*Path* 77). While the cause is fantastic, the results—drought, food shortages, social unrest—are very recognisable. The excessive heat is corrected in the eighth book via the Bowl of the Winds, which thrusts the world into the middle of winter, “a tempest of ice and snow, a lingering, killing frost” (*Gathering* 52). Then Randland begins to suffer from decay and pestilence, with food rotting too quickly and vermin spreading uncontrollably. Thus we can see that for the majority of the series, Randland’s wasting has come about through subtle fantastic exaggerations of entirely natural phenomena; it is only in the latter books of the series that the wasting becomes truly fantastic. As the Dark One’s prison grows weaker, his touch on the world becomes stronger, causing the rules of reality to begin to weaken: for he “is the embodiment of paradox and chaos, the destroyer of reason and logic, the breaker of balance, the unmaker of order” (*Dragon* 239). Ghosts begin to appear as the walls between life and death break down, and the reality-warping ‘bubbles of evil’ that have made occasional appearances since the fourth book become increasingly frequent, larger and lasting. By the twelfth book, we see the physical reality of the White Tower itself become unstable, with floors melting and entire wings shifting position in an instant, as well as an entire village caught in a time loop: “The town unravels at night, and then the world tries to reset it each morning” (*Gathering* 440). Thus, Randland’s slow march towards apocalypse begins to reach its apogee, taking it from the relatively mimetic physical collapse of

the early books to the completely fantastic metaphysical collapse of the latter books. Furthermore, the corruption of the landscape of the world is matched by an ever-increasing breakdown of social and political structures (discussed further below, 270). Thus, the metaphorical connection between the land and its characters common to epic fantasy is here manifested on a particularly large scale: “The world of the Wheel is being torn apart by civil unrest, and the prolonged drought and encroachment of the Blighted Lands are a metaphor for the spread of the Shadow” (Attrill 60). Randland is, by the latest book, a world on the very edge of health and sanity, as it slowly loses its long battle against decay and madness.

The slow decline of Randland is also linked with Rand in particular: like Aragorn and Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* and Covenant in *The Chronicles*, Rand has a symbiotic relationship with the health of the land: “There can be no health in us, nor any good thing grow, for the land is one with the Dragon Reborn, and he is one with the land” (*Crown* ix). Thus, the decreasing physical wellbeing of the world manifests as Rand’s never-healing wounds in his side, his near-blindness, dizziness, and the loss of his hand. And, as Attrill argues, the wounds in Rand’s side “must suggest the legend of the Fisher King” (60), just as Frodo and Aragorn’s linked roles of Sacrifice and Renewer recalled the same legend in *The Lord of the Rings*. An even more explicit reference to the Fisher King motif occurs during Moridin’s *sha’rah* game, when he considers the various strategies concerning a piece called the Fisher, which is “always worked as a man” with bandaged eyes and a wounded side (*Path* 34). Thus, in the continuing cycle of story, the legend of the Fisher King is both a game and a reality in this Age of the Wheel. Rand’s emotional state also finds connections with the physical state of the world: the shift from endless summer to endless winter coincides with Rand beginning to truly isolate himself emotionally, becoming

metaphorically 'cold': "death was coming. But he was steel. He was steel" (*Path* 311). This is also the point where, after a brief absence, Lews Therin's voice returns, indicating that Rand's mental state is also becoming increasingly unstable (discussed further below, 255-57), which corresponds with the increasing breakdown of reality throughout Randland. A number of prophecies in Randland suggest that Rand's death will be required to save the world: "The blood of the Dragon Reborn on the rocks of Shayol Ghul will free mankind from the Shadow" (*Dragon* 85). However, given this intimate relationship between Rand and the world, it is likely that it is not his death, but rather his *resurrection* that will be the act that restores the health and sanity of the world.

Another manifestation of the metaphorical connection between characters and the landscape is the dream-world of *Tel'aran'rhiod*, which is a physical reflection of the 'psyche' of the world. *Tel'aran'rhiod*, the World of Dreams, is, along with the Creator and the Dark One, one of the three constants in all possible worlds: it "lies *within* each of these others [worlds], inside all of them at the same time" (*Dragon* 240). Human actions are represented in *Tel'aran'rhiod* with varying degrees of temporality, depending on how permanent they are in the waking world: so, for example, while the buildings humanity creates are stable in the World of Dreams, the decorations and objects placed within them may change suddenly: "Perhaps they do not exist in one place in the waking world long enough to make more than a transitory impression on the World of Dreams" (Jordan and Patterson 280). In the same way, sustained social corruption can leave its marks in *Tel'aran'rhiod*: the reflection of Tanchico in the World of Dreams is full of minutely fractured buildings, flies and rats, indicative of the fact that the "city is dying, eating itself. There is a darkness here, an evil" (*Shadow* 212). Particularly significant human actions may

also be glimpsed in *Tel'aran'rhiod* before they actually happen in the physical world: these are events that are inevitable in all possible realities, and thus are already reflected in the non-temporal reality of *Tel'aran'rhiod*. And individuals who have had a profound effect on the world become “bound to the Wheel”, residing in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, until they are “spun out ... to work the will of the Wheel in the Pattern of the Ages” (*Great* 661). Thus *Tel'aran'rhiod* acts in many ways as an indication of the degree to which humanity is influencing the fate of the world: actions that have made, or will make, a real difference to the world leave their marks in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, imprinting these actions, as it were, on the subconscious of the world itself.

### 7.1.3. MAGIC AND POWER

The magic system of the world of *The Wheel of Time* reflects Jordan's scientific background as a physics major and nuclear engineer for the US Navy (“The Wheel Turns” 7). In a culmination of the progressive integration of magic and science that we have seen throughout this thesis, the magic of Randland is a fully-developed system of knowledge, with specific rules and parameters. The One Power is drawn from the True Source, the “driving force of the universe” (*Eye* 798), and is comprised of five ‘threads’: Earth, Air, Fire, Water and Spirit. A channeler ‘weaves’ these threads individually or in combination to achieve different results. The True Source is also divided into a male half, *saidin*, and a female half, *saidar*, with men and women using slightly different techniques to access and control the One Power (discussed further below, 251-51). Throughout *The Wheel of Time*, the reader is given progressively greater insight into the practicalities of learning and using the Power, from a large number of different character and cultural perspectives. Yet,

even with this large scale of use, the magic system remains remarkably consistent. Complex, detailed, concretely described and internally consistent: the One Power is, in short, a fantastic system of power that is presented in an utterly mimetic fashion. As well as integrating magic and science, Jordan also integrates magic and politics. In the epic fantasies discussed thus far in this thesis, magical power and political power have generally been connected only metaphorically, with sorcerers choosing not to use their magical ability to claim political power. However, in *The Wheel of Time*, magical power becomes concomitant with political power, which allows Jordan to explore the rights and responsibilities of those in power from an alternative perspective. These questions are brought to the forefront of the narrative, which depicts a point in time in which the current power structures are changing significantly. For centuries, the Aes Sedai have held the balance of power in Randland. Believing that their magical ability gives them the right to influence world affairs, they put themselves in positions of ‘advisors’ to political rulers, and generally work to control political matters in a more or less covert manner. By deliberately remaining an elite and mysterious group, building a reputation as being more than human (discussed further below, 260-61), the Aes Sedai have gained enormous political strength, to the extent where the Amyrlin Seat is considered the most powerful figure in the world: “No one refuses an audience with the Amyrlin Seat” (*Great* 117). However, one consequence of this level of power is that they are generally distrusted by anyone who is not Aes Sedai. As Butler notes, by deliberately isolating themselves from the general population, “in order to devote themselves to a higher good, [they] lose touch with the very society they purport to be aiding”. It is little wonder then that most people believe the Aes Sedai to be “puppeteers who

pulled strings and made thrones and nations dance in designs only the women from Tar Valon knew” (*Eye* 101).

And, in truth, many Aes Sedai do see themselves as superior to the ‘common’ people, believing, as Elaida does, that anyone “who isn’t Aes Sedai might as well be pieces on a stones board” (*Great* 57). This deeply ingrained belief among Aes Sedai that their magical abilities should naturally give them the right to dominate others is also reflected in their internal power structure, wherein Aes Sedai with lesser magical strength are expected to defer to those with greater strength, regardless of age or experience. By making magical ability and strength, which as Aviendha points out, is “something you were born with as surely as your eyes” (*Path* 50), the crucial factor in determining political power, the Aes Sedai can thus be seen as a fantastic interpretation of the systems of inherited rule that have been explored in all of the texts discussed thus far in this thesis. And like many of these systems, the Aes Sedai system is challenged in the course of the narrative, as it emerges that there are in fact a number of other organised groups of women channelers in Randland besides the Aes Sedai, each with their own strengths and knowledge. This new awareness of the Aiel Wise Ones, the Seafolk Windfinders, the Kin, and the Seanchan damane challenges the Aes Sedai’s belief that their magical ability makes them uniquely suited to rule others, because it appears that magical ability, while still very rare, is far more common than they realised. Thus, if the Aes Sedai wish to maintain their political power, they will need to prove that they have other qualities, besides an ability they happen to be born with, which deserve this level of authority.

But the Aes Sedai also face another challenge to their political domination: the re-emergence of male channelers. As noted above, the True Power is divided into male and female halves, which “work against each other and at the same time together” to

fuel the driving force of creation (*Eye* 168). The methods of accessing the True Power are different for women and men: women ‘embrace’ saidar, and gain control through submission—“I surrender to it, and by surrendering, I control it” (*Shadow* 145); men, in contrast, ‘seize’ saidin, and gain control through force—“I have to reach out and take hold of *saidin*.... I must fight it to make it do what I want” (*Shadow* 145). While this division does reflect a certain amount of problematic gender stereotyping, it is somewhat moderated by Jordan’s efforts to create a world of widespread gender equality, which he claims was one of the primary inspirations for the series: “I was thinking about what the world would be like if there had never been any need for a struggle for women’s rights, [where] no one ever thinks that something is or isn’t a suitable job for a woman” (“SFF World”). Jordan was able to create such a world in *The Wheel of Time*: the tainting of saidin during the Breaking of the World left men unable to channel without going insane, creating a world in which only women can use magical power and thus shifting the balance of power between the genders. However, while Attrill argues that Randland is “a largely matriarchal society” (39), it is more accurate to say that it is a largely equal society. Many societies have some kind of joint male and female ruling system, such as the King and Panarch of Taraborn, or the Village Councils and Women’s Circles of the Two Rivers; however, while there are some few strictly matriarchal systems, such as those in Andor and Far Madding, the majority of nations are simply monarchies, in which either a king or queen may rule. So perhaps female dominance in magical power has worked to counteract male dominance in physical strength, leading to a world in which both genders are represented equally in most levels of political power.

The one exception to this balance of power is, of course, at the very top level of the political system, which is dominated by the female Aes Sedai. In the world of *The Wheel of Time*, the concept of balance is fundamental to the fate of the world, for the “turning of the Wheel requires balance” (*Crown* 608). Thus, any imbalance in power is perilous: as the One Power is driven by both male and female halves, so too should the genders have equal power. And, in the best circumstances, the conflicting and complementary halves of the One Power should be used together: thus were the great advancements of the Age of Legends achieved, through men and women working together to “perform feats that neither could accomplish separately” (Jordan and Patterson 9). But because men have been unable to safely channel for centuries, the balance has been severely compromised, which has had consequences. Out of a desire to prevent another Breaking, the Aes Sedai hunt men who can channel, and bring them to Tar Valon to be tried and gentled: this is the primary goal of the Red Ajah, although members of other Ajahs will occasionally assist. However, centuries of hunting male channelers has, perhaps inevitably, led to a more widespread distrust, and even hatred, of men among many Aes Sedai, and particularly those of the Red Ajah: “Whether they liked men, or disliked them . . . not many women could belong to the Red for long without taking a jaundiced view of all men” (*Crown* 571). Men who can channel are, in turn, terrified of being discovered by Aes Sedai, because they know that the likelihood of surviving the gentling process is slim, which adds to the distrust of Aes Sedai in the general population, and among men in particular. So while the imbalance of magical power has, on the one hand, helped to create essentially equal political and social structures throughout the world, on the other hand it has also led to widespread distrust between female and male channelers. Thus, one of the major narrative threads of *The Wheel of Time* is the slow process of

restoring balance to the system, especially as it becomes clear that one of the keys to winning the Last Battle will be cooperation between Aes Sedai and Asha'man. The cleansing of saidin is only the first step of the process: the bigger challenge is overcoming centuries of fear and prejudice. Most Aes Sedai still believe that men are incapable of wielding Power safely, and that the Black Tower is "a blight on the face of the earth, as great a threat to the world as the Last Battle itself" (*Crossroads* 475); and, cognisant of Aes Sedai distrust, Asha'man are required to overcome their own fear that Aes Sedai will still attempt to gentle them. However, there have been ever increasing examples of Aes Sedai and Asha'man working together successfully, creating alliances, and even bonding one another. And, as discussed further below (258-59), it is clear that reconciliation between Egwene and Rand, the respective leaders of the Aes Sedai and the Asha'man, will be a definitive moment in restoring essential balance to the One Power.

## 7.2. CHARACTER

### 7.2.1. MULTIPLICITIES

*The Wheel of Time* has an enormous cast of characters: approximately 2000 named characters have appeared in the series thus far. As noted above (243), Rand acts as the first narrative focaliser of the series, but as the narrative progresses an increasing number of alternative focalisers are introduced: by the thirteenth book, the series has seen 129 unique narrative focalisers ("Statistical"). Approximately a dozen of these 129 characters would be considered 'primary' focalisers; the rest appear with varying degrees of regularity, with some characters having just a few brief focalising sections across the entire series. This multitude of characters and focalisation allows an incredible diversity of characterisation, especially when taking into account the three

year internal narrative time-frame, because Jordan is able to portray character perspectives from a vast range of cultural and moral backgrounds, as well as develop these characters in significant ways. Thus, one of the strongest features of the series is its depth of characterisation: in *The Wheel of Time*, even the most minor characters are given a voice and a story. It is therefore unsurprising that Jordan is not content to explore the role of the hero from one perspective only. Instead, Rand's functional role of hero is explored in a number of ways: through mythical resonance, through his own complex internal struggles between the actant and the actor, and through replication and mirroring with other characters.

As discussed above (241-41, 247), Rand has obvious parallels to the mythical figures of King Arthur and the Fisher King; other strong parallels also exist with Christ (or any messiah figure), as well as the Norse god of justice, Tyr. One purpose of these parallels is to act as a foreshadowing device: thus, Rand's associations with Tyr foreshadowed the loss of his hand in *Knife of Dreams*, and his associations with Christ further support the assumption that Rand will die but be resurrected. But another purpose of these parallels is to add a resonance to Rand's heroic role, by creating an atmosphere of mythic significance and inevitability around his actions, a sense that Rand is not only the centre and catalyst of *this* story, but of *all* stories. Unfortunately, Rand is all too aware that he is fulfilling a mythical role, which inevitably causes significant identity crises. Rand's doubts about his identity begin very early in the narrative, when he learns that Tam is not his real father, immediately causing both denial and doubt: "*He's my father.... Light, who am I?*" (*Eye* 88). After losing his founding sense of self, Rand continues to learn more about who he is: he is a channeler, he is part-Aiel, and he is the dreaded Dragon Reborn, the central figure of hundreds of prophecies. Each of these facts takes Rand further away from the

simple farmer he had always believed himself to be: being the Dragon Reborn means duty, leadership, killing, destruction, madness and death, with no chance of escape or reprieve. To cope, Rand becomes invested in his own mythic role: he allows the actor to be overwhelmed by the actant, and ‘Rand’ becomes lost in ‘The Dragon Reborn’.

Furthermore, Jordan uses the fantastic mode to exaggerate the identity crisis when Rand manifests an alternate personality of ‘Lews Therin’, a suicidal madman who assumes all of his fear, guilt and paranoia: “The man had said he could wait until the Last Battle to die, but how far could you trust a madman on anything? *Madman?* Lews Therin whispered. *Am I any madder than you?*” (*Knife* 415). However, for much of the narrative it is unclear whether Lews Therin’s voice is actually a sign of Rand’s madness, or whether he really exists. For Rand *is* Lews Therin reborn, and does therefore have many of the man’s memories in his subconscious: as Semirhage points out, this fact actually “makes his situation worse”, because Rand’s alternate personality is derived from real memories (*Knife* 592). Thus, the fantastic mode works to increase reader identification, because, like Rand, the reader is long unsure whether the voice in Rand’s head is real or not. However, Rand has a breakthrough following his meeting with Tam, who acts as a reminder of who ‘Rand’ really is: “His worlds met—the person he had been, the person he had become.... The Dragon Reborn couldn’t have a father ... the Dragon Reborn had to be a figure of myth” (*Gathering* 734-36). Following the shock of nearly killing Tam, Rand finally realises that no matter how much he invests in the identity of ‘The Dragon Reborn’, some part of him will always feel that Tam is his father, and that, therefore, some part of him will always be ‘Rand’: this realisation is enough to instigate the first steps towards a reconciliation of self. Thus Rand seems to have now finally accepted his

identity as a Saviour and a force for Creation: he is surrounded by an aura of light and life, and has enough control over his power that he is able to counteract the corrupting influence of the Dark One, even if only temporarily. Rather than denying Lews Therin's memories, Rand seems to have incorporated him into his identity. And, by accepting that both 'Rand' and 'Lews Therin' are part of the identity of 'the Dragon Reborn', he is able to remain balanced and whole: "I may be him [Lews Therin] now, but he was *always* me as well. I was always him. ... I'm *me*. And I always have been me" (*Towers* 749). As well as having an alternate identity through which he can come to terms with his heroic role, Rand's identity struggle is also reflected in Perrin and Mat's analogous struggles. There are many clear similarities between the three characters' stories: from the same small village, all three boys embark on a heroic journey that leads them to great power and responsibility, taking them far away from their humble beginnings. And all three would, if given the choice, prefer not to be heroes and leaders, because all three feel that they are in danger of losing something of their self within their heroic roles. And, as with Rand, Jordan uses the fantastic mode to exaggerate Perrin and Mat's conflict between actor and actant. From the beginning of the narrative, Perrin has deliberately avoided situations where he might be forced to physically assert himself; although he tells himself this is because he fears that his natural size and strength will lead him to inadvertently hurt others, he is eventually forced to confront his greater fear: that he might lose all self-control and begin to take pleasure in physical violence. This fear is fantastically extended when Perrin learns that he is a Wolfbrother, which gives him even greater physical advantages, but also brings with it the risk that Perrin could literally lose his humanity. Thus, Perrin's heroic journey requires him to learn how to both accept *and* to master his own power, to "be able to control the wolf inside of

him” (*Gathering* 337). Mat’s journey, on the other hand, requires him to overcome his pathological fear of responsibility. Mat constantly tells himself that wants to live a life of freedom, not accountable to anyone. In deep denial about his own nobility of character and capacity to be a great leader, Mat struggles to hold onto to who he believes himself to be: “Lead? Him? *I’m a gambler, not a soldier. A lover*” (*Fires* 632). His internal conflict is fantastically exaggerated when he receives the Eelfinn’s ‘gift’ of the memories of past warriors and leaders, which serve to augment Mat’s own latent leadership abilities, and make it increasingly difficult for Mat to deny his own heroic potential. Thus, while the focus is slightly different for each, Rand, Perrin, and Mat’s heroic journeys all work to reflect each other. Whether it is fear of madness, of power, or of responsibility, all three journeys are, at their core, about overcoming the fear of losing one’s self to the heroic identity.

Furthermore, Jordan, like Eddings, complements the male heroic journey with a female counterpoint. Egwene’s journey mirrors Rand’s in a number of ways: both accumulate vast magical and political power, both suffer imprisonment and torture, and both change dramatically from the simple villagers they used to be. But there are also significant differences between the two journeys: whereas Mat and Perrin’s stories represent different versions of the same struggle, Egwene is in many ways the inverse of Rand. So, while Rand, like Perrin and Mat, resists his heroic role, and struggles to hold onto to his old identity, Egwene throws herself into new roles and identities with little compunction. For example, while travelling in the Aiel Waste, Rand tells himself that although his biological father is Aiel, he was not raised Aiel and will therefore never be truly Aiel: “I will not pretend. I am what I am; they must take me as I am” (*Shadow* 828). Egwene, in contrast, feels that she becomes Aiel through living with them: “She had been Aiel in her heart. She thought a part of her

always would be Aiel” (*Chaos* 664). Unlike Rand, who resists change, Egwene has a flexible sense of self, able to merge old identities with new. Similar differences can be seen in the way that each character fulfils the role of leader in their respective magical communities. When inducted into the White Tower, Egwene embraces the Aes Sedai way of life completely, and when she is elected as a puppet Amyrlin, she chooses to become Amyrlin in truth, dedicating herself utterly to the good of the White Tower. And because Egwene surrenders herself, both literally and figuratively, to the Aes Sedai, she is able to reforge the broken White Tower “whole and complete” (*Gathering* 727). Egwene thus becomes leader of the Aes Sedai by following the same principles that are required in controlling Saidar: by surrendering, she gains control.

In contrast, while Rand creates the Black Tower to balance the White, he proceeds to distance himself from the Asha’man, appointing a second in command instead of taking charge himself. And, because he does not assert his power, he loses control, as Logain blithely informs him: “it is time to turn your eyes to the Black Tower before Taim splits it worse than the White Tower is. If he does, you’ll find the larger part is loyal to him, not you. They know him. Most have never seen you” (*Crossroads* 557-58). It remains to be seen how Rand will re-establish himself as leader of the Asha’man in truth. However, it is likely that it will be achieved through a show of power and strength, following, as Egwene did, the guiding principle of controlling his half of the One Power: “I have to reach out and take hold of saidin.... I must fight it to make it do what I what” (*Shadow* 145). This difference in leadership also enhances the sense that Egwene and Rand’s relationship is a microcosmic representation of the large-scale division between female and male channelers. Rand and Egwene, like male and female channelers, began from a place of closeness and

trust, but have since grown far apart. Because they have not seen each other for such a long time, each begins to believe the worst in the rumours they hear: Egwene believes that Rand has changed so much that is no longer “the youth with whom she’d grown up with” (*Gathering* 191); while Rand believes that Egwene only wants to control him: “She’s Amyrlin ... Aes Sedai to the core. I’m just another pawn to her” (*Gathering* 62). As the titular heads of the Aes Sedai and Asha’man, Egwene and Rand will ultimately be responsible for bringing together female and male channelers. But first they will need to learn to trust one another again. Significantly, despite who they have become, they knew each other first as simply ‘Rand’ and ‘Egwene’: this ability to recall the human identities of the figures of ‘The Dragon Reborn’ and ‘The Amyrlin’ will likely be a crucial factor in their reconciliation. It is a mark of the importance of this reconciliation that the penultimate book in the series concludes just before Rand and Egwene are about to meet, setting up the final book in *The Wheel of Time* to begin with the Dragon Reborn and the Amyrlin’s final confrontation.

### 7.2.2. BREAKING THE ILLUSION

Many characters in *The Wheel of Time* are heavily invested in an illusion of being more than human, relying on reputations created through stories and legends to maintain an aura of unshakeable superiority and strength. However, much of the narrative is concerned with breaking through the veil, and exposing the humanity underneath the illusion. One of the most prominent examples is the Aes Sedai, who begin the story as mysterious, all-powerful figures of legends. The common people know little about them, and many suspect that they are somehow monstrous or inhuman. Thus, just as Garion had to reconcile Old Wolf with the legend of

Belgarath in *The Belgariad*, when Rand first meets Moiraine, he must try “to make the woman who had smiled at him fit the stories” (*Eye* 99), for he did not expect an Aes Sedai to appear so normal. And, Moiraine, like all other Aes Sedai, works hard to cultivate this reputation of omniscience and omnipotence, maintaining an uncanny composure at all times, and using the intimidating Aes Sedai reputation to her advantage. However, the reader is soon given insight into the human weaknesses behind her confident exterior, the anxieties, doubts and fear that exist beneath the surface: ““Nothing is happening as I expect’.... *Clear my head, and begin again ... That is all there is to do*” (*Great* 320). And, slowly but surely, her Aes Sedai exterior begins to crumble for the other characters too. A significant moment for both Moiraine and the Aes Sedai comes when she is forced to humble herself to Rand, and to accept his authority, which causes shock and confusion: “The Aes Sedai had done as Rand told her? Without protest?” (*Fires* 158).

And of course, Moiraine is only the first among many Aes Sedai who find themselves in positions of lesser authority. After the battle of Dumai’s Wells, nine Aes Sedai swear fealty to Rand, “the unstained tower, broken, bent knee to the forgotten sign” (*Chaos* 1006). Other Aes Sedai become subject to Sea Folk law, or become apprentices to Aiel Wise-ones, or are taken captive by Seanchan, and, as word spreads, both Aes Sedai and the common folk alike begin to realise that the Aes Sedai are not as inhuman as they thought. Moiraine, however, is able to handle her changed status, because she has not invested so much of herself in her Aes Sedai identity that when it is exposed as an illusion she has nothing left to fall back on. Indeed, while her time imprisoned in the Tower of Ghenjei leaves her stripped of much of her Aes Sedai power, this does not seem to weaken her: “Yes, this was the same Moiraine. Humbled, cast down. That made her seem *stronger* to him for some

reason” (*Tower* 823). Perhaps by accepting her human weaknesses and fallibility, she has been able to forge a stronger sense of self, one that is in no way reliant on reputation and illusion. And for other Aes Sedai who find, like Moiraine, that their human side has been exposed for all to see, the question of whether they are able to adapt is reliant on how far they have invested in the Aes Sedai reputation. Elaida, for example, clings to her identity as both Aes Sedai and Amyrlin long after the illusion has been shattered: unable to acknowledge her human weaknesses, she has no strong sense of self to rely on when the power granted by her station begins to disappear. It is thus somewhat appropriate that Elaida is imprisoned by the Seanchan, who break Aes Sedai by stripping them of their identities as ‘Aes Sedai’ completely, of any sense of power or control granted by their magical ability. While some Aes Sedai are able to hold on to their identity despite the Seanchan torture, it is unlikely that Elaida will do the same.

On the other side of the moral divide, the Forsaken also rely strongly on their reputation to maintain power and control. The Forsaken begin as a myth in the narrative, something that “everybody’s mother scared them with” (*Eye* 14), a bedtime story of monstrous evil. But it is soon revealed that not only do the Forsaken exist, but that they, like the gods of *The Belgariad*, are just as subject to human weakness. Whether it is cowardice, lust, jealousy, pride, or insanity, none of the Forsaken are inhumanly invulnerable. However, like the Aes Sedai, the Forsaken cultivate and take advantage of their inhuman reputation. Thus, when Semirhage is captured, her Aes Sedai captors are initially unable to control her, because they are preoccupied by their knowledge that she is a “monster who many thought was simply a legend” (*Gathering* 107). Unable to overcome their perception of the Forsaken as nightmare creatures, the Aes Sedai allow Semirhage to manipulate and intimidate

then. It is only when Cadsuane grasps the fact that Semirhage is still “a person . . . just a person, like any of us” that she is able to destroy her aura of fear and wonder by spanking Semirhage like a recalcitrant child (*Gathering* 280). And, many of the Forsaken have spent so long invested in this illusion of inhuman evil that they have come to deny or forget their own humanity, unable to accept even the possibility of ordinary weakness. Thus, for Semirhage, one simple act of utter disregard is enough to break her: “She’d treated Semirhage—one of the Chosen!—as if she were barely worthy of notice” (*Gathering* 338). Like showing Brona the impossibility of his own immortality in *The Sword of Shannara*, showing Semirhage the reality of her humanity is the key to defeating her. Thus with both the Aes Sedai and the Forsaken we can see the risks inherent in characters becoming too invested in their mythic identity, hiding their fallibility and weaknesses even from themselves, and forgetting that, underneath of all the layers of myth and legend, they are still, in the end, only human.

### 7.2.3. CORRUPTED NATURE

This section has so far discussed the ways in which Jordan emphasises the essential humanity of characters, regardless of their mythic roles or reputation. There are, however, a number of beings in Randland, both good and evil, which are differentiated by their lack of humanity. True inhuman evil is typically a corruption—of nature, of humanity, of life. Similar to Lord Foul in *The Chronicles*, the Dark One exists as an equal and opposite force to the Creator, an eternal force for corruption. His influence on the land, as discussed above (245-46), is to twist and pervert, transforming nature into a grotesque parody of itself: his influence on the creatures of the land is to likewise pervert what already exists, and to encourage his

minions to do the same. For example, Trollocs, bred by Aginor, are grotesque blends of “human and animal stock” (*Chaos* 72), and they occasionally spawn Myrddraal, eyeless throwbacks to human stock. The Draghkar are deliberate corruptions of human stock, who drain both soul and life-force from their human victims. Darkhounds are created from the “souls of wolves” who have been “caught and twisted by the Shadow” (*Crossroads* 225). And Grey Men are humans who have voluntarily given away their souls in order to become assassins. Unlike some of the authors discussed thus far in this thesis, Jordan does not complicate matters by giving his monsters a voice, or by creating sympathy for them; the Shadowspan of Randland are simply the living embodiment of nightmares.

Not surprisingly, many Shadowspan have a strong resonance with nightmare creatures of the Primary World, another instance of the repeating cycle of story and legend. As the first monsters to appear in the story, it is appropriate that the Trollocs and Myrddraal bear unmistakable similarities to the Orcs and Nazgûl of *The Lord of the Rings*, given Jordan’s intention to have a ‘little bit of a Tolkien-esque feel’ in the early stages of *The Wheel of Time*. But, as the narrative progresses, Jordan draws on other stories and legends: the Draghkar recall vampires, the Darkhounds recall Hellhounds, and the Grey Men recall zombies. And in one of the more subtle nods to Primary World mythology, the names of the twelve Trolloc tribes are derivations of the names of various mythological evil creatures, e.g. Ah’frait (Afrit), Dha’vol (Devil), Ghar’ghael (Gargoyle), Bhan’sheen (Banshee). As well as these somewhat familiar monsters, there are also some particularly amorphous beings that are unique to Randland: Machin Sin, the insanity-inducing Black Wind that inhabits the Ways, is a physical manifestation of the taint on Saidin: “a creature of the corruption itself, something born of the decay” (*Eye* 687); and Mashadar, a fog-like malevolent force

created by decades of hatred and paranoia in one city: “No enemy had come to Aridhol but Aridhol. Suspicion and hate had given birth to something that fed on that which created it” (*Eye* 290). Mashadar, in particular, acts a potent reminder that humans have the capacity to twist creation just as much as the Dark One: like pollution in the Primary World, Mashadar is the product of human civilisation. So, the Dark One is not only a force for corruption himself, he exists to encourage the potential for corruption in humanity. Thus, the Dark One’s ultimate goal appears to be not to kill Rand but to corrupt him, to turn the Creator’s champion to the Shadow and thus destroy Creation forever.

With the force of corruption so strong in Randland, it is unsurprising that there are increasingly few pure forces of nature remaining. The Nym were constructed sentient beings, who had the “the ability to utilize the One Power for the benefit of plants and growing things” (Jordan and Patterson 29). When Rand gets a glimpse of the world in the Age of Legends, he sees numerous Nym taking part in the seasonal ritual of ‘seed singing’, and learns that the lore in this time said that the “Nym never died, not so long as plants grew” (*Shadow* 434). Thus, it is indicative of the extent of corruption in Randland that there seem to be no Nym left: the last remaining Nym, an embodiment of “verdant perfection”, is destroyed in the climax of the first book (*Eye* 740). A much more prevalent creature of pure nature are the Ogier. In both character and purpose, the Ogier bear similarities to both Ents of *The Lord of the Rings* and the Giants of *The Chronicles*: they are tall and long-lived, are slow to speak and to anger, and are lovers of stories. And while they, like the Giants, are skilled masons, they have a “special gift for growing things” (Jordan and Patterson 266): the Ogier groves are places of natural beauty and peace, built during the Age of Legends as a symbol of the unity between humanity and nature. However, in this

Age the Ogier groves are almost all destroyed, overrun by human civilisation: “It has all changed.... All the groves are gone, all the memories gone, all the dreams dead” (*Eye* 552). Likewise, the Ogier have long since withdrawn from humanity, isolating themselves in their Stedding and venturing ‘outside’ only rarely. The loss of the Nym and the withdrawal of the Ogier are both symbolic of an imbalance between humanity and nature in Randland: indicative that humanity is losing the quality of “profound ... respect for nature, and indeed, all living things” that the Ogier represent (Jordan and Patterson 270). Just as balance is required between female and male power, humanity needs to balance its own power with the power of nature, in order to counteract its own destructive tendency towards corruption.

However, it is becoming progressively evident that the creatures of nature have the capacity to defend themselves against corruption. The Ogier are widely regarded as gentle and peaceful, almost pacifist; however, some few stories “named them implacable enemies”, difficult to provoke to anger, “but deadly if accomplished” (*Shadow* 298). Indeed in Seanchan, the Ogier serve as soldiers: the ‘Gardeners’ are the most feared of the Empire’s guard (*Winter’s* 377). While the Ogier in Randland have not yet been roused to anger, all indications suggest that when they are, the results will be just as impressive as the Ents’ destruction of Isengard in *The Lord of the Rings*, a fantastic representation of nature’s capacity to retaliate against rampant corruption. A similar dichotomy between peace and violence can be seen in the wolves of Randland. Like the wolves in *The Belgariad*, the wolves in *The Wheel of Time* are characterised as poetic and noble, with names that reflect a beautifully complex way of viewing the world:

They were not names as such really, but images and sensations.... Two Moons was really a night-shrouded pool smooth as ice in the instant before

the breeze stirred, with a tang of autumn in the air, and one moon hanging full in the sky and another reflected so perfectly on the water that it was difficult to tell which was real. And that was cutting it to the bone. (*Chaos* 969).

The wolves in Randland also live partly in the World of Dreams, which indicates that they exist in a closer relationship to the essence of the world than most humans do, that they are more connected to the “the permanence of nature” (Jordan and Patterson 280). Wolves have little interest in the “doings of two-legs” (*Crossroads* 169), because they care “little for anything human” (*Chaos* 970). They plan to take part in the Last Battle, but not as an adjunct to humanity; rather, they will be at the ‘Last Hunt’ to stand in opposition to the Darkhounds, their twisted brothers, and thus as a representation of nature itself fighting for its own survival against the inexorable forces of corruption.

### 7.3. STRUCTURE

#### 7.3.1. THE NARRATIVE TAPESTRY

In his discussion of post-Tolkien fantasy, Shippey writes: “A further feature which as far as I know no one has ever tried seriously to copy is Tolkien’s structuring of *The Lord of the Rings*, his use of narrative threads” (*Author* 325). However we have already seen the undeniable influence the interlace structure of *The Lord of the Rings* has had in developing the generic structures of epic fantasy (182-87, 224-28). And, with *The Wheel of Time*, Jordan arguably develops this interlaced narrative structure to a point of complexity far beyond that of *The Lord of the Rings*. The first three books in the series have a relatively simple quest structure as the characters search for talismanic objects: respectively, the Eye of the World, the Horn of Valere, and Callandor. In each book, the principle characters split into separate plot threads part-

way through the narrative, before reuniting for the final confrontation in enemy territory. Thus, once again Jordan begins in ‘familiar ground’ for the early stages of the narrative, taking the most generically recognisable structuring element of epic fantasy—the quest—as the central structural element of each of the first three books. It is not surprising then that even Rand thinks that he has reached the end of his journey at the end of the third book: “*I have killed Ba’alzamon, killed Shai’tan! I have won the Last Battle!*” (*Dragon* 666). However, from this point on, *The Wheel of Time* takes on a far more complex narrative structure, as Jordan transitions from the ‘quest’ to the ‘war’ element of epic fantasy, which very soon expands into an incredibly complex pattern of distinct but related plot threads. This multitude of plot threads expand, divide, and merge with one another from book to book, and characters cross from one plot thread to another with remarkable frequency. So, whereas the ‘war’ element of *The Lord of the Rings’* narrative structure can be relatively simply divided into three sub-plot threads, it is impossible to so easily summarise *The Wheel of Time’s* narrative structure after the fourth book.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, with its vast number of “intricately tangled multi-stranded plots” (Attrill 70), which delve deep into the political and social minutia of Randland, and its seemingly ever-expanding number of volumes, it can often appear that *The Wheel of Time* lacks a cohesive narrative structure altogether, and has instead transformed into an epic fantasy equivalent of a never-ending soap opera.

However, beneath the convoluted surface of *The Wheel of Time*, there is a deep thematic unity. While there are a number of strong themes explored throughout the

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<sup>28</sup> The website, <http://www.encyclopaedia-wot.org/>, has produced graphical representations of the narrative structure for each book in the series, which demonstrate how complex *The Wheel of Time* has become.

series, one of the most predominant is, somewhat appropriately, the need for unity. While all of the people of Randland are ostensibly preparing to wage an apocalyptic battle against the Shadow, they are too preoccupied with their own internal power struggles to unite against their common foe. This theme is not only manifest in the events concerning the entire world, but is also replicated on a smaller scale within the various nations and organisations in Randland, and again on an even smaller scale between individual characters. We saw above (251) that there is a need for female and male channelers to overcome their deeply-ingrained distrust and work together; however, it is first necessary for all of the female channelers to learn to work together. As discussed, the Aes Sedai have recently learnt that they are not the only organised group of female channelers in the world: the Wise Ones, Windfinders, Kin and *damane* all exist to challenge Aes Sedai dominance, and each have their own methods for training and controlling female channelers. Thus far, the relationship between these different groups has been characterised by distrust, defensiveness, contention, and in the case of the Seanchan *damane*, outright aggression. Furthermore, this same lack of trust brought about by different world-views is replicated *within* the Aes Sedai, with the divisions between the Ajahs instrumental in causing and prolonging the greater division of the White Tower. Thus, Egwene, the first Amyrlin to be raised without having first been Aes Sedai, is able to re-unite the Aes Sedai because she truly sees herself as being of “all Ajahs” (*Gathering* 702). It is likely that Egwene will also have to overcome her own distrust of the Seanchan in order to realise her dream for “every woman who can channel to be connected to the Tower somehow. Every last one” (*Chaos* 702). So we can see that the larger goal of forging unity between all of the channelers of Randland is in reality of series of smaller steps: the first, the reunification of the White Tower, has been achieved, but

Egwene still needs to unite all of the female channelers, and Rand needs to reassert control over the divided Black Tower, before they can come together in the final step of re-establishing balance between female and male channelers.

This same pattern is reflected in numerous ways throughout the different narrative threads of *The Wheel of Time*, as the characters struggle to overcome the political infighting and civil wars that are threatening to destroy the stability of the world. These internal struggles form the central structuring elements of many long-running plot threads, for example: Elayne's succession campaign for the Lion Throne, the indiscriminate ravaging of the Shaido Aiel, and the Seanchan invasion. Further obstacles are caused by the Children of the Light and the Dragonsworn, both fanatical organisations who are ostensibly dedicated to defending the land against the Shadow, but spend more time trying to convert others by the sword. Even the forces of the Shadow are not immune: the Forsaken are so distrusting of one another, so preoccupied with becoming Nae'blis, that they are unable to unite against Rand and his allies. All the different nations, organisations, and factions of Randland are so focussed on gaining power and control, that they are unable or unwilling to recognise the bigger danger of the forthcoming apocalypse. Thus, in order to face the Shadow as a unified front, the people of Randland will need to learn to work together despite their fear, distrust and selfishness.

This theme is further reflected in the narrative thread of Rand, Mat and Perrin's broken friendship. We saw above (258-59), how Rand and Egwene's relationship acted as a microcosm of the relationship between male and female channelers in the same way, Rand's relationship with his closest childhood friends acts a microcosm of the large-scale division in the political structures of Randland. From a place of trust and closeness, Rand, Mat and Perrin have been long separated by circumstance,

misunderstanding and fear, to the point where they see each other almost as strangers. However, prophecy strongly suggests that the three men will need to reconcile before the Last Battle: together they are balanced, but “cut one leg of the tripod ... and all fall down” (*Dragon* 77). Like Rand and Egwene’s final confrontation, the reunion of all three men will not occur until the final book: Perrin and Mat briefly reunite before Perrin joins Rand’s forces, and Mat, still convinced Rand is “half mad” (*Towers* 825), is journeying towards the same location. It remains to be seen what direction their reunion will take. However, because all three are in unique positions of command over some of the largest armed forces in Randland, it is likely that their reunion will not only be symbolic of the unification of the enemies of the Shadow, but will most likely be one of the crucial acts that finally joins all of the disparate organisations of Randland into a unified front. Thus, we can see that the need for overall unity between all of the people of the world adds an overlay of structure to the sprawling narrative, because it has created a series of sub-plot threads and, more importantly, a series of mini narrative climaxes when nations are unified and alliances are formed, which offer the reader some degree of narrative satisfaction while they await the conclusion of the story.

But, of course, this conclusion is still forthcoming: not until 2012 will the readers of *The Wheel of Time* learn how the story ends. Given the generic precedent, the prophetic indications, and the general narrative momentum, it is likely that Rand will strike out with a small group of male and female channelers for Shayol Gaul to confront the Dark One (or his human lieutenant Moridin) while a large army, led by Mat and Perrin, wages a diversionary war elsewhere in Randland. It is also likely that the final confrontation between Rand and the Dark One will be more than physical, constituting a moral struggle between the embodiment of Light/Creation and the

embodiment of Shadow/Corruption, which will most likely end with Rand's self-sacrifice and resurrection. However, at this point, the ending of *The Wheel of Time* can only be a matter for guesswork. It is somewhat ironic, given the story's thematic focus on the dangers of becoming distracted by the small things, that Jordan himself may have lost sight of the big picture. "In the beginning", Jordan has claimed, "I thought *The Wheel of Time* was six books and I'd be finished in six years" ("The Wheel Turns" 7). But, like Tolkien before him, 'the tale grew in the telling', from six books to fourteen, and six years to twenty-two. There is a strong sense that Jordan became so engrossed in the acts of sub-creation and story-telling, in the fine detailing of the world and the intricate weaving of sub-plots, that the narrative simply grew beyond his control. However, Jordan has always maintained that he knew how the story would end when he began writing: "I started the *Wheel of Time* knowing how it began and how it all ended" ("The Wheel Turns" 7). Sanderson has since confirmed that he has seen the ending as Jordan had written it, and that, as a reader of the series, he "was satisfied. . . . It ends the way it should. Not, perhaps, the way I would have guessed—or even the way you have guessed. But it's the RIGHT ending" (Sanderson "Big"). This long-anticipated ending, combined with the strong thematic unity, and a further overlay of prophetic patterning (discussed in the following section), ultimately work to give the expansive story of *The Wheel of Time* a sense of structure. But it will only be when the story is actually finished that we will be able to fully judge the structural cohesion of the series, when we are finally able step back from the individual threads and patterns and see the narrative tapestry as a whole.

### 7.3.2. THE PATTERN OF PROPHECY

A striking feature of *The Wheel of Time* is its widespread use of prophecy, which is integrated into the story and the narrative structure far more comprehensively than any epic fantasy discussed in this thesis. There is a vast amount of prophecy in the series, which comes from multiple sources and in multiple forms, ranging from ancient written texts, to dreams and visions, to trance-induced oral foretelling.

Furthermore, across all of the varied nations and cultures in Randland, the acceptance of the reality of prophecy is one of the few common denominators: in this deterministic world, the immutability of destiny is so widely accepted that fatalism has become an adage: ‘the Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills’. While the ‘Pattern of the Ages’ allows for small changes in each person’s life, there are some events that simply must happen. When Rand passes through the Portal Stone, he sees all of the possible paths his life could take:

He was a soldier. He was a shepherd. He was a beggar, and a king. He was farmer, gleeman, sailor, carpenter. He was born, lived, and died an Aiel. He died mad, he died of sickness, accident, age. He was executed, and multitudes cheered his death. He proclaimed himself the Dragon Reborn and flung his banner across the sky.... A hundred lives. More. So many he could not count them. And at the end of every life, as he lay dying, as he drew his final breath, a voice whispered in his ear. *I have won again, Lews Therin.* (Great 531-32)

While the details of his life may change—his career, his family, the manner of his death—three things remain constant: he can channel, he is the Dragon Reborn, and his death is the moment when the Dark One claims victory. Thus, if Rand is to defeat

the Dark One, he will somehow need to circumvent his own destiny, either through defeating the Dark One before his death, or, as I have suggested throughout this chapter, through somehow circumventing death itself. As the Aelfinn tell Rand: “*If you would live, you must die*” (*Chaos* 535). However, it is not surprising that Rand struggles not to lose hope in the face of all this inevitability. Because Rand not only believes, but *knows* that, win or lose, he will die when he confronts the Dark One, he slides into despairing martyrdom, thinking that he only needs to remain strong enough to make it to the Last Battle. He attempts to lessen the pain of loss at his impending death by deliberately cutting himself off from his normal human emotions and relationships. However, Rand’s breakthrough on Dragonmount is the moment that he begins to allow himself to feel again: “He remembered love, and peace, and joy, and hope” (*Gathering* 759). Instead of focussing solely on the inevitable facts of his life, Rand instead remembers the choices that he does have. An alternative interpretation of Rand’s vision in the Portal Stones is the fact that while there are certain events in Rand’s life that are destined to be, there are countless different paths that his life could take: although it seems as though he has no choice, the reality is that his choices are limitless. And one of the most important choices Rand has to make is how he chooses to face his destiny, as Tam reminds him: “The choice isn’t always about *what* you do, son, but *why* you do it” (*Gathering* 738). Thus, Rand can choose to live the remainder of his life in dread and isolation, or he can choose to look for happiness, companionship, and perhaps even hope. And it is probable that these seemingly small decisions will actually be deciding factor between victory and defeat when Rand finally, inevitably, faces the Dark One.

As with so much of *The Wheel of Time*, the concerns of the individual are replicated in the concerns of the world at large. For three thousand years, the world has been

awaiting the Dragon Reborn, who, it is prophesised, will both destroy and save the world:

*The Dragon shall be Reborn, and there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth at his rebirth. In sackcloth and ashes shall he clothe the people, and he shall break the world again by his coming, tearing apart all ties that bind. Like the unfettered dawn shall he blind us, and burn us, yet shall the Dragon Reborn confront the Shadow at the Last Battle, and his blood shall give us the Light. Let tears flow, O ye people of the world. Weep for your salvation.*

(Great xi)

Accordingly, Rand is not widely welcomed when he is revealed as the Dragon Reborn: even if he saves the world, his arrival heralds unavoidable destruction. Furthermore, the rebirth of the Dragon also triggers the fulfilment of a multitude of prophecies in all of the different cultures of Randland, most of which are likewise concerned with death and ruin. And, in a world in which prophecy is so deeply believed that an entire culture commits mass suicide because the foretold signs have appeared (*Knife* 476), the test for the people is how they react to the forthcoming destruction. In the Aiel prophecies, Rand is the *Car'a'carn*, He Who Comes With the Dawn, and he represents both their doom and their salvation: "He shall spill out the blood of those who call themselves Aiel as water on sand, and he shall break them as dried twigs, yet the remnant of a remnant shall he save, and they shall live" (*Shadow* 573). When Rand declares himself, the Shaido clan deny him completely, refusing to believe that he is the *Car'a'carn*, which in turn precipitates yet another internal social division in Randland as the Shaido splinter from the rest of the Aiel. Other Aiel believe that Rand is the *Car'a'carn*, and therefore succumb to despair. These Aiel abandon their clans and societies, and become the Brotherless, using as their

justification the Karaeathon Cycle's prophecy that the Dragon Reborn will 'break all oaths' and 'shatter all ties'. However, the truth is that these Aiel are unable to cope with the stark reality of fulfilled prophecy, as Rhuarc notes: "It is one thing to know prophecy will be fulfilled, eventually ... another to see that fulfilment begun before your eyes" (*Shadow* 563). Believing that Rand, in revealing the Aiel past, has already destroyed the Aiel, they can find no reason to keep hoping. But other Aiel cling to the fact that prophecy also states that *some* Aiel will survive, and they intend to ensure that the 'remnant of a remnant' is "as large as possible" (*Chaos* 434). It is a small hope, but it is enough to keep them from giving up. Acceptance or denial, despair or hope, the world, like Rand, has to choose how they are going to deal with the inevitable. The world is approaching the Last Battle, and the future looks decidedly bleak: "*The Shadow shall rise across the world, and darken every land, even to the smallest corner, and there shall be neither Light nor safety. ... the world shall scream in the pain of salvation*" (*Shadow* xiii). Thus, in *The Wheel of Time* we see a curious reversal of the relationship between destiny and hope that we saw in *The Lord of the Rings*: in Tolkien's story, a sense of destiny gave reason to hope; in Jordan's story, destiny is cause for despair. The challenge for the characters of Randland is to find reasons to continue to hope, *in spite of* their certain knowledge of the immutability of fate.

Of all the authors discussed in this thesis, Jordan is the most cognizant of the possibilities of prophecy as a story-telling device, its potential to manipulate the reactions and emotions of readers. Furthermore, prophecy is used in *The Wheel of Time* as a way to strengthen narrative structure, acting as explicit foreshadowing devices, a way of tying together events across long time spans. And, similar to the resolution of thematic patterning, the fulfilment of prophecies provides moments of

narrative satisfaction. For example, the Aelfinn's prophecy that Mat will marry the Daughter of the Nine Moons occurs in the fourth book. The reader receives the first clue to the identity of Mat's future wife in the sixth book, and confirmation in the ninth. In the tenth book *Mat* learns the identity of the Daughter of the Nine Moons, and he finally marries Tuon in the eleventh book. So we can see that this one prophecy is a complete story within itself: it has a beginning, a number of turning points, and a climax, and thus acts to create its own narrative path through the text. And there are hundreds of prophecies, visions and foretelling throughout the series, each adding a separate layer of structure to the narrative. Moreover, as well as the explicit prophecies within the narrative, Jordan also uses a number of other foreshadowing devices. Some clues are given in the paratextual material. The icons preceding each chapter, which are generally used to simply establish the focus of the chapter, sometimes hint at more: for example, the Snake icon is a clue that the Forsaken are somehow present or influential in the chapter, even if they are not obviously visible. The glossaries, which are different for each book, as well as the official 'guide' to Randland, *The World of Robert Jordan's 'The Wheel of Time'*, can in their provision of supplementary information about the world and its history, often provide subtle clues for future events. Finally, generic precedent can also act as a foreshadowing device. For instance, few readers familiar with epic fantasy would believe that Moiraine died when she vanished through the *ter'angreal* archway in the fifth book, for her narrative function and the manner of her disappearance bear too obvious a similarity to Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*. Accordingly, rather than attempt to surprise readers, Jordan puts them in the position of knowing observer, supporting the assumption of Moiraine's eventual reappearance with a number of clues (Korda, Butler and Itnyre.), while allowing the characters to continue believing

that she is dead. Only in the latest book do Mat and Thom finally rescue Moiraine from her imprisonment, thereby confirming, once and for all, that she did not die. Jordan thus uses the same sequence of narrative events as in *The Lord of the Rings*, but changes the narrative effect, turning it from a moment of surprise revelation into a long-anticipated climax.

So, we can see that the convoluted web of in-text prophecies, paratextual clues, and generic precedent all combine to provide a vast amount of structural foreshadowing in *The Wheel of Time*. But they also act to provide rewards for close reading. While most individual prophecies are characteristically ambiguous, there are often a number of prophecies that refer to same event, but which come from different sources and are scattered across various books. When these prophecies are pieced together, along with the other foreshadowing devices, they can provide a clearer indication of future events. Thus, as discussed above, the many prophecies concerning Rand's death are further enhanced through knowledge of mythic precedent (241, 247). While many readers will be content to be surprised by the story, for some readers there is a certain narrative pleasure to be had from correctly solving the 'puzzle' of prophecy before it is resolved within the text. And, if the number of websites cataloguing the various prophecies in *The Wheel of Time* is any indication, many of Jordan's readers are more than willing to play the game.

However, for this kind of relationship between author and reader to be successful, there needs to be an enormous level of trust: trust from Jordan that the readers would pay enough attention to follow the complex patterns of narrative prophesying; and trust from the readers that Jordan would eventually resolve the plot threads in a satisfying manner. There is every indication that Jordan immensely enjoyed his omniscient position as 'puzzle-master', providing additional clues in interviews, at

fan conventions, and in his blog, and frequently responding to frustrated reader questions with the teasing acronym RAFO (Read and Find Out). But, as Jordan explains, the RAFO answer is also an indication of the importance he placed on his ability to carefully control reader response to his story: “Sometimes I give it because I ... might use something involving the answer in a future book and I don’t want to give it away ahead of time. Sometimes I say RAFO because the answer, while not particularly important in and of itself, will give clues toward something I want to remain hidden a while longer” (“It’s Been”). All things considered, it is not surprising that some readers’ reaction to Jordan’s death was very emotional: not only did they feel that they had lost someone with whom they had a long-term and intimate relationship, but they were also worried that the puzzle of prophecy would now never be completely solved, thus leaving them in a permanent state of narrative anticipation.

### 7.3.3. WEAVING THE STORY

The first chapter of each book in *The Wheel of Time* begins ritualistically: “The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, and Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose in...” The path of the wind is followed through the landscape, before it settles on the character who will be the first focaliser of the chapter. This ceremonial opening reflects the traditional beginnings of both epic poems and fairy tales, thus acting as a homage to epic fantasy’s oral and literary heritage. We have seen throughout this chapter the deeply metafictional nature of *The Wheel of Time*, not only in its awareness of mythic and literary predecessors in

the Primary World, but also in its awareness of the role of stories *within* the Secondary World, and how they act to shape characters' own understanding of their world and their identity. Thus, naturally, stories and storytellers alike are immensely valued in this Secondary World. Randland is a largely literate society. Printing presses and paper production mean that books, while still expensive, are nonetheless readily available. Thus, even in the remote village of Emond's Field, a small farm contains a "shelf of books" and a "reading chair" (*Eye* 65), and the people from this village can read books full of tales of "adventure and battles ... and undying love" (*Fires* 377), not for religious or educational purposes, but simply for the pure joy of escapism. And story-telling is also a highly respected profession in Randland. As court bard, Thom Merrilin moved in the highest circles of nobility and, even though he is now simply a gleeman, he still takes pride in his art, complaining when his audience does not fully appreciate his skills: "The tale is a hundred times better in Plain Chant, and a thousand in High, but they want Common" (*Dragon* 353). This a world in which a composer turns the Shadow because he believes that it is only through immortality that his art will reach the "greatness" and "recognition" that it deserves (Jordan and Patterson 76). And in the pride of Randland's entertainers, we can see a reflection of Jordan's own pride in his story-telling skills, as well as the hope that his work will gain him some measure of immortality: "I'm not a guru or a sage. I'm a storyteller. ... There's no writer who has not had enough ego to hope something he or she wrote would be seized on by the public – that something they write will last beyond them" (Baum).

The ritual beginning of each book also reiterates the founding world-view of Randland, the belief that time is circular and that, within the Wheel of Time, "memories ... become legend" and "legend fades to myth". Even within one Age of

the turning of the world, it is possible to see this same process of truth's transformation into myth, especially in Rand's evolution from an ordinary young man into a figure of story and legend. In the same way that Rand heard his stories in the Two Rivers, stories about Rand spread around the world, through gleemen's tales, "peddlers' news, and tales told by merchants' guards" (*Eye* 39). Images of Rand circulate through sketches and paintings, depicting a man, "tall and young, with reddish hair" fighting Ba'alzamon in the sky above Falme (*Fires* 7). Many books in *The Wheel of Time* conclude with an overview of how tales of the events in the book have spread around the world, and each shows a strong awareness of the fragile nature of the truth in stories: "As stories do, the tale changed with every telling. The Aiel had turned on the Dragon Reborn and killed him.... No, the Aes Sedai had saved Rand al'Thor. It was Aes Sedai who had killed him—no, gentled him—no, carried him to Tar Valon where he languished in a dungeon.... Or else where the Amyrlin Seat herself knelt to him" (*Chaos* 1006). Thus, Loial wants to follow Rand because he wants to write the definitive story of Rand's life: "I will be the one to write the true story of the Dragon Reborn.... The only book by someone who travelled with him, who actually saw it unfold" (*Shadow* 258). And while the reader sees Rand's transformation from naïve farm-boy to the Dragon Reborn, other characters meet Rand for the first time long after the stories have spread. And, just as Rand did when he tried to make Moiraine "fit the stories" of the Aes Sedai (*Eye* 99), people struggle to make the stories about the Dragon Reborn fit Rand: "The Dragon Reborn? This youth? He supposed it could be true. Most rumours agreed that the Dragon Reborn was a young man with red hair. But, then, rumours also claimed he was ten feet tall, and still others said his eyes glowed in dim light" (*Gathering* 175). Even Rand's childhood friends find it difficult to reconcile the rumours with the

person they thought they knew, trying to convince themselves that as much as he seems to have changed that the “seeds of personality within him must be the same” (*Gathering* 253). It is little wonder that Rand finds it so difficult to disconnect himself from the stories, to remember the person he used to be before he became the Dragon Reborn and became forever bound to the cycle of story.

## 7.4. CONCLUSION

With *The Wheel of Time*, Jordan takes the generic conventions of epic fantasy and stretches them to their limits, exploring each one from a multitude of perspectives. Thus, the sprawling narrative of *The Wheel of Time* is replete with multiplicities and duplication, as the concerns of the individual are reflected in the concerns of others, the concerns of the societies, and the concerns of the entire world. Serving as a point of thematic connection is the fact that underlying many of these concerns is the need to find a balance between two binary oppositions, between male and female power, story and reality, chaos and order.

The fundamental opposition between male and female power drives the narrative of *The Wheel of Time* in more ways than one. The historical imbalance in the Primary World provided creative motivation for Jordan, as he contemplated a world that had never had to struggle for women’s rights, which in turn directed the nature and development of Randland’s historical, social and political realities. Even more deeply influential is the division between saidin and saidar, the male and female halves of the One Power: although requiring radically different methods of control—domination or surrender—balance can only be maintained when they are used equally and simultaneously. Thus, the fact that male channelers have been unable to safely use their power for thousands of years led to dangerous imbalance. Female

channelers, the Aes Sedai in particular, gained too much power, and grew arrogant in their authority. So, the gradual return of balance to the system that occurs in *The Wheel of Time* leads to dramatic, but long-needed, upheavals in the systems of power. And this need to re-discover a balance of power is refracted in Rand and Egwene's relationship, as they, like the Asha'man and Aes Sedai, and male and female channelers across the world, must overcome fear and distrust and reconcile as friends and leaders, a reconciliation that will have significant effects in terms of both thematic and narrative resolution. And, although it was beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss, Rand and Egwene's struggle is reflected in numerous other relationships in *The Wheel of Time*: frequently, the core conflict between men and women, whether their relationship is romantic or platonic, tends to be about the need to find a balance of power, a reflection of the greater struggle between male and female channelers, and the eternal opposition/unity between saidin and saidar.

A balance is also required between stories and reality. Time in *The Wheel of Time* is cyclic, and an awareness of the complex relationship between memory, history, story, legend and myth is pervasive. The narrative itself is acutely aware of the stories and histories of the Primary World, with countless references to *The Lord of the Rings*, the Arthurian legends and other world mythologies, as well as people, objects and events that, with enough distance, could seem fantastic enough for story. And, within the world, characters who have grown up cherishing the escape that can be found in stories undergo a mingled sense of wonder and fear as these stories become sudden and vivid reality. And for many characters, the flexible relationship between story and reality becomes particularly problematic. For characters who are, or who are becoming, figures of story, struggle to find a balance between the actor, the identity of reality, and the actant, the identity of story. Some, like Rand (in the

early stages of his journey), Perrin and Mat, fear the actant will overcome the actor, and thus attempt to deny the responsibilities of their actantial role, clinging desperately to the comfort of their actorial identity. But, others invest too much of themselves in their actantial identity. The Aes Sedai, the Forsaken, and Rand in the later stages of his journey, are all at risk from wilful delusion, an utter denial of their own humanity, which means that that they have no core sense of self left to rely on when the illusion of story is shattered. Thus, there is a need to find a balance between story and reality, between the actant and the actor, accepting both sides of the identity in order to create a stable sense of self.

And, across the world and the narrative, there is a fundamental and ongoing opposition between the forces of order, unity, creation and hope and those of chaos, war, corruption and despair. *The Wheel of Time* depicts a point in the struggle where the balance is too far strongly on the side of chaos: the entire world is on the brink of social and political collapse, pure forces of nature are overwhelmed and diminishing, reality itself is beginning to unravel, and, in the face of the prophesised apocalypse, individuals and societies are succumbing to despair. There is a desperate need for humanity to draw together, to return order and balance, to cling to hope. Thus, the entire narrative charts the myriad paths that people take to find their way back from the edge of despair and chaos, to come together and rally against the greater threat. Aes Sedai and Asha'man begin to work together, alliances are formed between the various groups of female channelers, nations and armies are unified under strong leaders: and driving all of this large scale unification is the depiction of hundreds of individuals learning to overcome fear and prejudice to find common ground with enemies, to find, or re-find, love and trust amongst friends and lovers. Somewhat appropriately, the narrative itself, despite the threads of thematic unity and prophecy

holding it together, has often seemed on the brink of collapse, as narrative momentum slowed and dispersed as more books were added to the series. However, the last few books have seen a pulling together, a tightening of the weave, as plot threads resolve and merge: all indications suggest that, as for the world and its characters, unity and order will be found in *The Wheel of Time* just in time for the final confrontation.

## 8. TURNING INWARDS:

### Robin Hobb's *The Farseer Trilogy*

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Robin Hobb's *The Farseer Trilogy* differentiates itself from most other epic fantasies for one reason: it is a first person narrative. As Senior notes, most epic fantasies, indeed most fantasy novels, "are written in a third-person voice because the first person would often remove the sense of wonder and distance required to produce fantasy" (*Variations* 136). However, Hobb has stated a number of times that, for her, first person "seems the most natural way to tell a story" (Bedford). The first-person perspective of course results in a much more intimate and introspective narrative, with a greater focus on the psychological detail and character development of the narrator, FitzChivalry Farseer. So, whereas in *The Wheel of Time* we saw an expansion outwards from the individual to the world, and multiple replications of both character and theme, in *The Farseer Trilogy* we see a contraction, a convergence of thematic significance in one character. Fitz's story takes place against a backdrop of world-changing events, great wars and momentous quests: the generic structures of epic fantasy. However, Fitz is the centre of the story, and the most significant plot thread in the narrative is Fitz's journey of self-discovery. And, in Fitz, we can see the embodiment of many of the themes explored thus far in this thesis. An eternally liminal character, Fitz is replete with internal binary oppositions: he represents both nature and civilisation; in politics and magic he is both powerful and powerless; he is both actor and actant, human and inhuman; he is the centre of both a war and a quest; he has the potential to change destiny, yet is unable to change his own fate; and he is both the hero of the story and the teller of the story. Other

characters in *The Farseer Trilogy*, as we will see in this chapter, although fully developed characters in their own right, are most important for what they represent for Fitz, embodying different aspects of his personality, reflecting and challenging his beliefs about what it means to be human. Thus, in Fitz's endless search for identity, we can see an exploration of the questions and conflicts that have been at the heart of epic fantasy since its very beginnings.

## 8.1. SETTING

### 8.1.1. THE WORLD INSIDE

The world of *The Farseer Trilogy* is, like all the other fantastic worlds explored in this thesis, presented in a mimetic fashion: detailed, matter of fact, and internally consistent. And, also like the other texts, the sense of the world's reality is enhanced through paratextual material. Along with the ubiquitous map, each chapter is preceded by a short extract from Fitz's collection of notes, stories, fables, and lore, which he has collected as part of his effort to write a history of the Six Duchies, a technique that allows Hobb to gracefully include explicit exposition that may have otherwise been awkward in a first-person narrative. However, despite these similar mimetic techniques, our introduction to this fantastic world differs in a number of ways from the examples we have seen thus far in this thesis. The protagonist's formative years take place, not in an idyllic rural environment, but in Buckkeep, a busy town and castle, and the centre of power in the Six Duchies: "a windy, raw place [clinging] to the rocky black cliffs much like limpets and barnacles cling to the pilings and quays that venture out into the bay" (*Apprentice* 30-31). Further, the narrative stays in this beginning location for far longer than any of the other texts discussed in this thesis. Apart from a few brief excursions, Buckkeep is the primary

setting of the first two books; not until the third book is the traditional quest narrative introduced, which takes Fitz, and the reader, out of Buckkeep and into other parts of the world. Thus, Buckkeep is more than a transitional location: it becomes the reader's primary point of connection with this world. And this connection is further enhanced by the first-person narrative, because Fitz, the reader's sole bridge to the fantasy world, is so strongly associated with Buckkeep. Fitz's recollections of his childhood experiences are recollections of the places within Buckkeep that were of particular importance to him: as he states, "the town became the world to [him]" (*Apprentice* 36), and Fitz's interactions with this 'world' shape and reflect his growing sense of identity. Thus, it is telling that as a small boy, Fitz is instinctively drawn to the working-class spaces: the stables, docks, and taverns, the guardroom and the kitchen. Although Fitz is technically a member of the royal household, he has the chance to experience the type of freedom afforded to people who live on the outskirts of power. While Fitz has strong connections with the keep itself, he feels at his happiest and most free when he is outside the castle walls.

For, after this brief period of childhood happiness, where Fitz "ran free in the way that only small children can" (*Apprentice* 36), he is pulled back inside the castle walls, as his position of royal bastard is exploited by the royal family. As a royal bastard, Fitz is in a liminal social and political position, as he notes: "I was and was not a member of the keep community" (*Apprentice* 51). This liminal position is reflected by the spaces Fitz occupies within the keep: the in-between, forgotten spaces. Fitz is first removed from the safety and relative obscurity of the stables to a bedroom in the keep, which is isolated and undecorated: although he is within the walls, he is not truly welcomed into the family. Further, Fitz's bedroom becomes a reflection of his sense of self. Burrich's description of Fitz's room—"so bare a room,

with so little care for it? ... It's as if you've never expected to stay here more than a night or two" (*Royal* 602)—in turn reflects on Fitz's own lack of self-preservation instincts, and the fact that he never truly feels at home here. His bedroom is also linked to Chade's apartment, a secret hidden space in which Fitz learns the art of assassination: "You'll remember that this is all a very dark secret, won't you? Not just me and this room, but the whole thing, waking up at night and lessons in how to kill people" (*Apprentice* 83). The implications of this abuse of childhood innocence are made clear by the fact that Chade is deliberately given access to Fitz's bedroom, from which he can take him in the middle of the night to do things that must be kept a 'dark secret'. And, as Fitz's bedroom represents his role in the royal family—present, but excluded—so too does Chade's secret room, and the series of secret passageways it connects to, represent Fitz's secret role of royal assassin, working, literally, behind the scenes, to support the royal family. In this way, Fitz's abortive grab for power is in part a desire to come out of the hidden spaces, to claim a visible position of power: "Could I make Buckkeep my own?" (*Royal* 661). Perhaps inevitably, Fitz's attempt culminates in his murder of Justin in the Great Hall: his hidden self at last made visible in Buckkeep's heart of power. For his failure, Fitz is sent to the dungeons, figuratively and literally the lowest point that he can occupy in Buckkeep, before he is finally cast out of Buckkeep forever, his identity as FitzChivalry Farseer literally killed and buried. And, because Fitz is so strongly associated with Buckkeep, his exile is especially meaningful: just as he is banished from the only home he has ever known, he is also stripped of the only sense of self he has ever known.

But it is not only Fitz who is strongly identified by the spaces he occupies: each of the main characters is associated with a particular space within Buckkeep. Thus,

while the first-person narrative does not allow us to ‘see’ inside these character’s heads, we are nonetheless able to gain deeper understanding of their personality. For example, Chade’s chamber not only represents Fitz’s hidden side, it also reflects the two sides of Chade’s personality: partly warm, rich and comforting, partly callous and frightening: “The fireplace that should have warmed this end of the room gaped black and cold” (*Apprentice* 78). Similarly, Patience’s unpredictability and curiosity is reflected in her cluttered chamber, with its “remarkable” juxtaposition of objects (*Apprentice* 233). And both Fitz and the reader gain an insight into the Fool’s true self through a brief glimpse of his chamber: it is “a soul laid bare. Here was light, and flowers, and colours in profusion” (*Apprentice* 368). And so it is with all of the characters. Burrich’s stables, Verity’s study, Kettricken’s garden, Shrewd’s chamber: each character is associated with a particular space, a reflection of their inner self. And this makes any absence or change to the space intensely significant. The destruction of the Fool’s room is not just an act of vandalism, but a violation of the Fool himself, even more devastating than the associated physical attack: “someone had smashed his world” (*Royal* 471). And when Regal plunders Buckkeep, emptying Burrich’s stables, stripping Patience’s room bare, destroying the “careful balance” of Kettricken’s garden (*Royal* 617), it is more than mere objects that are being taken away. While each of these characters lives in Buckkeep, each have a space that is uniquely theirs, a space that is their world within the world of Buckkeep: to destroy or deplete this world is to damage their very psyche. Thus we can see that the metaphorical connection between characters and their world that is a consistent feature of epic fantasy manifests in *The Farseer Trilogy* in a particularly intimate manner.

### 8.1.2. THE NATURAL WORLD

*The Farseer Trilogy* also establishes connections between the land and human actions on a larger scale through its two magic systems, the Skill and the Wit. Each magic system is associated with a different aspect of the world, and also comes to represent two aspects of Fitz's identity. The following section discusses how the Skill is associated with the human world of power and politics; the Wit, on the other hand, is associated with the natural world, the world of plants and animals. It is a magic of unspoken communication, linking living creatures with one another, a "cobweb of sense" (*Apprentice* 191) connecting the threads that run between people, animals, and the land: "that web which bound all creatures together" (*Royal* 142). Because of its connection with the natural world, the Wit recalls the sacramental sense of magic of Middle-earth and the Land: and, like Frodo and Covenant, through this natural magic, Fitz experiences intense sensory awakening. But unlike Frodo and Covenant, Fitz is awakened to a world that he already knows: his bonds with Nosy, Smithy and Nighteyes simply intensify Fitz's sensory experiences of the world around him: "My sense of smell seemed more acute.... I became more aware of others around me ... alerting me to small sensory clues I might otherwise have ignored. Food was more savoury, perfumes more tangible" (*Royal* 355-56). Fitz is not finding a different world, a world that is somehow more pure or more vital; rather, his experience of the world he already knows is enhanced through his Wit-bonds, thus allowing him to discover the wonder of the ordinary world.

The Wit is the magic that comes first and most naturally to Fitz: he in fact speculates that "*the Wit is as natural a magic as a man can claim ... and that all humans possess some small aptitude for it, recognized or not*" (*Quest* 671). And yet, those who are openly Witted are feared and persecuted: the Wit is disparaged as

“unnatural” (*Apprentice* 44), a “perversion, a disgusting weakness in which no true man indulged” (*Royal* 114). This widespread prejudice compels Fitz to repress and hide something that he feels to be a natural part of who he is, and is perhaps an essential feature of humanity itself. Further, the pervasive oppression of Witted-folk in the Six Duchies is indicative of the relationship between humanity and the natural world. The Wit is so deeply feared because it entails acknowledging the similarities between people and animals: “*the Wit may be man’s acceptance of the beast nature within himself, and hence an awareness of the element of humanity that every animal carries within it as well*” (*Quest* 99). And to accept that humans and animals are akin is to perhaps accept that humans and animals should have equal power within the world. Thus, humanity’s repression of the Wit can be seen as a manifestation of humanity’s desire to control and dominate the natural world. As Black Rolf explains to Fitz, those who are unwilling or unable to embrace their Wit are more likely to “think they have a right to all beasts; to hunt them and eat them, or to subjugate them and rule their lives” (*Quest* 147). Early in the narrative, we see the potential cruelty of human nature manifest in the animal cages in which Fitz finds Nighteyes (*Royal* 99); by the final book, it has escalated to Regal’s Circle, a place where animals are driven to fight and kill Forged Ones and criminals for the amusement of the citizens of the Inland Duchies. When Fitz passes by these animal cages, he is overwhelmed by the “dumb agony” of the animals that his Wit forces him to witness (*Quest* 217). Thus it would be impossible for Fitz to enjoy the ‘entertainment’ of Regal’s Circles, because he is physically unable to ignore the true extent of the suffering of the animals are enduring. As we have seen throughout this thesis, epic fantasy often depicts the Secondary World as being in a state of atrophy or corruption; in *The Farseer Trilogy*, the decline of the world is partly manifested through the widespread

disparagement and repression of the Wit. There is a mutually causal relationship between the characterisation of the Wit as an unnatural perversion, and the loss of respect and compassion for the natural world. Fitz, because he ultimately refuses to repress his Wit, is able to continually find new wonder and empathy for the natural world around him. But others, blinded to this sensory experience, become ever more distant from the ‘web of life’ which runs between all creatures, and will consequently become more likely to view the natural world with a sense of entitlement, rather than belonging.

### 8.1.3. A WORLD OF POWER

On the opposite end to the Wit on the magic continuum is the Skill, which is a specifically human form of magic. Whereas the Wit connects individuals with all living beings, the Skill connects humans with one another. So whereas the imagery of the Wit is usually that of a web, the imagery of the Skill is typically of water—a wave, a river, a tide—representative of the stream of human consciousness to which Skill grants access. Thus, one of the risks of the Skill is that the practitioner, lacking a strong sense of self, could ‘drown’ in the flow of human selves, becoming “lost, selfless, in the flood of Skill” (*Royal* 495). Another risk of the Skill is that it is addictive, because it “*offers to its practitioners an attraction that has been misnamed as pleasure*” (*Quest* 54), a sense of euphoria that lures the user into constant use, thereby sapping their mental and physical energy. And, unlike the Wit, which comes naturally, the Skill must be taught: it is a system of knowledge, rather than a natural instinct. The Skill is perceived in the Six Duchies as a more worthy and powerful magic than the Wit, in part because it does not have the uncomfortable animalistic associations of the Wit, but also because it is the hereditary magic of the ruling

Farseer house. Instrumental in upholding the Farseer reign, knowledge of the Skill has been jealously guarded by the family for generations, both out of fear that it could be used against them, and out of a desire to keep it an “élite tool” so that it becomes “more valuable” (*Apprentice* 177). We can see here the similarities to the Aes Sedai of *The Wheel of Time*, wherein an inherent magical talent becomes concomitant with earthly, political power. And, like Jordan, Hobb uses this literal equation between magical and political power to extend and reflect on the rights and responsibilities of those in power.

Most members of the Farseer family have some degree of Skill, and the way that they use the Skill is intrinsically linked with their approach to ruling. For example, Fitz and Verity are both ‘good’ Farseer rulers, because both are concerned with the well-being of *all* of the people of the Six Duchies. The strength of the Farseer rule lies in its ability to see all of the disparate Duchies as one kingdom, to not elevate one over the other, and to treat all of their subjects as equal. This philosophy of rulership is strongly intertwined with the Skill, which gives the Farseers the ability to literally experience the lives of their subjects, to briefly live with them, regardless of their location or station. When Fitz is drawn into Verity’s Skilling, he understands that Verity’s dedication is not to the abstract or geographical concept of a kingdom, but rather to the individual lives that make up this kingdom: “People. His people. It was not some rocky coast or rich pastureland that he stood watch over. It was these folk, these bright glimpses of lives unlived by him, but cherished all the same. This was Verity’s kingdom” (*Royal* 285). And Fitz is later recalled to his own duty as a Farseer when he is “claimed as a witness” to the Red Ship Raids: “Scent and sound and touch, I lived them all” (*Quest* 164). In reflection, Fitz notes that “insulated and isolated from the war”, he had allowed himself to forget the people who still

experienced it every day, and thus had forgotten his duty to them (*Quest* 165). In the same way that the Wit enables humanity to experience a sense of connection and belonging with the natural world, and thus increases their respect for it, the Skill allows the Farseer rulers to experience a sense of connection and belonging with all of their subjects, which creates an intense sense of responsibility. In the Mountain Kingdom, the ruler is known as Sacrifice, because they are the servant of the people, and “willing to give all, even life, for the sake of those who are ruled” (*Quest* 489). And as Verity tells Kettricken, while it is not necessarily spoken in the Six Duchies, it is “what is felt... To put the Six Duchies always ahead of [himself]” (*Royal* 411). Ultimately, it is this extreme dutifulness that leads Verity to literally sacrifice himself through the Skill for the sake of his kingdom, first pushing himself beyond his mental and physical boundaries in his Skill-use, and then in the creation of his dragon, pouring his life-force into the defence of his kingdom, where he is “consumed ... quite literally” (*Quest* 774). For Verity, nothing, not his sense of self, or even his life, is more important than the protection of his people.

Regal, in contrast, thinks only of his rights, not his duties, as a Farseer. As his name suggests, Regal has the appearance and bearing of a ruler, he “looked ever as a prince should” (*Royal* 40), but his understanding of rulership goes no deeper than this: “He had no concept of governing a kingdom; only of wearing a crown and doing what he wished” (*Quest* 825). Regal also has limited Skill ability, which is intrinsically related to his inability to be a good King. Unlike Fitz and Verity, Regal has no experience of the lives of the people of the Six Duchies, nor is he ‘called to witness’ their suffering at the hands of the Red Ship Raiders. Lacking this insight and empathy, it is easier for Regal to view the Six Duchies as simply lines on a map, and the people and towns of the kingdom as “only game pieces. Possessions” (*Quest*

507). Regal is thus able to abandon the Coastal Duchies as a political liability, because he has no perception of these Duchies as a collection of individual and precious lives. Instead, Regal attempts to gather power and wealth to the Inland Duchies, stripping Buckkeep of its assets to further boost the riches of Tradeford. Likewise, Regal uses his limited Skill to leech power from his coterie: as a Farseer, he sees the Skill as his birth-right, and with little Skill of his own, he feels justified in taking it from others, “as a tick or a leech bites into its victim and clings and sucks life from him” (*Quest* 346). For Regal, the measure of his rule is the amount of power, both political and magical, he manages to gather to himself; he has no thought for using this power to protect and preserve the kingdom and its people. We have seen throughout this thesis a persistent challenge and questioning in epic fantasy of the concept of inherited rule; here, it manifests as a situation in which the person who is legally the rightful ruler is the one who is least suited. Thus, one of the principal moral problems that Fitz and Chade must face is their knowledge that Regal is clearly incapable of being a true Farseer ruler, and that Fitz, even though he is “not king ... nor even the son of a true king” (*Royal* 460), would be far better suited to rule. To rebel against Regal would not only be treason, but a rejection of their duty to the rightful Farseer ruler; but to ignore Regal’s inadequacies would be to dishonour their own responsibility as Farseers themselves to the people of the Six Duchies. The tragedy is that it is ultimately only a small matter of legitimacy that prevents the more suitable ruler from taking power. But Fitz, even though he never claims true power, proves his worth as a Farseer through his numerous sacrifices for the sake of the kingdom: as Kettricken tells Fitz, “That is what it is to be Sacrifice.... Nothing can be held back for oneself. Nothing” (*Quest* 486).

## 8.2. CHARACTER

### 8.2.1. QUESTING FOR IDENTITY

As mentioned in the introduction, *The Farseer Trilogy* is an extremely personal and introspective narrative. Thus, in contrast to Jordan, who explored the role of the hero from multiple perspectives, Hobb explores one hero in intense depth, in many ways reminiscent of the marked psychological detail of Donaldson's *The Chronicles*.

While Fitz is ostensibly writing a history of the Six Duchies, the story he produces is primarily autobiographical, as Fitz himself notes: "*All too often, I find I have wandered far from a history of the duchies into a history of FitzChivalry. Those recollections leave me face to face with who I once was, and who I have become*"

(*Quest 1*). We have seen throughout this thesis the ways in which the hero's quest is often also a journey of self-discovery: in *The Farseer Trilogy*, this quest for identity becomes the primary narrative thread (discussed further below, 308-08).

Furthermore, Hobb uses the fantastic mode to extend and literalise Fitz's quest for identity. As discussed in the previous section, the two magic systems of the Six Duchies represent different aspects of the world: the Wit is associated with the natural world, while the Skill is associated with the human world. Because Fitz has innate abilities in both magics, they ultimately come to represent Fitz's greatest internal conflict: his struggle between desire and duty. While Fitz's sense of duty as a Farseer is, as discussed above, very strong, another part of him wishes to live a life in which he is free to simply follow his own desires: this is the life represented by the Wit. But always he finds himself pulled back into the world of duty and politics, the world of the Skill. As Fitz states, he is really not given a choice: "No choice, no choice, no choice. Never any choice about anything ... the harder I tried to avoid

those roles, the more firmly I was pushed into them” (*Quest* 414). Thus, at the core of Fitz’s quest for identity is his struggle to reconcile his two selves: the actor, who he feels he really is; and the actant, the role that he is destined to fulfil.

In a reflection of his lengthy quest for identity, Fitz collects many names, each working to define him in a different way. He is: nameless, boy, Bastard, Fitz, Newboy, FitzChivalry Farseer, Catalyst, Changer, Tom, Keppet. The first names he receives are given to him by others, and are simply a reflection of his illegitimate birth: the bastard, the Fitz. But the first name he truly claims for himself is Newboy, the name given to him by the street urchins of Buckkeep town: “They call me Newboy. And they don’t think ‘the bastard’ every time they look at me” (*Apprentice* 115). He claims this name because, as Newboy, he is able to feel free from the constraints and responsibilities of his birth. His love for Molly persists in large part because she knew him first as Newboy, not the Bastard. As Kettle later points out, “what you loved, what both of you truly loved, was not each other. It was the time of your life” (*Quest* 773). And, as Molly represents Fitz’s lost freedom and innocence of childhood, Nighteyes represents the freedom of a life of simply following your most basic desires. During his days, Fitz negotiates the human world, but by night he runs “as a wolf [in] a world bereft of court intrigues or plotting, of worries and plans. My wolf lived in the present” (*Royal* 215-16). The fantastic mode is thus used to extend Fitz’s internal conflict as, through his Wit-bond with Nighteyes, Fitz experiences the ultimate freedom that comes with living in the ‘now’, unconcerned with either the past or the future, doing only what you need to satisfy you immediate needs. Both Molly and Nighteyes at various times ask Fitz to abandon his life as a Farseer and live with them in freedom, but he always resists, insisting that he “wouldn’t be allowed to leave just like that” (*Royal* 476). Indeed, the only way Fitz

is able to truly experience freedom is through his death, in the brief period where his consciousness resides within Nighteyes, and they live as the Wolf: “There is a cleanness to life that can be had when you but hunt and eat and sleep. In the end, no more than this is really needed by anyone” (*Royal* 745). However, he is literally pulled back into his body and his life by Chade and Burrich, depriving him of the choice to leave FitzChivalry behind.

But as much as Fitz complains, quite rightly, that he is given no choice, he is nonetheless deeply tied to his role as a Farseer, and does not fight as hard as he might to completely abandon this life. For while there is a freedom in being Newboy or the Wolf, he also desperately desires a real name of his own. When Burrich tells him that he could petition the King for a name and a crest, Fitz protests that a name he gave himself would not feel as if it was really his: “The King should name me. Or you should.... Or my father” (*Apprentice* 73). As much as Fitz’s identity as a Farseer is defined by his sense of duty to the Farseer line, the kingdom and its people, it is also shaped by a simple need to be acknowledged and loved by his family. Thus, he is confused when Shrewd chooses to ‘buy’ his loyalty, when he would have given it for free: “Bastard though I was, he could have declared himself my grandfather, and had for the asking what he instead chose to buy” (*Apprentice* 56). He lives with a constant feeling of rejection from his absent father, and thus transfers all of his paternal loyalty and love to Verity, because he gives Fitz both attention and affection: “He granted me that, my uncle, that instant of kinship, and I think that ever after it changed how I saw him” (*Apprentice* 124). Thus, it is not only a sense of loyalty, but a desperate need to belong to his family, that makes Fitz unwilling to abandon his identity as a Farseer. Furthermore, there is a part of Fitz that takes deep pleasure in the political intrigue and the potential power this life offers him. When

Brawndy offers his support to usurp Regal, Fitz finds it difficult to resist: “It was not, I told myself, a temptation” (*Royal* 659). Fitz’s attraction to the world of politics is reflected by the magic that is associated with this world: the Skill, like politics, is both seductive and dangerous, and potentially addictive: “*There is a fascination to this power that draws the user in, tempting him to use it more and more often*” (*Quest* 259). Fitz is drawn to the Skill, at first out of a need to prove his position as a Farseer, but later out of a deep physical desire for the Skill itself. When he leaves on the final stage of his quest to find Verity, he acknowledges to himself that he is only partly motivated by loyalty; his greater motivation is his “overriding hunger for the absolute”, the Skill as Verity showed it to him, “in its pure physical form” (*Quest* 488). As much as Fitz resents the lack of freedom inherent in his role as a Farseer, there is a part of him that craves the latent power this role represents.

A significant moment in Fitz’s struggle for identity comes in the third book, when he decides to abandon his quest to find Verity and return to Molly. At this point, Fitz has been on his own for some time: free from Buckkeep and bereft of Nighteyes, this is the first time that Fitz has truly been alone. And in the most secure state of identity that he has ever achieved, he makes the decision about who he really wants to be. Fitz is following Verity’s Skill-command—*Come to me*—when he has a Skill-vision of Molly giving birth to his child. At this moment, he makes the choice to abandon Verity and return to Molly, at last choosing desire over duty. As he turns back towards Molly, he begins making plans for his future. He decides that he will adopt the name Newboy: “An odd name, but I’d heard odder, and I could live with it the rest of my life. Names, once so important to me, no longer mattered” (*Quest* 244). He decides that the roles he wants to fulfil are those of “a good husband, a good father” (*Quest* 244). But interspersed with Fitz’s plan-making is the repetition of Verity’s

Skill-command—*Come to me*—which ultimately leaves him literally unable to walk away from his duty to Verity:

I took a step, I stumbled, the world swung around me dizzily, and I went to my knees. I could not go back. I had to go on to Verity.... I knelt on the rise, looking down at the town, knowing clearly what I wished with all my heart to do. And I could not do it.... I could not tell my heart to stop beating. I could not cease breathing and die. And I could not ignore that summoning. (*Quest* 244).

Thus, in the moment when Fitz finally makes the choice about who he truly wants to be, he is physically prevented by the Skill magic from following through with his decision: this is the moment where Fitz's deepest internal conflict is definitively extended and literalised through the fantastic mode. And by the time Fitz has fulfilled his duty, and eased the Skill-command, it is too late – Molly is married to Burrich. It is little wonder then that Fitz declares that, if faced with the choice, he would willingly lose his Skill: "I had never much enjoyed being Skilled. I would far rather be Witted than Skilled. It would be no loss" (*Quest* 826). This is a deeply significant moment for Fitz: his entire life has been characterised by his hunger for the Skill, both for the power itself, and for what it represents. But, if he could choose, he would abandon both duty and power for a simpler life that brings him true joy. However, Fitz cannot choose. As discussed further below (312-12), while Fitz achieves some measure of closure in his quest for identity, in the end it is largely irrelevant. For, in the process of fulfilling his duty as a Farseer, and his role in the story, Fitz loses almost everything that defined him as Newboy: when he is finally free to claim the life and identity he truly desires, that life and identity no longer exist.

## 8.2.2. CONNECTION, MEMORY AND HUMANITY

We have seen throughout this thesis the ways in which the authors have speculated on the relationship between immortality, or longevity, and humanity. However, in *The Farseer Trilogy*, it is not immortality, but emotional connection that is the key to humanity. One striking difference between Hobb's epic fantasy and the other examples discussed thus far is that it lacks a 'Dark Lord' figure, a mythical embodiment of ultimate evil. Although Regal is the primary antagonist, he is an all too familiar human kind of evil: unfeeling, selfish, and latently sadistic, "a cosseted child with a penchant for cruelty that had never been denied" (*Quest* 825). As we saw above (295-95), Regal's primary failure as a King is his inability to empathise, through the Skill, with his subjects as individuals: in many ways, this facet of Regal's identity is a fantastic manifestation of his recognisable psychopathic personality traits. And if Regal is Hobb's interpretation of the Dark Lord figure, than the Forged ones are her interpretation of monsters, the 'cannon fodder' whose primary purpose in the narrative is to be both feared and killed. Like other examples of 'monsters' discussed thus far, the Forged Ones are corrupted humanity, but in a much more immediate way: they are not the result of a long breeding process, or a prolonged degeneration; rather, these people are transformed into monsters in a matter of days. The 'forging' process leaves them physically undamaged, but makes them "less than human, bereft of all emotions and any but the most basic thoughts" (*Royal* 25). Fitz, whose Wit gives him enhanced awareness of all living creatures, understands most completely what the Forged Ones are: they have no sense of community or shared humanity, they are "separate from that net" which binds creatures together, and have become "as isolated as stones" (*Royal* 142). And while Fitz can feel sympathy for their loss of humanity, he recognises that "death [is] the

only solution to their condition” (*Quest* 174). So while the Forged Ones still serve the same narrative function as other monsters, Hobb adds a level of complexity and pathos through having their lost humanity so near the surface: these monsters are preying on their own kin, who, in turn, are forced to kill their parents, their siblings, their partners, their children. Thus, we can see in Hobb’s characterisation of the generic ‘evil’ characters of epic fantasy an argument that one of the keys to humanity is our ability to emotionally connect with other people. Regal and the Forged Ones fill the functional roles of antagonist and monsters within the narrative, but their inhumanity is at heart a fantastic exaggeration of what is most commonly characterised in the Primary World as simply a lack of empathy.

Hobb also speculates that another path to inhumanity is to deliberately disconnect yourself from your own memories. We see this manifest most clearly in Fitz who, even though he is the hero of the story, still has the potential to be monstrous. Of course, Fitz has more than enough traumatic memories to repress: he is abandoned by his parents, forced to be an assassin, driven to a suicide attempt, tortured, killed, loses the woman he loves, and sees his child raised by another man. The way Fitz tries to deal with his traumatic memories reflects Hobb’s thoughts on the dubious value of repression: “I strongly feel that until people face a loss and deal with it, they cannot fully live their lives” (“Repeat”). The most debilitating of Fitz’s memories are those of his torture in Regal’s dungeons, and he spends much of the third book desperately trying to repress these memories, all the while living in fear of the day that they will “rise up and reveal themselves to unman [him]” (*Quest* 82). Because Fitz is unable to confront his trauma, he lives his life controlled by fear. But the answer seems to come when Fitz discovers that he can give his most painful memories to Girl-on-a-Dragon. This is a fantastic extension of the act of repression:

Fitz is not just denying or hiding his memories, but literally removing them. So, while he retains the barest outlines of the memories of his torture, he gives Girl-on-a-Dragon the emotions and the sensory experiences associated with those memories: “*It is enough to know what was done to me. Take it to keep, and let me stop feeling my face against the stone floor, hearing the sound of my nose breaking, smelling and tasting my own blood*” (*Quest 791*). Along with the memories of his torture, he gives the dragon the hurt of abandonment by his parents, the intensity of his memories of Molly, and the memories of his abuse at Galen’s hand. But afterwards, Fitz compares what he has done to cutting off an infected limb: “Being rid of it was not the same as being healed of it. The empty place inside of me itched” (*Quest 797*). Repression, in any form, is not healing: Fitz has lost his memories, but he is still left with his phantom trauma.<sup>29</sup> Still, he would have given even more if Nighteyes had not stopped him, realising what Fitz is risking becoming: “*I would sooner not be bonded with a Forged One*” (*Quest 791*). But it is Verity who first makes the connection between carving a dragon and Forging: “I wonder if this is what it feels like to be Forged. To be able to recall what one once felt, but unable to feel it anymore” (*Quest 778*). He is more correct than he realises: as Fitz later learns, the Outislanders have been using this same black stone in the forging process (discussed further below, 311): the only difference being that Verity and Fitz can choose what and how much of their selves to give. But, whether it is inborn, forced or voluntary, the path to lost humanity seems clear. Regal’s lack of empathy, the Forged Ones, Verity’s sacrifice, or Fitz’s repression, are all at their core the same thing: an absence of emotional connection. Thus we can see a persistent argument throughout *The Farseer Trilogy*:

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<sup>29</sup> Fitz does not fully confront his trauma until he takes his memories back from Girl-on-a-Dragon in the climax of *The Tawny Man* trilogy: only then is he able to begin to truly live his life again.

that it is only through maintaining emotional connections—with others, with our own memories, with our self—that we are able to retain our humanity.

### 8.2.3. NIGHTEYES

Nighteyes is easily one of the most popular characters in *The Farseer Trilogy*, and considered by many as “Hobb’s grandest creation” (Steinberg 68). We can see in Nighteyes a truly successful manifestation of the fantastic mode in characterisation, as an animal becomes a fully-developed individual, with both psychological depth and significant character development. When asked about her decision to make one of the most important characters a wolf, Hobb responded:

I think that there are certain animals ... to which humanity has a sense of connection. Taking a stab at it, they may represent our link to the natural world, and become a sort of extension by which we think about the animal parts of our natures and the roles they play in our lives. (“Other Fantasy”)

As discussed above (291), the Wit, in its broadest sense, is a manifestation of humanity’s ability to connect with the ‘web’ of life: thus, if a wolf is one of the animals that, for Hobb, best represents humanity’s link to the natural world, it is unsurprising that Fitz should have a wolf as his most significant Wit-partner. Fitz has two other Wit-partners before Nighteyes, both dogs, who each symbolise a stage in Fitz’s life: Nosy represents childhood innocence and curiosity, and Smithy represents the forging of an adolescent identity. But more than either dog, Nighteyes becomes the symbol and heart of Fitz’s Wit. When Fitz first encounters Nighteyes, their mirrored situations—both orphaned, both feeling caged and angry—creates an immediate sympathetic link. The description of their first meeting uses shifting pronouns to draw attention to their instant connection: “I came to the animal

vendor's stall, and stood face to face with myself" (*Royal* 99). Thus, from the first, Nighteyes is established as a foil to Fitz, to represent the side of Fitz that longs to live a life of simple freedom.

But Nighteyes is more than just a wolfish representation of one of Fitz's identity crises; he also exists as a character in his own right. We have seen in the previous two chapters how both Eddings and Jordan developed manners of speech and expression for wolves that differed subtly from humans; Hobb takes this even further, and develops Nighteyes as a fully rounded and ever-evolving character. Nighteyes is not a generic 'wolf' identity, but has unique personality quirks, such as a sly sense of humour (particularly when observing Fitz's limitations as a human), his enjoyment of ginger cake, and his weakness for hunting porcupines. And, like all other characters in *The Farseer Trilogy*, his name is deeply significant. Fitz knows him first simply as Cub, and Nighteyes only reveals his true name to Fitz when they are almost completely bonded, as a sign of trust (*Royal* 243). The name 'Nighteyes' is also an expression of his identity, suggesting as it does a capacity for a heightened level of perception. Further, the concept of 'pack' is fundamental to Nighteyes' identity, indicative of the idea that the wolfish impulse to see themselves always as but one part of a larger whole is one of the key differences between wolves and humanity. As Fitz observes, "We were pack. It was a concept I had never encountered before, going deeper than companion or partner" (*Royal* 148). Nighteyes not only sees himself as pack with Fitz, he extends his understanding of pack to Fitz's relationships. For example, Nighteyes approves of Kettricken as a mate for Verity, the 'pack-leader', because "*she hunts well, with a keen tooth, and her kills are clean.... She is worthy of he who leads*" (*Royal* 208); he is also able to accept that Burrich is raising Fitz's child with much more equanimity than Fitz, because this

is Burrich's natural role as 'Heart of the Pack' (*Quest* 348). As well as offering an alternative perspective, Nighteyes' way of seeing the world often has its advantages: he is able to easily solve the stones game because he does not see the stones as individual pieces, but rather "as a pack of wolves driving game" (*Quest* 542-43). And, importantly, it is Nighteyes who is able to bind the Elderlings to their cause, because he sees them as pack, and invites them: "*Make our kill yours, and welcome. That is pack*" (*Quest* 816). Thus, not only does Hobb consider the ways in which a wolf's way of thinking might differ from a human's, she also considers the ways in which wolfish perception might have advantages over human.

Moreover, Hobb also examines the impact that constant interaction with the human world might have on a wolf. Nighteyes is significantly changed as a result of his bond with Fitz, and his "reactions and thoughts" become more and more often "a mixture of human and wolf" (*Quest* 520). As discussed above (298), one of the great temptations that Nighteyes represents for Fitz is the fact the wolves live in the 'now'; however, Nighteyes slowly becomes more attuned to the human way of perceiving time, and thus more aware of the concepts of past and present, of cause and effect, of thinking of "*what comes before and after choosing to do an action. One becomes aware that one is always making choices, and considers what the best ones are*" (*Quest* 543). Like Fitz, Nighteyes is a liminal character, caught between the world of wolves and the world of humans. And by choosing to bond with Fitz, Nighteyes is making a sacrifice of his own. The true life of a wolf, of pack, the "cleanness to life that can be had when you but hunt and eat and sleep" that Nighteyes represents for Fitz (*Royal* 745), is something that Nighteyes himself can never have. He does leave Fitz for a time to experience the freedom of life separate from the human world, but eventually returns to Fitz because he misses him, misses his "form of thinking, the

sorts of ideas and discussion that wolves never shared amongst themselves” (*Quest* 340). In this, Nighteyes truly becomes a mirror to Fitz: he is not just a reflection of a facet of Fitz’s identity, but he also has to make the same decisions and the same sacrifices as Fitz. As Fitz explains to Starling: “It is one thing to be willing to die for another. It is another to sacrifice the living of one’s life for another. That is what he gives me. The same sort of loyalty I give to my king” (*Quest* 357). Thus, Nighteyes is not only irrevocably altered by his bond with Fitz, he, like Fitz, is required to sacrifice a life of simple pleasure and freedom for the sake of loyalty to one he loves.

## 8.3. STRUCTURE

### 8.3.1. AN INDIVIDUAL EPIC

The first-person narrative and intense focus on character in *The Farseer Trilogy* creates a similar thematic/structural dissidence to that which we saw in Donaldson’s *The Chronicles*. However, unlike Donaldson, Hobb does not allow the generic structure of epic fantasy to dictate the shape of her narrative. While she does preserve, in essence, the interlaced structure of epic fantasy, ultimately the reader sees only part of the story. As noted above (286), *The Farseer Trilogy* is, at its core, the story of Fitz’s journey of self-discovery, and Hobb succeeds in making this story the primary structuring element of the narrative. So while *The Farseer Trilogy* does, like all the other epic fantasies discussed thus far, combine a ‘quest’ plot thread with a ‘war’ plot thread, there are some variations. To begin with, the generic quest is not Fitz’s, but Verity’s: it is his search for the Elderlings that introduces the first significant split in the narrative structure. When Verity departs on his quest part way through the second book, he leaves Fitz behind to participate in the war plot thread. Fitz, as both a warrior and a royal assassin, takes part in both the physical battles and

the political machinations inherent in the war plot thread. Fitz only becomes involved in the quest plot thread in the third book, when he gathers a quest party to follow Verity. Thus, rather than witnessing different aspects of the world-wide battle through multiple character focalisations, Hobb structures the narrative in such a way that one character can partake in all elements of the story at different stages: while this does not capture the entirety of the story, it does work to convey the sense of scope. Nonetheless, Hobb does acknowledge that there were some disadvantages to writing an epic fantasy in the first-person: “It was horribly inconvenient at times, because I could never say, ‘Meanwhile, back at the castle, thus and so was happening’. I could only tell the reader what Fitz knew at that moment” (“Other Fantasy”). There were, however, a number of options available to Hobb to overcome this drawback. One was mimetic plot-thread crossovers, such as letters, stories and rumours, which act to pass information and provide connections between the various plot threads. Another solution lay in the scholarly extracts preceding each chapter. While these extracts are primarily used in the early stages for world-building and exposition purposes, as the narrative progresses they are more frequently used to inform the reader of what is occurring in the other plot threads. Although Fitz does not know ‘at that moment’ what is happening, he finds out at a later period, and his account of these, now historical, events are made available to the reader at the appropriate point in the narrative. And, of course, the Skill offers a particularly useful fantastic technique to help tell the full story, allowing Fitz to not only know, but to experience for himself, what is taking place in another part of the world at any given time. Through this combination of mimetic and fantastic narrative techniques, Hobb is thus able to convey some sense of the full scale of this story, above and beyond one individual’s participation in the events.

We can see in the two-part climax of *The Farseer Trilogy* the culmination of a number of narrative and thematic elements. The climax of both the war and quest plot threads is the raising of the Elderlings and the subsequent victory over the Red Ship Raiders. In the culmination of his desperate drive to protect the people of the Six Duchies, Verity uses his Skill to make a dragon and flies to war: “Finally, he had his wish, to confront his enemies, not with the Skill, but in the flesh” (*Quest* 828). Meanwhile, Fitz and Nighteyes waken the other dragons through a combination of Wit and blood: the life force of the world merging with the life force of its creatures to waken the Elderlings to the defence of the land. Thus, there is a particular sense of unity in this victory: it requires both the Skill and the Wit, both civilisation and nature, to successfully drive the Red Ship Raiders from the shores of the Six Duchies. However, while Fitz is instrumental in bringing about this convergent climax, he only experiences it through the Skill, having chosen to remain in the Stone Garden with Nighteyes. And it is here that Fitz’s personal journey also reaches its climax, when he not only defeats Regal, but chooses to let Regal live. Fitz gains access to Regal’s mind through Will, and for the first time Fitz, and the reader, are able to see who Regal truly is: “I seeped into Regal’s mind like slow poison, listening with his ears, seeing with his eyes. I knew him” (*Quest* 823). In this moment, Regal is transformed from the malevolent, inhuman evil of Fitz’s nightmares, into simply a childish and thoughtless person: “All of the fear I had borne inside of me, over a year’s time now. Of what? Of a whining, spoiled child” (*Quest* 825). And because Fitz at last understands Regal, and is thus able to have some empathy for him, he is able to show Regal a level of mercy that Regal would never have shown him. Furthermore, Fitz’s decision to not kill either Regal or Will is a renunciation of his childhood training, as he decides he is “no longer an assassin”

(*Quest* 826). This deeply significant decision is similar to Fitz's realisation that he would rather be Witted than Skilled: in both cases Fitz is choosing to reject the roles associated with his Farseer identity. By disassociating himself from the roles of 'Skill-practitioner' and 'assassin', Fitz is taking the larger step of disassociating himself from the identity of FitzChivalry Farseer, and thus moving one step closer towards resolving his quest for identity. However, as noted above, while Fitz does achieve some small measure of closure in his personal journey, it comes too late for him to gain any true happiness.

In his discussion of the subgenre, Shippey argues that the "underlying sadness" and "avoidance of the unmodified happy ending" of *The Lord of the Rings* is one of the least influential aspects of Tolkien's work on epic fantasy (*Author* 325). But *The Farseer Trilogy* does avoid the 'unmodified happy ending', and its ending is a melancholy one for a number of reasons. On a large scale, the triumphant victory over the Red Ship Raiders is tempered by Fitz's realisation that the Six Duchies in many ways brought this war upon themselves: "*If the truth be known, Forging was not an invention of the Red Ships. We had taught it well to them, back in the days of King Wisdom*" (*Quest* 832). The black stone used to create the Elderlings causes momentary memory loss when they fly overhead: if it happens often enough, the loss is extensive and permanent, and the Outislanders lost many people to this process the first time Elderlings were used in battle. So they found their own black stone and returned generations later to exact their revenge. And the Six Duchies, by again using the Elderlings to drive away the Outislanders, may be just continuing the cycle of loss, hate and revenge. This same sense of futile repetition can be seen in the conclusion of Fitz's story, who, like his father before him, abandons his child to Burch in order to keep her safe, and then, like Burch, Chade and Verity did for

him, goes on to help raise another man's child. As is discussed in more detail in the following section, the overriding goal of the Prophet and his Catalyst is to free the world from the wheel of history, wherein humanity is "doomed endlessly to repeat the mistakes we have already made" (*Quest* 350): the fact that both of these narrative arcs conclude with suggestions of continuing cycles implies that the Fool may actually have failed in his quest to save the world.

And, like the conclusion of the war and quest plot threads, Fitz's personal journey does not end entirely happily. While he is at last able to resolve his inner struggles, by separating himself from the life and identity of FitzChivalry Farseer and living in quiet solitude with Nighteyes, he has lost too much of himself to be able to find true joy in this life for which he has always longed. Like Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, Fitz's role as an actant has entailed such a high degree of sacrifice that it has irrevocably destroyed his ability to live contentedly as an actor. Interestingly, Hobb has stated that she thought the ending of *The Farseer Trilogy* a happy one: "Some people found the ending sad or even tragic.... I saw the final scenes of him as peaceful and fulfilling. There he was, in the solitude he'd always craved, with his wolf" ("Repeat"). But while Fitz does find a life of peace, there is a distinct overlay of loneliness and melancholy to this life. Although he has Hap, occasional visits from Starling, and the deep companionship of Nighteyes, he still longs for the intensity of human connection offered by the Skill: "I Skill out in despair as lonely as a wolf's howling, begging anyone, anyone to respond. I feel nothing. Not even an echo" (*Quest* 837). Unable to completely heal from his past because, as discussed above, he has removed those parts of memories, Fitz is therefore unable to fully live the life he has now. Hobb has said a number of times that when she first finished *The Farseer Trilogy*, she "firmly believed that [she] was finished with Fitz" ("Repeat"). While

Hobb found herself later drawn back into Fitz's story, and, as noted above (304), allows him to achieve true healing and peace, there is a certain tragic beauty to the conclusion of Fitz's story in *The Farseer Trilogy*, which is in many ways truly reminiscent of the 'underlying sadness' of the ending of *The Lord of the Rings*. Unaware that his story will one day continue, Fitz waits quietly for death, prematurely aged, broken in both body and spirit, and ever tempted by the abandonment of self that the Skill offers. It is only Nighteyes who prevents Fitz from giving in to his temptation; but together they wait for the day when Fitz will finally forsake his traumatic past forever: "We dream of carving our dragon" (*Quest* 838).

### 8.3.2. THE PROPHET AND THE CATALYST

In contrast to Jordan's extensive use of prophecy in *The Wheel of Time*, which as we saw, was tied to a universal belief in irrevocable destiny, Hobb uses prophecy relatively sparingly in *The Farseer Trilogy*, and this prophecy is based in an obscure and uncertain system of belief. Some few characters in the Six Duchies, such as the Fool and Kettle, believe in the philosophy of the White Prophet, which originates in a far southern land. This philosophy believes that time is a great wheel, and that humanity is trapped within this circle of time, destined to forever repeat the same history, "Unless someone comes to change it" (*Quest* 351). Changing this destiny is the role of the Prophet and his tool, the Catalyst. The Prophet sees the possible paths of the future, the significant crossroads and turning points, the definitive moments in time; the Catalyst, in turn, multiplies these crossroads and turning points, and presents even more possibilities: "*While you live, you give us more choices. The more choices, the more chances to steer for calmer waters*" (*Apprentice* 416). The Prophet can change the path the world is on, direct it to a better future, and the

destiny of the entire world rests on the repeated success of different Prophets. If too many Prophets fail, “the repeating history of the world will grow more and more evil”, and the world will spiral towards apocalypse. But if enough Prophets succeed, then “time itself will finally stop.... For time is the great enslaver of us all. Time that ages us, time that limits us” (*Quest* 351). When humanity is freed of time, the past and the future will no longer matter, “old wrongs can be corrected before they are done” (*Quest* 351), and humanity, like wolves, will be free to live in the ‘now’. The Fool believes that he is the White Prophet of this age, and his duty is to prevent the fall of the Six Duchies to the Red Ship Raiders, the “pebble the started the landslide”: a future in which the Forged Ones spread over the Six Duchies, and “Darkness devours, and is never satiated until it feeds upon itself” (*Royal* 339). He has come to the Six Duchies to avert this destiny, to use Fitz, his Catalyst, to create more possibilities and turn the world onto a different course.

The Fool is a personification of the concepts of fate and prophecy. In some ways he is reminiscent of the Prophecy of Light in *The Belgariad*, but Hobb not only gives prophecy a voice, she gives it a physical body and fully-developed character. Two aspects of the Fool’s character in particular reflect his actantial role in the story: his liminal identity reflects the nature of changeable destiny in this world, and his increasing uncertainty regarding his own prophecies reflects the ambiguity inherent in the concepts of prophecy and destiny. In one of Fitz’s historical notes, he describes the Fool as “*one of Buckkeep’s great mysteries. It is almost possible to say that nothing definite is known of him. His origin, age, sex and race have all been the subject of conjecture*” (*Royal* 234). Whereas Fitz is liminal in terms of his roles and, by extension, his identity, the Fool is liminal first and foremost in terms of his identity. Neither man nor woman, young nor old, white nor black, the Fool’s

constantly shifting identity reflects the nature of destiny in this world: as the possible futures of the world are forever in a state of flux, so too is the Fool. And, beyond the Fool's physical representation, his personality and character development over the course of the trilogy are also a reflection on the role of prophecy in narrative. We have seen throughout this thesis the ever more sophisticated narrative uses to which prophecy has been put, culminating in *The Wheel of Time*, where prophecy becomes a great narrative puzzle, teasing the reader to 'figure out' the clues before the event takes place. In *The Farseer Trilogy*, the Fool, like the all-knowing author, takes pleasure in his own prescience, and especially in teasing Fitz with "annoyingly vague forms" of prophecy (*Apprentice* 164). But, as the narrative develops, so too does the Fool's relationship with his own prophecies. For the Fool is deeply aware of the ambiguous nature of prophecy, and in particular the fact that "No one truly understands a prophecy until it comes true" (*Quest* 454): it is only in retrospect that we can look back and agree that this is what the prophecy signified. Additionally, the Fool is plagued by doubts as to whether he is truly the White Prophet of this age. In the land of his origin, he was not believed to be the Prophet, and for this reason left his school before he could learn all he needed to know. Therefore, the Fool is always uncertain of whether he is guiding history in the right direction, and is frequently frustrated by his inability to see and speak the future clearly, to the extent that when he believes that Fitz has died, he truly begins to question his own sanity: "Was I a White Prophet at all, or was it but some peculiar madness, a self-deception to control a freak?" (*Quest* 433). Thus, from the mischievous and mysterious figure of the early stages of the narrative, the Fool is transformed by the end of the trilogy into a subtly complex personification of the maddeningly indeterminate nature of prophecy. And the Fool's uncertainty is not alleviated by the ending, which, as discussed above,

leaves the reader with a sense of doubt, a suggestion that they may have inadvertently ensured the continuation of the ‘repeating history of misery and wrong’ that the Fool hoped to prevent.

Fitz’s role as the Catalyst in the philosophy of the White Prophet is yet another facet of his life of thwarted choices. As we have seen throughout this chapter, although Fitz tries to build a life where he is able follow his desires, he is always denied this freedom by the fact that, as a royal bastard, he is duty-bound to family and kingdom. To discover that he is further prevented from a life of freedom of choice due to his role as the Catalyst seems inevitable, for, as Fitz acknowledges, he has been a catalyst for change since his birth: “If all I had ever done was to be born and discovered, I would have left a mark across all the land for all time. I grew up fatherless and motherless in a court where all recognized me as a catalyst. And a catalyst I became” (*Apprentice* 20). As the Catalyst, Fitz has never had a chance to live the life he desires: the Fool has always been driving Fitz towards the destiny he has foreseen, influencing Fitz into fulfilling the roles he has tried so hard to avoid. Thus, one part of Fitz’s journey is to come to an understanding of the immutability of his own destiny, and to accept his role of Catalyst. Like Garion in *The Belgariad* and Rand in *The Wheel of Time*, Fitz finds a way to accept his destiny: for him, this requires learning to let go of the past and future, and to begin living in the ‘now’. Fortunately, Fitz has been prepared for this via his experiences with both the Wit and the Skill. Through his Wit-bond with Nigteyes, Fitz has experienced the pleasure of physically living in the now, of following only your immediate needs and desires. Similarly, the Skill teaches one to mentally live in the Now. A centring exercise for Skill-training requires the practitioner to cease thinking of the past and the future: “Then you will find the Now, the time that stretches eternal, and is really the only

*time there is*” (Royal 745). Further, Fitz has had glimpses of the pure physical form of the Skill, which goes beyond the stream of human consciousness to a place where the “oneness of the world” flows, “like a single sweet note drawn out purely forever”, a great song “of vast balances and pure being” (Quest 475): the pleasure of the Skill lies in the fact that it offers access to this vast tide of power, in which one has the “sense of moving unhampered by time” (Royal 603), a moment of perfect stillness that lasts forever. To truly fulfil his role of Catalyst, Fitz has to let go of both his past and his future and find the Now. We have seen already the harmful steps that Fitz takes to let go of his past; he begins to let go of the future when he believes that the Fool has foreseen his death, which at last frees Fitz from delaying his actions: “It all has to be done now, right away, with no concern for tomorrow. No belief in tomorrow. No fears for tomorrow” (Quest 683). Thus, there is an implicit tragedy in Fitz beginning to live in the Now: in letting go of the past, he makes himself incrementally less human by cutting himself off so completely from his own memories; and in letting go of the future, Fitz lets go not only of his worries but of his hopes for the future. In order to give the world more choices and possibilities, Fitz has to give up his own choices and possibilities: as the Fool tells him, Fitz is Sacrifice for the future of the world: “*it is not for your benefit, but for the Six Duchies that I preserve your life. And your duty is the same. To live, so that you may continue to present possibilities*” (Apprentice 416). But once Fitz is able to live in the Now, he finds belief and purpose in his destined role: “This is right. I feel it. I am the Catalyst, and I come to change all things” (Quest 818). And so Fitz, for whom names have ever been of great significance, finally claims the name of ‘Catalyst’ for his own.

### 8.3.3. THE TRUTH IN STORY

Like all of the Secondary Worlds discussed in this thesis (with the exception of the Four Lands of *The Sword of Shannara*), stories, story-telling and story-tellers play an important role in the Six Duchies. But in *The Farseer Trilogy*, particular attention is paid to the role that story-tellers play in constructing history. In a world where only the privileged classes are literate, wandering minstrels are “*repositories of knowledge*”: they hold “*the histories of the Six Duchies, not just the general history that has shaped the kingdom, but the particular histories, of the small towns and even the families who make them up*” (*Quest* 129). Because their specialised knowledge plays such an important role in settling legal disputes, minstrels hold a unique position in the Six Duchies, accorded both respect and privilege. But beyond their everyday functionality, each minstrel longs to bear witness to a great story, a significant moment in history that will ensure their name will live on forever. And this desire for immortality through story is realised most fully in the character of Starling, whose near-death experience at the hands of the Red Ship Raiders sets her on her desperate quest for the great story of this time: “Then she’d be immortal, remembered as long as her song was sung” (*Quest* 247). The deep need to create something of lasting significance is a reflection of Hobb’s own motivation in writing fantasy, which came, in part, from a desire to write a story that would affect her readers as profoundly as Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* had affected her: “Could I do what he had done? Could I create fantasy that had a moving, intricate plot, a rich setting, and characters that stepped off the page and into the reader’s heart?” (“A Bar” 94). It is not surprising then that of all the prominent story-tellers discussed thus far in this thesis, Starling is the first female story-teller (discussed further below, 336). And just as Starling’s character and motivation reflects Hobb herself, so too

does her perception of the story she is witnessing reflect the nature of the story that Hobb is telling, and indeed the nature of epic fantasy itself. In a particularly meta-fictional moment, Starling, who has been consistently disappointed in Fitz's inability to live up to the standards of heroism and myth she has set for him, finally realises that the heart of this story lays elsewhere: "that is what makes the song! ... Not a song of heroic strength and mighty-thewed warriors. No. A song of two, graced only with friendship's strength" (*Quest* 667). In Starling's initial misconception we can see the misconceptions often held about epic fantasy—consider, for example, the description of epic fantasy and its 'mighty-thighed warriors' discussed in Chapter Three (78)—and in her moment of realisation we can see a recognition of the fact that epic fantasy has always been, at heart, stories about those who are least heroic rising nonetheless to the heights of great heroism.

But as much as *The Farseer Trilogy* is aware of the importance that stories have in creating history, it is also aware of the subjective nature of stories, and hence the inherently fragile nature of history itself. As the stories of history are created, they can be exaggerated, as story-tellers "*embroider the truth*" to make events seem more vivid or more believable (*Quest* 780): by the time the stories of today have become history in truth, no one is left who is able to separate fact from fiction. And when the stories themselves are incomplete, it becomes inestimably more difficult to find the truth hidden within the legends. Thus Verity is significantly hampered in his quest to find the Elderlings, because the stories of the Elderlings are so fragmented that he has little idea of who, or what, it is that he is trying to find. Sadly, while it is Verity's desperate need to protect the people of the Six Duchies that drives him to base his hopes on ancient legends, his actions lower him in the eyes of those same people, who would rather put their faith in concrete matters of ships and armies, than

Verity's "madman's errand" (*Royal* 433). Of course, Verity's risk is ultimately justified, and he in turn becomes a figure of legend. And Fitz at last discovers why the stories of the Elderlings were so fragmented:

So the promised aid of the Elderlings was brought to the Six Duchies.... And just as in King Wisdom's time, their outstretched shadows on the folk below stole moments of life and memory as they passed. All the myriad shapes and colours of the dragons made their way into the scrolls and tapestries of that time, just as they had before. And folk filled in what they could not remember of the battles when dragons filled the sky overhead, with guesses and fancies. Minstrels made songs of it. (*Quest* 829)

Just as the flight of the Elderlings may have been one more step in the repeating cycle of history that led to the Red Ship Wars, so too may they have been but one step in the repeating cycle of fragmented stories and legends that constitute the history of the Six Duchies.

And, like so much of *The Farseer Trilogy*, the themes that have been explored on a large scale throughout the narrative are played out in an intimate way within the character of Fitz. Fitz is attempting to write a history of the Six Duchies, but he finds that he is ever digressing into his own history, his own stories: "always I find that I am writing of my own beginnings rather than the beginnings of this land. I do not even know to whom I try to explain myself" (*Apprentice* 2). In the act of writing, Fitz finds himself trying to assemble a coherent narrative for his own life. But he is always aware of the tenuous nature of memory, and how the stories that he has heard about himself may have influenced his own memories: "I wonder if it is truly mine.... Perhaps I have heard the story so many times, from so many sources, that I

now recall it is an actual memory of my own” (*Apprentice 2*). As a royal bastard, a warrior, a prince, one both Skilled and Witted, and a Catalyst, Fitz becomes the matter of many stories, and each of these stories may have had a pervasive effect on the shaping of Fitz’s own memories of himself. And of course, Fitz has repressed and given away so many of his most painful memories, that he has no choice but to piece together these fragments of his identity through the stories of himself. On one occasion Starling tells Fitz that she prefers the distance that being a story-teller brings: “I’m a minstrel, you see. I’d rather witness history than make it. Or change it” (*Quest 261*). Similarly, Fitz, after being at the centre of the story for all of his life, ultimately needs the objectivity of history: by observing his own past from a distance, assembling it from multiple sources rather than relying on his memory alone, Fitz hopes to create a semblance of order from his life, and perhaps thus be able to make some sense of who he has become. But as Fitz concludes his story, he writes: “I have written too much. Not all things need to be told. Not all things should be told” (*Quest 833*). At the end of *The Farseer Trilogy*, Fitz is not yet healed of the trauma of his past. Thus, even though he has written of all of the events that have led him to this point in his life, there are still some memories that Fitz is still unable to confront, for he is yet unable, or unwilling, to find the full truth in his own story.

## 8.4. CONCLUSION

Hobb’s decision to write *The Farseer Trilogy* as a first-person narrative not only distinguishes it from the vast majority of epic fantasy, but it unequivocally places Fitz’s journey at the centre of the narrative, shifting the focus from the fate of the world to the fate of the individual. However, Fitz’s journey acts as a microcosmic reflection of the events occurring in the entire world, as the conflicts and dangers

facing the Six Duchies are played out within Fitz's tortured psyche. Furthermore, in Fitz's search for identity, we can see a convergence of thematic significance, a concentrated echo of many of the questions that have always been at the heart of epic fantasy, and in particular the persistent questioning of what it means to be human.

For Fitz, the identity of 'FitzChivalry Farseer', royal bastard and assassin, means a life of constrained desires. An eternally liminal character, Fitz becomes caught between two worlds, the world of civilisation, humanity and duty, and the world of nature, animals, and freedom. The two magic systems of the Six Duchies, the Skill and the Wit, are fantastic extensions of these two sides of Fitz, representing as they do literal connections with the human and natural worlds. As a Farseer, Fitz has inherited both the Skill and the intrinsic sense of duty to the people of the Six Duchies that the Skill brings. Deeply loyal to both his family and his kingdom, Fitz struggles to reconcile his personal and political enmities with his own latent desire to enjoy the full extent of power offered by both the Skill and the Farseer name.

However, through the Wit, Fitz is able to experience the true sense of freedom that the natural world offers, a life unconstrained by duty, where, like Nighteyes, one is free to live always in the 'now'. Thus, Nighteyes, and the world he represents, exist always as a temptation to Fitz, a way of escaping the duties and sacrifices entailed by his identity as FitzChivalry Farseer. But, no matter how far he tries to escape into the world of the Wit and nature, even to the point of abandoning his life and body, Fitz is inevitably drawn back into the world of the Skill and civilisation. Being of both worlds, Fitz is never able to truly live in either.

This same conflict is played out on an even larger scale in Fitz's identity as 'The Catalyst', as Fitz discovers that he is not only constrained by family and duty, but by

destiny itself. As the Catalyst, Fitz has the power to change the fate of the entire world, yet he is powerless to change his own fate. Ruthlessly manipulated by the Fool, the embodiment of ambiguous prophecy, Fitz eventually succumbs to his identity as the Catalyst, to the role of the actant, and sets into motion the events that will perhaps save the world. But in order to fulfil his actantial role, Fitz is forced to sacrifice much of his life and identity as an actor, as a human. Moreover, by disconnecting himself, both figuratively and literally, from many of his most painful memories and emotions, Fitz moves ever closer to the inhumanity of both Regal and the Forged Ones, a inhumanity that arises from a complete lack of emotional connection. But even though Fitz does manage to avoid the full extent of this kind of disconnection, he does instead attempt to completely disconnect himself the identities of both FitzChivalry Farseer and the Catalyst, becoming ‘Tom’, historian and philosopher, and finding comfort in the distance that story provides. However, Fitz’s lingering desire for true connection with the human world indicates that, despite his sacrifices, Fitz has not entirely lost himself. Ending on a note of melancholy uncertainty, *The Farseer Trilogy* ultimately, like epic fantasy itself, provides no easy answers to the question of what it means to be human.

## 9. CONCLUSION

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The story of epic fantasy is deeply rooted in the oldest fantastic traditions of Western literature, but has its clearest origins in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. And it was with the publication of Terry Brooks's *The Sword of Shannara* and Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever* in 1977 that the story of epic fantasy truly began. During its thirty year history, the subgenre of epic fantasy has enjoyed enormous commercial success, but has suffered persistent critical neglect. Contributing to this neglect is a widespread prejudice against both fantasy fiction and popular fiction inherent in the Western critical tradition, a prejudice that assumes fantasy fiction is escapist and popular fiction is formulaic. Although *The Lord of the Rings* has succeeded, to some extent, in overcoming these prejudices, epic fantasy has not. When epic fantasy is addressed in literary criticism, there is frequently too much emphasis on the superficial aspects of the subgenre, as critics focus on what epic fantasy texts have in common, with each other and with *The Lord of the Rings*, rather than exploring how authors have adapted, challenged, or taken advantage of the generic nature of their story. However, as this thesis has demonstrated, epic fantasy has, since its beginnings, been characterised by a desire to develop a unique creative vision. While Brooks and Donaldson both struggled to reconcile their visions with the weight of Tolkien's influence, neither author was content to just produce a straight-forward replica *The Lord of the Rings*. And as the subgenre has developed, the Tolkien influence has become less powerful. As stated in the Introduction, the final three epic fantasies discussed in this thesis were deliberately chosen because of their shared generic features, which are some of the

most common to epic fantasy; however, as this thesis has demonstrated, even authors working at the centre of the subgenre's definitional boundaries are able to produce something stylistically unique. Eddings was able to use the generic nature of his story to humorous effect; Jordan pushed the generic features of epic fantasy to their limits, exploring them from a multitude of perspectives; and Hobb united the subgenre's narrative features and thematic concerns in the character of a first-person narrator. Thus, like many other defences of popular fiction, this thesis has contended the assumption that 'generic' naturally equals 'formulaic'.

In addition to the lack of detailed attention to individual texts in critical discussions of epic fantasy, there has been very little exploration of what lies beneath the surface of the generic features of epic fantasy, of the underlying narrative and thematic sophistication of which the subgenre is capable. And it is perhaps through tracing the continuities and developments of these narrative and thematic threads that we can truly begin to appreciate the critical potential of epic fantasy. The most important aspect of any epic fantasy is the fantastic world that is both the setting and the centre of the story. Tolkien set the precedent for fantasy worlds with Middle-earth, using a range of mimetic narrative techniques to create a fantasy world that was wholly believable, a true Secondary World. The success of Middle-earth, and of any successful Secondary World, is strongly reliant on the author's ability to invest in the act of sub-creation, to believe, as it were, in the reality of their own invention. We saw that in the case of both *The Sword of Shannara* and *The Chronicles* that the authors were hindered by a sense of disbelief: Brooks was unable, or unwilling, to invest in the creation of his fantasy world, and the world itself was therefore unsuccessful; and although Donaldson was able to create a successful Secondary World, the act of sub-creation seemed to occur in spite of the sense of disbelief, of

the constant questioning of whether belief in the Secondary World was either warranted or safe. However, in all three of the other epic fantasies discussed in this thesis we did not see any lingering sense of unbelief; instead, Eddings, Jordan and Hobb were all able to invest fully in the act of sub-creation, each developing Secondary Worlds that were characterised by certainty of detail, depth of history and a uniqueness of character. And while authorial belief is the greatest aid to reader belief, it can also be helped by creating a sense of familiarity in the early stages of an epic fantasy, by beginning in recognisable territory before transitioning into the more fantastic areas. We saw that in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien created a similarity between the Shire and the England of the Primary World, thus helping the reader to accept the reality of Middle-earth as a whole. But, as epic fantasy developed, the familiar territory shifted from the Primary World to Middle-earth itself, which is now the standard template of a Secondary World. While Brooks and Donaldson were hampered by their struggle to fully separate their fantastic worlds from Tolkien's, we saw that both Eddings and Jordan were able to take advantage of a widespread familiarity with Middle-earth in order to start the reader off in comfortable territory. However, as we saw with *The Farseer Trilogy*, beginning an epic fantasy in a location resembling Middle-earth is now largely unnecessary. While authors still use the same mimetic narrative techniques established by Tolkien, the concept of a Secondary World is so firmly established that there is little need to ease the reader into Secondary Belief via a resemblance to something that is already known.

We have also seen throughout this thesis a number of ways in which a Secondary World may be strongly connected to the people that live within it. In *The Lord of the Rings*, this connection was sacramental in nature, a manifestation of Tolkien's Catholic beliefs. Thus, both Middle-earth and its people were able to act as either

windows or barriers to the divine, and the land itself able to affect both the physical and spiritual health of its inhabitants. Furthermore, in a manner reminiscent of the legend of the Fisher King, Frodo and Aragorn acted as, respectively, Sacrifice and Renewer for Middle-earth, creating a different sort of relationship between the land and its people. We saw a similar relationship between the Secondary World and the protagonist in both *The Chronicles* and *The Wheel of Time*, as Thomas Covenant's leprosy became manifested on a world-wide scale, and as Rand became the Fisher King in truth during his turning of the cycle of story. But this connection also emerged in other ways. In *The Belgariad* and *The Farseer Trilogy*, it became a way of delineating character development, creating an intimate relationship between the identity of the protagonists and the social realities of their worlds. Only in *The Sword of Shannara* did we see a complete lack of intimate connection between the fantasy world and its inhabitants. On a larger scale, we also saw that the Secondary Worlds were frequently connected not just to individuals, but to society as a whole. As each world faces a looming apocalypse, they are often also undergoing social atrophy, in which the people have lost a sense of reverence for the natural world, and the worst traits of human nature and civilisation have become dominant. Overwhelmed by petty selfishness, there is thus often a need for the people of the Secondary World to curb their arrogance, to once again find respect for the world in which they live. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the dominance of Man, and the concurrent diminishment of the natural world, is held back for a time, but is nonetheless a tragic inevitability. However, as we saw in both *The Wheel of Time* and *The Farseer Trilogy*, it is often necessary to find a balance between nature and civilisation in order to save the Secondary World from destruction.

In the magical and political systems of the Secondary Worlds we have seen a clear progression of influence from modern ideals. Broadly speaking, magic has transformed from something largely symbolic, a fantastic power occurring in worlds where kingship was likewise mysterious and sacred, to a practical and scientific force that serves as a metaphor for political power. In *The Lord of the Rings*, magic served as an expression of much of Tolkien's most deeply held religious beliefs about the nature of hope and belief, and was therefore not made explicable. However, throughout the texts discussed in this thesis, magic has gradually become a science, developing clear systems and rules, and being able to be taught. Indeed, the idea of a studying magic, of witnessing novices being trained by masters in the system of magic, was a feature of all of the epic fantasies discussed in this thesis—with the exception of *The Sword of Shannara*, wherein magic was, as in *The Lord of the Rings*, still largely inexplicable, although here the uncertainty of detail seemed motivated by distrust rather than reverence. We did, however, see in *The Farseer Trilogy* the introduction of an equal and opposite magical force that was more reminiscent of the sacramental nature of magic *The Lord of the Rings*, as Hobb negotiated a careful balance between old and new. Furthermore, the more modern concept of magic—the Skill—was strongly associated with political power, a reflection of a development we have seen throughout this thesis. Since its beginnings, epic fantasy has attempted to counter the unquestioning reverence for inherited rulership evident in *The Lord of the Rings* with a sense of modern democratic ideals. In *The Sword of Shannara*, the attempt to adapt the social reality of the fantasy world was awkward and inconsistent; however, due to Donaldson's stronger creative vision, it was much more successful in *The Chronicles*. Approaching the issue from a slightly different direction, Eddings undermined

expectations about inherited rulership in *The Belgariad*, consistently exposing the ordinary nature of kings and queens. In a similar fashion, both Jordan and Hobb revealed the underlying humanity of rulers in their Secondary Worlds; but we also saw in both *The Wheel of Time* and *The Farseer Trilogy* a merging of politics with magic, as inherited, or inborn, magical power became inextricably linked with political power. Thus, magic was transformed into a fantastic narrative tool through which the authors could further question and challenge non-democratic systems of power.

We have also seen throughout this thesis an exploration of the dual nature of epic fantasy heroes, an awareness of the fact that characters are capable of being both actant and actor, of fulfilling functional roles in the story while also demonstrating psychological depth. Tolkien demonstrated the potential for mimetic characterisation techniques with the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*, and in particular the pleasure that can be found in witnessing ordinary, humble characters rise to heights of great heroism. However, even more interesting is the internal conflict that can arise between actor and actant, which is made especially prominent when epic fantasy heroes become aware of their dual nature. Some heroes are irrevocably and tragically altered by their role in the story. Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, Rand in *The Wheel of Time*, and Fitz in *The Farseer Trilogy*, all suffered great loss as a result of their actantial role, and ultimately sacrificed a fundamental part of their own identity, as the actor was overwhelmed by the actant. In contrast, Covenant in *The Chronicles* was able to find healing and renewal through the discovery of his actantial nature. And some heroes are not fundamentally altered by their role in the story, and instead, like Sam in *The Lord of the Rings*, Shea in *The Sword of Shannara*, and Garion in *The Belgariad*, simply undergo a growth in self-worth and confidence. But, no matter

the outcome, there is always a need for each hero to find a balance, to recognise the actantial side of their identity but not allow it to overwhelm their core sense of self. We have also seen in many of the texts discussed in this thesis further reflections on the nature of the hero through doubling and replication. The protagonist's heroic journey has been mirrored by others: Frodo and Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*; Rand, Perrin and Mat in *The Wheel of Time*. The hero's story has been complemented by a female double: Garion and Ce'Nedra in *The Belgariad*; Rand and Egwene in *The Wheel of Time*. Even an animal may undergo a heroic journey that reflects and enhances that of the protagonist, as we saw with Fitz and Nighteyes in *The Farseer Trilogy*. As even these few examples have demonstrated, there are endless possible variations of this motif in epic fantasy, for the same journey can take many different paths, and there are countless ways for a hero to be made.

Beyond the exploration of the role and identity of the hero, we have also seen how epic fantasy is able to address the deeper question of what it means to be human. One of the great advantages of epic fantasy is its ability to extend and literalise some of the most fundamental concerns of human existence. Thus, the fear of death can be explored via characters who have eternal life. In *The Lord of the Rings* we saw that immortality could either be natural, as with the Elves and Ents, or unnatural, as with the Nazgûl, Ringbearers and ghosts. But, whether natural or unnatural, immortality was ultimately a curse rather than a gift, a reflection of Tolkien's religious beliefs about true eternal life beyond death. Though no longer deeply connected to Christian beliefs, epic fantasy has continued to explore the possible costs of immortality and longevity. One of the more common consequences is a disconnection from your own humanity, as we saw with Brona in *The Sword of Shannara* and the Bloodguard in *The Chronicles*. We also saw a variation of this idea in *The Wheel of Time* in the Aes

Sedai. Although they are long-lived, more problematic was their encouragement of their reputation of inhumanity, which not only worked to disconnect them from the rest of humanity, but created risks if they became too invested in the illusion. The fundamental human need to maintain a sense of connection with others was also explored in *The Farseer Trilogy*, especially through the tragedy of the Forged Ones. Through all of these texts, we can see an exploration of the idea that being human entails death, fear, pain and suffering, and to disconnect oneself from these aspects of human life puts one at risk of disconnecting from one's humanity entirely. But we saw an alternative perspective in *The Belgariad*, wherein eternal life actually served to make one *more* human, and the struggle for a character like Belgarath was to hide his limitless emotional capacity beneath an illusion of inhuman immortality. Another variation on the theme of immortality emerged through naturally long-lived characters such as the Ents of *The Lord of the Rings*, the Giants of *The Chronicles* and the Ogier of *The Wheel of Time*: all were non-human embodiments of nature itself, which meant that their longevity worked to enhance the sense of tragedy in the destruction of the natural world.

As well as concepts of mortality, we have seen epic fantasy's potential to explore concepts of morality, especially through the extremes of good and evil allowed by the fantastic mode. For example, in just the texts explored in this thesis we have seen a number of complex and varied representations of evil, even in those characters who sit unambiguously at one end of the scale of morality. Sauron and the Nazgûl in *The Lord of the Rings* were ultimate manifestations of evil, and their utter denial of Light was both a cause and effect of their state of being. Reminiscent of Sauron, a 'Dark Lord' figure has been a generic feature of epic fantasy: we have seen variations of this character type in both *The Chronicles* and *The Wheel of Time*, in the form of

Lord Foul, a fantastic embodiment of disease and corruption, and the Dark One, an eternal force of chaos and perversion. Like Sauron, neither Lord Foul nor the Dark One is actually present in much of the narrative, for they are more important for what they represent, rather than for who or what they are. However, we also saw somewhat more psychologically complex variations of the Dark Lord in the characters of Brona in *The Sword of Shannara* and Torak in *The Belgariad*: while both were still relatively absent from the narrative, they were given more human characteristics and reasons for their evil. Only in *The Farseer Trilogy* was there a complete lack of a Dark Lord; instead, Regal acted as the primary antagonist, and was not only extremely present in the narrative but was unquestioningly human (albeit inhuman in his psychology). We saw more of this kind of complexity and narrative presence in the lieutenants of the Dark Lord figures in the other texts discussed in this thesis, in, for example, Saruman in *The Lord of the Rings* and the Forsaken in *The Wheel of Time*: all fallen characters who turned to evil for their own reasons. As well as individual evil, each of the texts also explored the concept of entire races or species of evil. Some, like the Murgos/Grolims in *The Belgariad* and the Trollocs and other monsters in *The Wheel of Time*, were uniformly and blatantly evil, existing only as embodiments of fear and nightmare. However, for other such groups, their evil was often mitigated by a limited sense of morality or sympathy for their circumstances, such as the Orcs in *The Lord of the Rings*, the people possessed by Ravens in *The Chronicles*, the monsters of *The Belgariad*, and the Forged Ones of *The Farseer Trilogy*. While their primary narrative function of these groups may still have been to serve as ‘cannon fodder’, their evil could nonetheless be given a measure of depth and complexity.

We have also seen demonstrated throughout this thesis the powerful effect the interlace narrative structure has had in epic fantasy. The interlace structure was one of the most innovative aspects of *The Lord of the Rings*, because it transformed the simple fairy tale or heroic journey structure typical of fantasy stories into something far more complex. By displacing a single hero from the centre of the narrative, and instead placing the Secondary World at the heart of the story, Tolkien created a fantasy story replete with an intricate interlacement of narrative and thematic threads. However, interlace is a forceful structure, requiring strong authorial vision and focus. And we saw that both Brooks and Donaldson struggled to control this structure in their epic fantasies, as it clashed with their creative intentions of, respectively, a simple adventure story, and a story concerned with the concept of unbelief. However, the other three authors discussed in this thesis were able to exert greater control over the interlace structure. Eddings greatly simplified the structure by keeping a clear focus on the two protagonists, and limiting the wider epic scope of the story to mere glimpses at the edge of the narrative. Jordan created a narrative even more complex than *The Lord of the Rings*, taking the interlace structure to its limits: although he has, at times, seemed at risk of losing control, of letting the interlace structure take over the story, the strong underlying thematic structure has helped to hold the narrative together. However, we will only be able to fully judge how successful Jordan was in controlling the interlace structure when the final book of *The Wheel of Time* is released. And, most notably, Hobb was able to maintain the interlace structure in a first-person narrative. This was achieved by a slight shift in focus, by bringing the hero's journey back to the centre of the story, but making his journey inextricably linked, both narratively and thematically, to the epic story occurring around him. The wider scope of the epic fantasy narrative is also inherent in the

nature of the ending of each of the texts discussed in this thesis: in each, there is a sense that this story is only one part of a larger ongoing story. Whether it was a melancholy ending, like that of *The Lord of the Rings*, the dénouement of a long and glorious tale, or of *The Farseer Trilogy*, with its suggestion that this story was just another instance in an ongoing cycle of mistakes and retribution. Or, a happy ending like that of *The Sword of Shannara*, *The Chronicles* and *The Belgariad*, where everything was satisfyingly concluded, but there were hints of future stories yet to be told. It remains to be seen whether the ending of *The Wheel of Time* will be melancholy, tragic or happy, but even the conclusion of Rand's story will only signal the ending of this particular turning in the cycle of story. It is unsurprising that all of the authors discussed in this thesis have written further stories, prequels and sequels, set in the same Secondary World, which in turn add further layers of narrative structuring to the already complex stories discussed here. For, in their act of sub-creation, epic fantasists are not only creating a world, but a world of possible stories.

Through its stories, epic fantasy also explores concepts of prophecy, destiny and foreknowledge, asking whether the future is predetermined, and if it is, how we should best respond. In some of the texts discussed in this thesis, destiny is a welcome concept. In *The Lord of the Rings*, there was a sense that higher powers were looking over the characters, not determining the way things would be, but rather giving indications of the way things should be. And this sense of subtle guidance gave reason to hope in the midst of despair. However, knowledge of destiny had opposite effects in *The Wheel of Time*. Here, the sense that some things were predetermined gave cause for despair, and the challenge was to find reasons to continue to hope, to remember that there were still things that could be controlled, in spite of destiny. A similar acceptance of fate was needed to be found in both *The*

*Chronicles* and *The Farseer Trilogy*. After long periods of stubborn resistance, both Covenant and Fitz eventually gave into their destined roles, and while they were not necessarily able to find hope in their acceptance, they were at least able to find a sense of rightness and fulfilment. We have also seen that the fantastic mode provides the opportunity to personify the concept of fate. In *The Belgariad*, the Prophecy of Light gave voice to the idea that destiny is a game, with two alternative outcomes, and the goal is to maneuverer your pieces into the winning position, and thereby direct the future to your desired outcome. In *The Farseer Trilogy*, fate was embodied in the Fool, whose ever-shifting identity and growing self-doubt reflected the uncertainty of foreknowledge, the sense that despite some measure of prescience, the future can never be fully determined, and that by attempting to control the future, you may end up doing more harm than good. And, at the surface level of narrative, we have also seen the ways that prophecy can be used to manipulate the narrative and to control reader response. Prophecy was sparsely used in this way in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles* and *The Farseer Trilogy*; in these texts, prophecy was primarily used to create atmosphere, and to establish or reinforce thematic threads. However, we saw the potential of prophecy to be used for explicit manipulation in *The Sword of Shannara*. This potential was more fully exploited in *The Belgariad*, but was brought to fulfilment in *The Wheel of Time*, wherein the myriad prophetic puzzles became part of an on-going relationship between author and reader.

And, finally, we have seen a strong tendency towards metafiction in epic fantasy. This metafiction manifests as an awareness from many of the characters that they are taking part in a story, but also as a more general respect and appreciation for the inherent value of story-telling and the joy that can be found in Story. *The Sword of Shannara* was the only exception to this trend, but even Brooks has claimed his

primary creative motivation to be the desire to tell a simple story. Indeed, while the subgenre is capable of exploring significant and complex themes, the telling of a good story will always be at the heart of epic fantasy. Furthermore, epic fantasy recognises that this goal is both admirable and difficult to achieve, a recognition evidenced by the fact that each of the epic fantasies discussed in this thesis (with the exception of *The Sword of Shannara*) features a story-teller who closely resembles the author. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf resembles Tolkien: both are deeply knowledgeable, somewhat cantankerous, and capable of moments of transcendent thought or deed. In *The Chronicles*' troubled protagonist, we can see a manifestation of Donaldson's creative struggle to find a balance between opposing beliefs.

Belgarath acts as Eddings' avatar in *The Belgariad*, characterised by an identical humorous and self-referential, yet always earnest, creative style. In Thom Merrilin of *The Wheel of Time*, we can see Jordan's own pride in his story-telling skills and his desire to control his audience. And, unsurprisingly, the only epic fantasy discussed in this thesis written by a female author also featured the only female story-teller: and, in Starling, we can see a reflection of Hobb's desire to tell a story that would move and inspire its audience. These story-tellers are not only a way for each author to place a part of themselves, consciously or unconsciously, into the story, but a way for each epic fantasy to further celebrate the power and artistry of Story.

Overall, this thesis has demonstrated that, in contrast to the assumption that all fantasy fiction is by definition escapist, epic fantasy is enormously capable of addressing the concerns and issues that are at the heart of everyday reality. Even as epic fantasy was being transformed from Tolkien's literary masterpiece into popular fiction, it still concerned itself with the same themes as *The Lord of the Rings*: questions of good and evil, of the responsibilities of power, of humanity's

relationship to the world and its people, of death and immortality, of destiny and foreknowledge, and of stories and their roles in our lives and our world. And, as this thesis has demonstrated, epic fantasy is able to take advantage of both the fantastic and mimetic mode in order to question and challenge these themes, as each author uses the generic features of the subgenre to offer new understandings and interpretations. For, as many defenders of fantasy literature have claimed, epic fantasy can never truly be an 'escape' from reality, for it is written and read by people who exist in this reality; however, by introducing fantastic elements, we can gain a measure of distance, an alternative perspective from which to reflect upon reality.

While this thesis has demonstrated the worth of serious critical study of epic fantasy, it has only touched the edges of the potential scope of such a field of study. The texts addressed are some of the most well-known of the subgenre, but there have been many other epic fantasies produced in the last thirty years, both popular and obscure, which are just as worthy of extended critical attention. Furthermore, each of the authors addressed in this thesis has contributed further to the Legendaria of their Secondary Worlds, with works that further expand and complicate both narrative and theme. And, new authors continue to produce epic fantasies that are both popular and innovative: the recent works of Brandon Sanderson and Patrick Rothfuss, for example, are not only creative re-workings of the subgenre, but have also reached number one on *The New York Times* bestseller list. However, a prejudice against epic fantasy still exists. George R.R. Martin's hugely successful *A Song of Ice and Fire* series has recently been adapted for television by HBO, and in *The New York Times*' 2011 review we can see many of the same negative assumptions about fantasy and its readers that were directed towards *The Lord of the Rings* over fifty years ago. For

example, the reviewer claims that that the more ‘illicit’ aspects of the series were “tossed in as a little something for the ladies”, a claim that is primarily based on the fact that she did not know any women who read books like this, leading her to assume that the series is simply “boy fiction patronizingly turned out to reach the population’s other half” (Bellafante). This kind of enduring negativity towards epic fantasy in the wider community, combined with the continuing paucity of scholarly work on most of the authors discussed in this thesis, as well as the subgenre as a whole, makes it clear that there is still much work to be done before we will be able to tell the full story of epic fantasy.

## 10. ABBREVIATIONS OF PRIMARY WORKS

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<i>Apprentice</i>	<i>Assassin's Apprentice</i> , Robin Hobb
<i>Castle</i>	<i>The Castle of Wizardry</i> , David Eddings
<i>Chaos</i>	<i>Lord of Chaos</i> , Robert Jordan
<i>Chronicles</i>	<i>The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever</i> , Stephen R. Donaldson
<i>Crossroads</i>	<i>Crossroads of Twilight</i> , Robert Jordan
<i>Crown</i>	<i>A Crown of Swords</i> , Robert Jordan
<i>Dragon</i>	<i>The Dragon Reborn</i> , Robert Jordan
<i>Enchanters'</i>	<i>Enchanters' End Game</i> , David Eddings
<i>Eye</i>	<i>The Eye of the World</i> , Robert Jordan
<i>Fires</i>	<i>The Fires of Heaven</i> , Robert Jordan
<i>Gathering</i>	<i>The Gathering Storm</i> , Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson
<i>Great</i>	<i>The Great Hunt</i> , Robert Jordan
<i>Knife</i>	<i>Knife of Dreams</i> , Robert Jordan
<i>Lord</i>	<i>The Lord of the Rings</i> , J.R.R. Tolkien
<i>Magician's</i>	<i>Magician's Gambit</i> , David Eddings
<i>Path</i>	<i>The Path of Daggers</i> , Robert Jordan
<i>Pawn</i>	<i>The Pawn of Prophecy</i> , David Eddings
<i>Queen</i>	<i>Queen of Sorcery</i> , David Eddings
<i>Quest</i>	<i>Assassin's Quest</i> , Robin Hobb
<i>Royal</i>	<i>Royal Assassin</i> , Robin Hobb
<i>Shadow</i>	<i>The Shadow Rising</i> , Robert Jordan
<i>Sword</i>	<i>The Sword of Shannara</i> , Terry Brooks
<i>Towers</i>	<i>Towers of Midnight</i> , Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson
<i>Winter's</i>	<i>Winter's Heart</i> , Robert Jordan

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