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

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.[1] 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.[2] *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

[1] 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.

[2] 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.[3]

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

[3] 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 50th 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.[4] All three authors are

[4] 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[5], 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,

[5] 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.